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**English 302: The Object(ive)s of Literature**

**Course Description**. “If we can’t have what we want, we must want what we have.” Borrowing this sentiment from Michel de Certeau (who borrowed it from others), I want to spend the next several weeks considering its possible meanings. In particular, this course is aimed at understanding *what* we want, that is, the various objects, commodities, gifts and the relationships they bring with them, and our *desires*—that is, our “wants.” To “want” something originally meant to lack it, so what we *want* is to have (i.e. to own, to make a claim on) objects that we don’t actually possess. We want what we can never fully have, but that doesn’t stop us from trying. Needless to say, objects often stand in for our desires and so they become the substitutes for our *objectives*. We want to feel independent, so we buy ourselves a car; we want to fulfill our domestic needs so we buy a house. These things, however, involve us in the machinery of society and it sometimes turns out that our ownership of things fails to fulfill our wants and our needs. We want to possess things, and they wind up possessing us.

“But this is an *English* course,” you might say to yourselves. “What does an English major have to do with things?” For one thing, literature necessarily makes use of objects. There’s a famous scarlet letter, a golden bowl, a lighthouse, a French madeleine cookie, and other objects that populate poems, novels, and appear as props in plays. Understanding how literature *re-presents* (that is, makes figuratively present what is literally absent) the world of things is to understand the trickiness of texts and the profound claims that literature makes on us as readers. When we read, “He pulled out a gun,” we believe in some mysterious way that there really *is* a gun somewhere, rather than just a bunch of words on a page. How literature makes use of objects, that is, what the *objectives* of literature are or can be, will be the focus of our conversations.

**What is English 302—and why is it required?** We designed Critical Practices (Engl. 302) as the follow-up course to English 202 (formerly known as English 301). While 202 is intended to get students to think about and practice ways of close-reading *literary texts*, including introducing students to some different theories of reading, English 302 is intended to get students engaged in close-reading, and thinking about, *theoretical texts*. The way I teach 302 is not as a “theoretical” theory course (that is, reading a lot of abstract theory for its own sake), but as a “practical” theory course, in which we *practice* theory by engaging it and putting it to work as a critical tool.

This course is primarily a discussion course, which means that it runs off the energy generated by our conversations in class. I will try to give each of you the opportunity to offer your own ideas and understandings, whether in general class discussion, small groups, through your essays, or in your various shorter writing assignments. My job, as I see it, is to help provide historical and intellectual backgrounds, to raise open-ended questions, and to offer some respectful, but pointed, resistance to some of your responses and ideas. Your job is to come prepared to discuss by having read *and thought about* the works. Sometimes I fear that students consider it enough just to get the reading done for class, but there is that *thinking* part, that time of rumination and conversation over coffee or a beer, that is the most important aspect of your responsibility and, ultimately, probably the best correlation to how well you do in the course.

Moreover, the English Department has emphasized that English 302 is best organized around developing *critical writing skills.*  It’s my belief that writing is something that we need to do every day in order to understand where we are and to help us find out where we are headed. Writing is thinking in a concrete form. I will try to get you to write as often as possible, either in-class or outside of it, as a way to help you orient yourself to the ideas, questions, and texts. Often this writing will have no grade attached to it because I think writing is a good thing in itself; the more often we feel that we are rewarded (or punished) for it, the less we use it as a tool and the more it seems like a badge of self-worth. Some of the writing *will* be graded, and if it is, I will try as hard as I can to make my assumptions and expectations as transparent as possible. And sometimes I will fail to do so, which is why your questions will be important not only to your own understanding and clarification but for others as well. Don’t hesitate to ask questions!

**Canvas.** This course has an accompanying Canvas site where you can access and download handouts as well as upload essays. You can reach the site by logging on to your MyUW. As long as you’re registered for the course, you should be able to see assignments as well as your grades. If you are absent from class, check this site ***first*** for any handouts. It’s your job to download them. Your will also be uploading and receiving your essays on Canvas.

**CELL PHONES, LAPTOPS, RECORDING DEVICES**

So that we can all stay focused and get the most from our time in class, all cell phones – including my own – must be turned off except by prior agreement. (For instance, if you’re the primary caregiver for someone, a relative or close friend of someone who’s critically ill in hospital, or an expectant birth partner, please let me know so that we can make a suitable arrangement.)

There will be a few opportunities during class to use your laptops and I will let you know when these occur. If you want to use a laptop, other mobile device, or recording device in class at any other time, you need to ask for permission in advance. There are very few instances where I will agree (such as an accommodation through Disability Services).

**Learning Objectives.** You need to have three related skills in order to succeed in English. Simply put (although not so simply done), you need to be good readers, good writers, and good critical thinkers. As a 300 level English course, The Object(ive)s of Literature will offer work to help develop and sharpen these skills. In particular, I expect the literary texts, secondary readings, and other assignments will provide some of the necessary experience and work to help you achieve all or some of the following objectives:

* To be attentive and careful observers of texts, particularly of the subtleties of figurative (and other) language, patterns of images, and the structures and forms of texts (from the micro to macro-levels).
* Through such close textual analysis and deployment of relevant quotations, you will be able to enunciate coherent claims and develop arguments about literary, theoretical, and critical texts.
* To understand and explore some of key theoretical and critical concepts of the course, particularly the ideas of **the gift, fetishism, the thing**, and **practice** as an individuated form of socially mediated know-how.
* Write essays able to set-up, deploy, and organize a dynamic argument, including implicit and explicit critical questions about texts and the use of relevant quotations as support.
* Be able to engage theory. This objective doesn’t mean working with abstractions or speaking in the jargon of a particular theorist. Rather, it means reflecting on the assumptions that drive our understanding, judgments, and arguments. It also means being intellectually generous enough to read and discuss difficult texts with curiosity.
* Help to develop a community of inquiry. It is one of my strongest pedagogical beliefs that students teach each other at least as effectively as they learn from a professor.

**Requirements (specific handouts on each requirement will be forthcoming):**

1. **Participation (25% or 100 points).** Class participation is the most important indicator of this course's success or failure. Admittedly this is a subjective category for assessment, but I will be looking for the quality of your contribution rather than quantity. Your grade will be based on attendance, class comments, and work in small groups and writing groups. **(Class attendance and participation will count towards 15% of your grade; work in writing groups will count towards 5% of your grade.)** An important part of your participation grade (**5% of your final grade)** will be based on your work in initiating class discussion. Once the quarter has gotten underway, I will ask you to sign up for with a group to initiate class discussion on a particular text or subject. I will give you some suggestions for how you might get the ball rolling, but it will be up to the group to decide what seems to be the best method for starting the conversation. See the grading rubric for attendance at the end of the syllabus.
2. **Two Scaffolding Essays (20% or 80 points).** Leading up to your first major essay, you will be writing two short (2-4 pp.) essays to engage the theories and to prepare you to write on Bender’s novel. I will provide a prompt for the essay to help you focus on the main issues. They will be due Thursday, April 11th **in class**, and Thursday, April 25th **on Canvas**. **No late papers will be accepted, unless okayed by me beforehand.**
3. **Theory as Practice (25% or 100 points).** One of the most important aspects of this course will be learning to do close readings of texts using a theoretical perspective. Of course, in this class the definition of "text" will be very broad, and it will include everything from literary texts to cultural objects, practices, and places. Employing theory involves the difficult task of choosing a particular aspect of a theoretical essay (a term, a question, a short passage) and using it as the basis for critical analysis of a text. I will ask you to apply one of the theorists (Hyde, Freud, Winnicott, Marx) to *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. The essay will be workshopped on Thursday, May 2nd and a final draft will be due Thursday, May 9th on Canvas. A handout on the essay will be forthcoming. **No late papers will be accepted, unless okayed by me beforehand.**
4. **Theory as Practice #2 (30% or 120 points).**  As Bill Brown asks, “How does the effort to rethink things become an effort to *re*institute society?” Somewhat like the first assignment, this one will ask you to employ a theoretical perspective on Nicholson Baker’s novel, *The Mezzanine*. You will have the chance to write a critical essay on the novel from one or more of the theoretical perspectives you’ve learned in this course. This will be a 4-6 pp. essay, and a handout detailing this assignment will be forthcoming. The essay is due **Tuesday, June 11th on Canvas.**

**GRADING SCALE (Grading is organized on a 400 point scale). Your final grade will show up as points (e.g. 380 points equals a 3.8).**

**Participation grading rubric**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 60-45 | 44-30 | 29-15 | 14-0 |
| Criterion: | Positive attributes | | | |
| Finds ways to connect own comments to the comments made by other students in class. | Frequently | Occasionally | Seldom | Almost never |
| Answers questions in class posed by the professor or by other students OR offers helpful explanations when another student is confused. | Frequently | Occasionally | Seldom | Almost never |
| Uses language that is appropriate for the classroom and is courteous towards other students and the professor. | Frequently | Occasionally | Seldom | Almost never |
| Demonstrates that s/he is doing the reading through questions, answers and comments in class. | Frequently | Occasionally | Seldom | Almost never |
|  | Negative attributes | | | |
| Misses class. | Almost never | Seldom | Occasionally | Frequently |
| Shows up late to class. | Almost never | Seldom | Occasionally | Frequently |
| Exhibits disruptive behavior (e.g. interrupts others, is on cell-phone, falls asleep, dominates conversation, breaches class-generated norms, etc.). | Almost never | Seldom | Occasionally | Frequently |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Action | Result |
| One-two class missed | No effect on grade |
| Three or more classes missed | 10 points deducted from participation grade per day missed |

**English 302 Syllabus: The Object(ive)s of Literature**

**Texts:**

Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine*

Aimee Bender, *An Invisible Sign of My Own*

**Course Readers:** All readings marked with an asterisk (\*) are in the course reader, available from Rams Copy on the Ave near 42nd.

**Note:** Readings are expected to be done by the date indicated. The secondary works should also be read by the date indicated, although in some cases they won’t be discussed until the next class period.

**Week 1: The Gift of Literature**

Tue., April 2: Critical Practices: Reading Objects

Frank O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died” (handout)

Thur., April 4: Lewis Hyde, “The Labor of Gratitude”\*

Frank O’Hara, “Personal Poem” (handout)

**Week 2: Gift Exchange**

Tue., April 9: Close-Reading

Lewis Hyde, “The Bond”\*

Aimee Bender, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (pp. 1-31)

Thur., April 11: Aimee Bender, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (pp. 32-63)

**Scaffold Essay Due Thursday in Class**

**Week 3: Two Types of Fetishes**

Tue., April 16: Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities”\*

Thur., April 18: Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism”\*

Bender, *Invisible Sign* (pp. 64-140)

**Week 4: The Freudian Fetish and the Transitional Object**

Tue., April 23: D. W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena”\*

Bender, *Invisible Sign* (pp. 141-172)

Thur., April 25: Bender, *Invisible Sign* (pp. 173-242)

**Scaffold Essay on Marx or Freud or Winnicott Due on Canvas**

**Week 5: Writing About Literature**

Tue., April 30: Putting Theory to Work

Getting Ready for your essay

Thur. May 2: Peer Critiques of Essays

**Week 6: Thing Theory**

Tue., May 7: Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”\*

Thur., May 9: Thing Theory (and all the others) Applied

Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (pp. 3-55)

**Theory as Practice Essay Due on Canvas**

**Week 7: The Objects of Art**

Tue., May 14: Michael Shanks, et al., “The Perfume of Garbage”\*

Tue., May 16: Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (pp. 57-80)

**Week 8: The History of Objects**

Tue., May 21: Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”\*

Thur., May 23: Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (pp. 81-104)

**Week 9: Everyday Objects**

Tue., May 28: Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (pp. 105-135)

Thur., May 30: Essay Conferences

**Week 10: Conclusions**

Tue., June 4: Essay Conferences

Thur., June 6: Critical Practices Reconsidered

**Second Theory Essay Due on Canvas Tuesday, June 11th**