

COLI 214 – B Literature and Society

Tues/Thurs—10:05 to 11:30; AB113

Instructor: Vern Walker

Office Hours (LN660):

Tues—11:45-12:45/Wed—3-4

or contact me by e-mail “vwalker1@binghamton.edu”

In Praise of Ambiguity, Slowness, and the Hermits

This course was formed around the strange intersection of literature and society stemming from these three quotes:

“In the giant ashlar of this inhabitable house of knowledge one can find a lost corner here or there, and be unscientific without becoming an idiot... [it is] to pursue the sort of spiritual formation of the human being that would be required for it to feel itself living within the circle of the human person like a free-floating, loose, somewhat uncertain eccentric among strange pedants, refusing nothing so much as being as firm and solid as they.”

~Robert Musil

“It’s only those kinds of truths, the ones that are not demonstrable and even ‘false,’ the ones that one cannot without absurdity lead to their conclusion without coming to the negation of them and of oneself—those are the ones that must be exalted by the work of art.”

~Jean Genet

“Poetry should resist the intellect, almost successfully.”

~Wallace Stevens

It is art’s unique gift to explore these ambiguous realms—realms that defy our reasonable understanding, realms in which nothing “true” is developed (nor desired). What could possibly come from such a venture? We will use our course to follow certain strains of thought in conjunction with this view of literature. If our society is marked by bold certainty, progress, and, essentially, sociability, then we will search those corners of society that lean towards ambiguity, slowness, and the solitary life. By doing so, perhaps we will form a new kind of critique towards society, one that is brought about only through the study of art.

It must be noted, however, that this course is not founded upon any assumptions—that is, we should not merely assume that certainty, progress, and society are positive or negative attributes in the world. Such language is only that which we repeatedly hear in our everyday lives. Our method will be to examine these concepts through their negative. In this way, we shall merely mark the above quotes as our question, of which the aim of this course is not necessarily to seek an answer, but solely to focus intently on this intricate problem. Our goal will be to develop the problem as fully as we can. As Flannery

O'Connor wrote of her first novel, "Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen." This statement, I believe, holds true for most of what we consider important in our society today.

Through the various readings of this semester, ours will be the difficult task of complicating our understanding of the world, and rediscovering our place within society. The hope of this course is, therefore, to realize the necessary tie between thought and life, theory and practice, literature and society. We shall strive to develop our vision through reading, gain expressive voices through discussion, and construct stronger thoughts through the practice of writing. With this charge and challenge, let us follow the hermits to "...defy compulsion and strike out fearlessly into the unknown."

General Outline of the Course:

The problem restated: Jorge Luis Borges (Argentinean), "Funes, the Memorium"
Ingeborg Bachmann (Austrian), "Youth in an Austrian Town"
Wallace Stevens (American), "Of Mere Being"; "Tea at the
Palaz of Hoon"

The experience of ambiguity: Franz Kafka (Czech), "The Judgment"
Robert Musil (Austrian), "Tonka"
Flannery O'Connor (American), "Everything that Rises
Must Converge"

The subtleties of slowness: Virginia Woolf (British), *To the Lighthouse*
Edward Albee (American), "Who's Afraid of Virginia
Woolf" (film version)

With the help of theoretical language: Walter Benjamin (German), "The Storyteller"
Georg Simmel (German), "The Metropolis and
Mental life"
Virginia Woolf (British), "Street Haunting"

In praise of the hermits: Thomas Merton (American), "Wisdom of the Desert"
Leo Tolstoy (Russian), "Three Hermits"
Henry Thoreau (American), *Walden* (selections)
Albert Camus (French), "The Guest"; Nobel Prize Speech

The complications of everyday life: Walker Percy (American), *The Moviegoer*
"I (Heart) Huckabees" (Film)

The problem revisited: Novalis (German), "Soliloquy"
Martin Heidegger (German), "Building,
Dwelling, Thinking"
Simone Weil (French), "The Power of Words"

Course Requirements:

This is a discussion course!!! Each of us will approach these texts from a different perspective. Thus in a course designed to bring forth different ways of thinking, not only our readings but also our discussions are necessary methods to reach this goal. Therefore, students are expected to come to class having already completed the reading assignment due for that day and ready to raise questions and/or direct the discussion towards important or difficult sections of the reading. Attendance and constructive participation will be a major factor in the final grade. More than 3 absences will result in a significant loss of credit.

There are four texts required for the course, which can be purchased at the bookstore: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Merton's *Wisdom of the Desert*, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Percy's *Moviegoer*. The rest of the readings will be found on the electronic reserve (except Camus' speech will be in Blackboard/documents or on the web). I highly suggest that you buy a binder and print out all the readings at the beginning of the semester.

*** How to access “**Electronic Reserve**”: “eres.binghamton.edu” → Reserves/course material → Comparative Literature → Coli 111 Walker → Password: leaf214

*** How to access “**Blackboard**”: Binghamton Homepage → Quick Links → Blackboard → Password: 1st two letters of your last name + last 4 digits of S.S. # “Blackboard” will have the updated course syllabus, handouts from class, etc...

6 one-page question papers will be due throughout the semester. The aim of these papers is to state a problem you found difficult in that week's readings. We will use this exercise as 1) practice for developing a question as fully as possible, 2) an aid to discover your own personal line of thought or recurring themes throughout the semester that interest you. This weekly work will ideally become raw material for your long papers.

2 substantial papers will be due throughout the semester. The paper assignments will be announced in class and posted on the “Blackboard” well before the due date, as is assigned in the schedule below. The subject will be open to your own interests of the texts, only the works on which you are able to write will change through out the semester. Writing is a skill we must all practice as often as we can. A “rewrite” is required on the 5 page paper. To “rewrite” a paper is not simply to correct grammatical mistakes, but a significant *re-writing* of the paper. It will be *re-graded* accordingly.

The break down of your semester grade will be as follows: 25% attendance and participation; 10% one page questions; 25% 5 page paper; 40% final paper

As my professor wrote in his syllabus for Proseminar, “I am sorry if I insult you, but the university obliges me to say: plagiarism is a bad thing, don't do it.” *****All plagiarism cases will be sent to the Dean***** See official website for details:

<http://www.writingcenter.binghamton.edu>.

*Please contact me if you have difficulties with the assignments or the due dates for the papers **BEFORE** it becomes a problem!!!*

Tentative Schedule

(Instructor reserves the right to make changes at any time during the semester)

- Sept 1st: Bachmann's "Youth in an Austrian town"; Borges' "Funes, the Memorium"; Wallace Stevens (handout)
- Sept 6st: Kafka's "The Judgment"
Sept 8th: Musil's "Tonka" pages 69-95 **(One page question)**
Sept 13th: Musil's "Tonka" pages 95-122
Sept 15th: O'Connor's "Everything that Rises Must Converge" **(One page question)**
- Sept 20th: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, pages 3-40
Sept 22nd: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, pages 40-82 **(One page question)**
Sept 27th: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, pages 82-124
Sept 29th: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, pages 125-143; **(One page question)**
Oct 4th: **Holiday**
Oct 6th: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, pages 145-180
Oct 11th: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, pages 180-209
Oct 13th: **Holiday**
Oct 18th: Film, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf"
Oct 20th: Film, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" *****5 page paper due*****
- Oct 25th: Benjamin's "The Storyteller"
Oct 27th: Simmel's "Metropolis and Mental Life"; Woolf's "Street Haunting"
- Nov 1st: Merton's introduction to the "Desert Fathers;" Tolstoy's "Three Hermits"
Nov 3rd: Thoreau's *Walden*, "Economy" *****Rewrites Due*****
Nov 8th: Thoreau's *Walden*, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," "Reading," "Solitude," "The Village," "Higher Laws"
Nov 10th: Thoreau's *Walden*, "Brute Neighbors," "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors," "Conclusion" **(One page question)**
Nov 15th: Camus' "The Guest," Nobel Prize Speech (on Blackboard/documents)
- Nov 17th: Percy's *Moviegoer*, pages 3-42 **(One page question)**
Nov 22nd: Percy's *Moviegoer*, pages 42-116
Nov 24th: **Holiday**
Nov 29th: Percy's *Moviegoer*, pages 117-201; "I (Heart) Huckabees"
Dec 1st: Percy's *Moviegoer*, pages 201-242; "I (Heart) Huckabees" cont.
- Dec 6th: Novalis' "Soliloquy;" Heidegger's "Building, Dwelling, Thinking;" Simone Weil's "The Power of Words;" "I (Heart) Huckabees" conc.
Dec 8th: Conclusions? *****Final Paper Due*****