Foundations of Humanistic Inquiry

Autumn 2020
Online meetings by Zoom
Monday, 6:30-9:30
Mark Miller
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Office hours by appointment

This course offers an introduction to advanced study in the Humanities across a range of fields, including poetry, philosophy, fiction, and film. We will have three main goals. The first is to develop analytical skills common to the Humanities as well as those specific to each of our four fields, as we explore lyric poetry’s density of meaning, the subtle conceptual distinctions on which philosophy depends, narrative form and point of view in short fiction, and the roles of the camera and editing in film. Our second goal will be to move from the exercise of those skills in the give and take of conversation to their deployment in writing. Rather than one long term paper, the course requires three short papers, each of which will focus on a different field and its modes of analysis. To add focus to this wide disciplinary range, each of our texts will examine questions of ethics and identity, particularly (but not exclusively) concerning questions of race, class, and gender. Our third goal will be to expand our ways of thinking about those central humanistic topics, as they take shape in relation to the different demands and opportunities of our four fields.

Required Texts (available at the Gleacher Center Bookstore)
William Blake, Songs of Innocence and of Experience (Oxford)
Plato, The Republic, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge)
Flannery O’Connor, A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories (Houghton Mifflin)
Octavia Butler, Seed to Harvest (Grand Central)

Other Required Texts available as pdf files on the course Canvas site

Course Schedule

I. Ethics, Representation, and Identity in Lyric Poetry

Oct. 5  PDF: poetry and the condensation of meaning
"Fowls in the frith"; Emily Dickinson, "They shut me up in Prose";
Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro"; Randall Jarrell, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"

Oct. 12 PDF: identity, race, and gender
Margaret Atwood, "You Begin"; Langston Hughes, "Dinner Guest: Me,"
"Dream Variations," and "Song for a Dark Girl"; Gwendolyn Brooks,
"We Real Cool"; Robert Hayden, "Night, Death, Mississippi";
Adrienne Rich, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law"
Oct. 19  Ethics and Politics in mixed form: visual and verbal analysis

Paper #1 (2-3 pp.) due by email Saturday, October 24

II. Philosophy, Justice, and (Self-) Difference

Oct. 26  Plato, *The Republic*, Book 1
Nov. 2  Plato, *The Republic*, Book 2
Nov. 9  Plato, *The Republic*, Book 5

Paper #2 (2-3 pp.) due by email Saturday, November 14

III. Ethics, Narrative, and Figuration in Fiction

Nov. 16  Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People”
Nov. 23  Octavia Butler, *Clay’s Ark*, Parts 1 and 2
Nov. 30  Octavia Butler, *Clay’s Ark*, Parts 3 and 4

IV. Rear Window Ethics: Narrative, Visual Form, and Sound in Film

Dec. 7  Alfred Hitchcock discussing film technique: 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NG0V7EVFZt4
Hitchcock, *Rear Window*

Paper #3 (3-4 pp.) due by email Monday, December 14
Course Requirements

The first requirement of the course is to do all of the readings with care, to think about what is interesting in the texts and the questions the texts raise, and to come to class prepared to discuss them. Everyone should come to class with specific things they would like to discuss: not just abstract topics, but specific places in the text to turn to that you think can help us ask larger questions of the text and about the topics of the course. As you prepare for class, think about the kind of text we are reading for that week. If it’s philosophy, think about the main ideas it’s articulating, whether or not you find them convincing, and why or why not; also be sure to flag the arguments the text is making, that is the reasoning it offers in support of its ideas. If it’s poetry, think about its imagery and diction and the multiple meanings packed into them. If it’s fiction, think about imagery there too, and also about the point of view from which the story is narrated, and the ways the author positions us to evaluate that point of view. If it’s film, think about the work of the camera in ways Hitchcock encourages us to in the interview on YouTube. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of things to look for, but it will offer some good starting points to help us get beyond merely sharing our personal responses to the readings and start thinking analytically.

In accord with that aim, the second requirement of the course is a minimum of one posting per week to the discussion board on the course Canvas site (beginning with the second class meeting). Think of this not primarily as a chance to respond to the reading, but as a chance to begin the discussion we will continue in class. To this end, everyone is encouraged to actually discuss things on the discussion board. That is, if someone has already posted some thoughts that seem interesting to you, that coincide with what you were thinking about, or that you disagree with, take your post as an opportunity to engage your classmates’ ideas. Since the discussion board should be the beginning of our collective discussion of the material, everyone is also required to read each other’s posts. To make this possible, everyone must post at least once by the end of the day Sunday. That way we can all be sure to read all the posts before class on Monday.

The third requirement is completion of three papers. Due dates are on the syllabus. I will post rubrics for the papers on the Canvas site the week before they are due.

The final grade for the course will be based on 25% for class participation, 25% for the discussion board posts, 25% for papers 1 and 2 combined, and 25% for the third paper.