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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.

**English 302 Online and in the Age of Pandemics.** This course, like most English courses, works best through discussion. That said, our current online reality makes discussion difficult, but not impossible. In fact, it opens up new possibilities and forums for conversation that I hope to use this quarter. It’s impossible for you and for me to spend two hours straight on Zoom, but I think it’s important that we all meet at regular times so I can create a context for our readings, to discuss the theories and novels, and to provide an opportunity for you to ask questions. The class meetings, therefore, will be organized around some full-class discussions followed by small group breakouts on Zoom. 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 online posts. 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. These days, Canvas has to substitute for a regular classroom. I’ll try to make it as useful and flexible as a piece of technology can be. If you miss 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.

# ETIQUETTE FOR ZOOM(ERS)

Just a few tips to make the online class time productive for everyone.

# Before Class

* Choose an appropriate space for joining your virtual classroom (a quiet place where you can focus and won’t be disturbed). *You may need to coordinate with roommates or household members to minimize noise and competition for internet bandwidth while you are attending class online.*
* Test all technology before class, including your video, audio, and Wi-Fi connection. Make sure your camera, mic, and speakers are all working properly. You can also try using a headset to keep the sound only to yourself.
* Adjust your camera angle and lighting so that your classmates can see your face clearly. It’s important for class engagement when we can see each other.
* Prepare a clean background or use a "virtual background" on the Zoom app.
* Dress appropriately like you would in an actual classroom.
* If you have the option, use an ethernet connection instead of wireless. If using wireless, make sure the signal is sufficiently strong and stable.
* Sign in before class time. You will be e assigned to Waiting Room first.

# During class

* **Muting and unmuting your mic** -- You microphone is set on mute upon signing in – Please unmute yourself to speak. Mute your mic when you are not speaking in order to cut down on ambient feedback and other unwanted background noises.
* **Start Video** – Your video is off by default at the start of the class. Start video when joining the class and keep the camera on during class time especially during a discussion. You may "Stop Video" temporarily if there is an awkward moment or emergency, for example. But please start video again when you are ready to return.
* **Chat** – We will use it from time to time during the class time for discussion and feedback. You may use the Chat function to communicate with each other or everyone on matters related to the class.
* **Raise Hand** – During the discussion, use the Raise Hand button, or actually raise your hand to get my attention if you wish to speak. This will avoid interrupting or speaking over others.
* **Share Screen** – When presenting using PowerPoint or another application, share the application only rather than your desktop to protect your privacy.
* **Refrain from private behaviors** – The entire class can see you…
* **Eating?** – Eating is fine but try to keep it discreet.
* **Avoid doing other tasks during class time.** Free yourself from distractions. Put your cell phone on silent mode.

# After Class

* Leave meeting.

**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. Admittedly, this is a challenge for an online classroom, but one that we can use to our advantage.

**Religious Accommodations.** “Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW’s policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at [Religious Accommodations Policy (https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/)](https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/). Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the [Religious Accommodations Request form (https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/)](https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/).”

**Requirements:**

**Online Conversations (20% or 80 points).** Our course blog (on Canvas) is a way to initiate and continue classroom conversations. It’s a place where you can track your reading process and work through thoughts, reactions, and questions in informal, low- stakes writing.

**Class Participation (10% or 40 points).** Participation means showing up to and engaging with the course material and participants. It might involve discussing or asking questions in our Zoom meetings, discussing in break out sessions, and/or helping your peers through the process of writing essays.

**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 and Baker’s novels. I will provide a prompt for the essay to help you focus on the main issues. They will be due Friday, October 16th , and Friday, November 18th **on Canvas**. **No late papers will be accepted, unless okayed by me beforehand.**

**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 Wednesday, Oct. 28th and a final draft will be due Friday, Nov. 6th on Canvas. A handout on the essay will be forthcoming. **No late papers will be accepted, unless okayed by me beforehand.**

**Theory as Practice #2 (25% or 100 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. Like your first essay, this one will follow a shorter scaffolding essay. This will be a 4-6 pp. essay, and a handout detailing this assignment will be forthcoming. The essay is due **Tuesday, December 10th on Canvas.**

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

**Texts:**

Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (Available at U Bookstore or online)

Aimee Bender, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (Available at U Bookstore or online)

An asterisk (\*) indicates weekly readings available on Canvas

**Note:** Readings are expected to be done by the date indicated.

**Week 1: The Gift of Literature**

Wed. Sept. 30 Introduction: Reading Objects

Frank O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died” \*(Canvas)

**Week 2: Gift Exchange**

Mon. Oct. 5 Lewis Hyde, “The Labor of Gratitude”\*

Frank O’Hara, “Personal Poem”\* (Canvas)

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

**Group A First Readers/Group B Responders**

Wed. Oct. 7 Lewis Hyde, “The Bond”\*

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

**Week 3: Two Types of Fetishes**

Mon., Oct. 12: Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities”\*

Bender, *Invisible Sign* (pp. 64-75)

**Group B First Readers/Group C Responders**

Wed., Oct. 14: Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism”\*

Bender, *Invisible Sign* (pp. 79-140)

**Scaffold Essay on Marx or Freud**

**Due Friday, Oct. 16th by noon on Canvas**

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

Mon., Oct. 19: D. W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena”\*

**Group C First Readers/Group A Responders**

Wed. Oct. 21: Bender, *Invisible Sign* (pp. 141-172)

**Week 5: Writing About Literature**

Mon., Oct. 26: Putting Theory to Work

Bender, *Invisible Sign* (pp. 173-242)

Getting Ready for your essay

Wed. . Oct. 28: Peer Critiques of Essays

**Week 6: Thing Theory**

Mon. Nov. 2 Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”\*

**Group A First Readers/Group B Responders**

Wed. Nov. 4: Thing Theory (and all the others) Applied

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

**Theory as Practice Essay Due Friday, Nov. 6th on Canvas**

**Week 7: The Objects of Art**

Mon. Nov. 9: Michael Shanks, et al., “The Perfume of Garbage”\*

Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (pp. 57-80)

**Group B First Readers/Group C Responders**

Wed. Nov. 11: **Veterans’ Day**

**Week 8: The History of Objects**

Mon. Nov. 16 Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (pp. 81-104)

**Group C First Readers/Group A Responders**

Wed. Nov. 18 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction”\*

**Scaffolding essay on Brown or Shanks or Benjamin due Friday,**

**Nov. 20 on Canvas.**

**Week 9: Everyday Objects**

Mon. Nov. 23 Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (pp. 105-135)

Wed. Nov. 25 **No Class**

**Week 10: Working on Drafts**

Mon. Nov. 30 Looking Back, Summing Up, and Reflecting

Wed. Dec. 2 Drafts Due to Peer Critique Groups

**Week 11: Conclusions**

Mon. Dec. 7: Essay Conferences

Wed. Dec. 9: Essay Conferences

**Second Theory Essay Due on Canvas Tuesday, December 15th**