

English 295, Introduction to Literary Studies

Course Description, Goals, Objectives, and Relation to the English Major

Course Description: English 295, Introduction to Literary Studies, is an introduction to the rewarding complexities of studying literature. The course introduces students to literary theory and its applications, offers a framework for understanding the historical evolution of literary studies, and introduces students to a range of approaches to the study of texts. The course includes practice in writing commentary on literature.

Why Study Literature? The course raises issues of literary theory that organize various approaches to reading texts and demonstrate the importance and value of textual study.

Literary theories ask questions about foundational assumptions. Work in the course addresses such questions as:

- What is literature? (What distinguishes the “literary” from “non-literary” texts?)
- What reading processes allow us to determine the meaning and value of texts?
- How do the relationships between text, context (historical, social, ideological, linguistic), reader, and writer affect the perceived meaning and value?

Assumptions about the nature, the function, and the scope of literature studies are continually under debate. ENGL 295 will invite students to think about questions of literary “value” broadly understood, including its relationship to audience and reception, sociohistorical constructions and uses, and aesthetics.

To achieve the central goal of introducing students to the study of literature, the course will examine the following rich complications:

- 1) **CONTEXTS for reading. The course offers a framework for understanding the historical evolution of literature studies. Alerting students to historical conditions and constructions allows us to enrich their ability to read texts, literary and non-literary, as well as critical commentaries of those works.**
 - The effort to contextualize the profession will include a history of theory and criticism that points to shifts in theoretical paradigms, addressing the relationship between social/cultural circumstances and the concerns of theorists and critics. Every generation has its theories about the nature, function, and scope of creative expression, even when the theoretical assumptions have not been articulated explicitly. The historical overview of

theory and criticism may include the history of criticism starting with Plato but will emphasize twentieth- and twenty-first-century figures and developments.

- The course may also productively examine literary history, as both a description and a production based on critical and theoretical assumptions. This conception of literary history includes traditional period descriptors, but will also problematize prescriptive or rigid periodization by showing how it, too, is a product of a set of circumstances and ideology.

2) WHAT we read. The course requires students to apply theoretical insights to and to encounter critical readings of primary texts that represent a range of types.

- The range will include the following:
 - a) representatives from traditionally-defined genre categories
 - b) texts that challenge traditionally-defined genre categories, possibly including texts other than written (from oral tradition, film, song, etc.)

The theoretical debates of the past several decades have interrogated stable, normalized genre categories and their claims to be nonideological or ahistorical. They have also expanded our understanding of textuality, inviting us to see the power and significance of forms other than those typically valued by genre definitions. The course will ask students to think critically about form and structure, whether traditional, hybrid, revisionary, or radical.

3) HOW we read. The course will introduce students to a range of specific approaches to the study of texts. It will give them practice in close reading strategies and in using literary theory in the service of textual interpretation.

- The range will include but is not limited to some combination of the following: formalism, deconstruction, Marxist theory, psychoanalytic theory, New Historicism, cultural studies, various feminist and gender theories, film theory, etc. The study of literary theory and specific approaches to the study of texts will introduce students to at least some of the debates that occur within the profession—for instance, over the canon; over issues of race, gender, class, sexuality and other issues of authority and power in literature and in literary production and reception; or over curricular reform.

Relationships to the English Major.

This course is designed to prepare students for the variation in approaches to literary study and in kinds of texts that students will encounter in the English major here at the University of Mary Washington. The course encourages students to ask important questions, assess the usefulness of different instances of

criticism, recognize the value of different approaches, and develop acuity as producers and consumers of texts. The course will also introduce students to library research methods for literary studies and review MLA citation.

Literature courses at the 300- and 400- level are expected to acknowledge and build on the work accomplished in English 295. Literature courses at the 300- and 400- level should make explicit use of concepts and vocabulary of literary theory when appropriate, contextualize the work of the course by identifying the approach or approaches emphasized, create opportunities for students to encounter critical debates relevant to the focus of the course, and allow students room to experiment with theoretical and critical approaches of their choosing. In other words, advanced literature courses will continue to address issues of why we read, what we read, and how we read the assigned texts in our courses.

The course is designated Writing Intensive.