

The Virtues of Theory

Many students arrive at the conclusion that literary interpretation is a mysterious matter of intuition and guesswork; in the classroom, how teachers know "what it means" and how they can be so sure they are not "reading into it" are often left unexplained. Truthfully, explaining how we read is not simple; the way that books are read and interpreted has changed over the years. There remain heated arguments among the proponents of different methods. Yet almost no literary critic or professor trained since WWII would seriously claim that one ought to *study* literature non-theoretically (or that one even could)!

During this semester, you will read several works of various genres, but the emphasis will be on our exploration of some of the most influential critical methods or frameworks of the twentieth-century. As you become familiar with these contemporary approaches to the interpretation of literature, each will lead you to ask very different questions about the text you are reading. While you will not master them before the end of the semester, employing the methods in writing interpretive essays will help you learn to juggle new terms, apply new concepts, and appreciate new perspectives.

These methods have not been selected because they are the only or the universally preferred ones, nor in order to make you a professional literary critic. Rather they will acquaint you with contrasting ways of reading, allowing you to gain a deeper appreciation of literature. At the same time, you will gain a kind of mental flexibility that has a wide application; it will be useful to you in further literature classes and beyond. Whether or not the merits of a particular approach ultimately convert you, this course will allow you to hone your skills in reading, writing, and interpretation.

The emphasis on skills, methods, and theories may seem strange to some students, particularly those drawn to literary study because they simply enjoy reading. Hopefully this course will not rob anyone of the pleasure of reading! But it does assume that, to do literary study or teach it

well, an acquaintance with theory is necessary. Ideally, familiarity with multiple interpretive methods will deepen your understanding and pleasure as you read. Certainly it will help you to venture more informed and persuasive ideas about what you read. And since literary study and teaching require that we move beyond our personal reactions and intuitions toward a public presentation of our ideas, this course will prove indispensable.