

Why Do We Read Literature?
ENGL3701 // Literary Criticism and Theory // Fall 2015

Instructor: Donal Harris
(e) donal.harris@memphis.edu
(o) Patterson Hall 426

Class Information:
M/W: 12:40 – 2:05pm

No background knowledge of critical theory or history of literary criticism is necessary or expected.

This course begins with a seemingly simple question: why do people read and study literature? It's a question at the heart of English Departments today, yet it often goes unasked in the classroom. This class will keep it front and center as we survey how a wide range of critics, scholars, and artists have grappled with the uses of literature over the last hundred years. We will read from key essays of literary criticism and theory since the end of the nineteenth century, as well as some poems and plays from the period that have repeatedly turned up as test cases of new approaches to reading literature. Our goal is to understand what people thought about literature in the past so that we can articulate why we read it seriously now.

This class will be organized around a series of recurring sub-questions that fall under our title: What is "literature," anyway? What counts as "studying" it? What makes literature good or bad? Should we only study the good stuff? What makes literature different than or similar to other arts: painting, film, television, music, etc.? What is the relationship between an author and her work of art? Why do readers respond to literature in such different ways?

Each week we will read exceptional essays of literary and cultural criticism that in some way try to answer one or more of the above questions. We will place the essays in intellectual and historical context, analyze them as rhetorical constructions, and assess their implications for the study of literature. Critical readings will be paired with short primary works throughout the semester.

(Tentative Requirements)

Regular discussion board posts, a midterm, a short (10min) presentation, and a final research project.

Required Text:

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* ISBN: 978-1-4051-0696-2