

3220: British Literature since 1750

Dr. Stephen Tabachnick

stbchnck@memphis.edu

678-4580

We will look closely at Romantic, Victorian, and Modern masterpieces of poetry, fiction, prose, and drama written from around 1790 through 1940, with a few pieces added to bring us into the post-World War II period. This material is incomparably rich and we will do our best, in the short time that we have, to mine it for its wisdom and artistry.

We will keep four basic principles in mind as we attempt to interpret the course material:

1. Great literature is the “secular scripture,” in the words of Canadian critic Northrop Frye. British literature represents the collective wisdom of the people of the United Kingdom gathered over a long period of time, and, like the Bible, the particular literature that we will be studying sets a standard not only for wisdom but for beautiful expression as well.
2. The interpretation of literature is a performance art. An excellent interpretation is characterized by precision and elegance. As you read and write about this work, think of yourself as a pianist performing a great composer’s work. Which notes will you emphasize, which themes will you bring out, and how will your interpretation hold together? Will your interpretation make an impact on the audience, or not?
3. Excellent interpretation is possible only after thorough, detailed reading and study of the works themselves, mastery of the requisite technical skills, and the application of deep thought and feeling. In short, an excellent interpretation is the product of very hard work and sensitivity. A pianist must think about and play over each work numerous times before a concert.
4. As Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once wrote, “mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself, but talent instantly recognizes genius.” These works have served as models for generations of talented writers and thinkers, who have recognized their quality. They will also inspire and improve your own thoughts and writing.

Text: *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, eighth edition, vol. 2, ISBN 0393925323, paperback. This is a thick and heavy book but a very good one.

Work load: There will be three midterms and a final, each including passage identification and an essay.