This is a course in the lively history and practice of literary theory. Since literature came into the world people have had theories about it: what it is, what it can & shouldn’t do, why it exists, how it works, what makes a piece of writing good or mediocre or sublime—and who gets to say so. We will read a wide range of answers to these questions written by very different people in very different places and times, from Ancient Greece to 1960’s Paris, from post-colonial Kenya to present-day New York and Beijing. To get a feel for how these different literary theories work in practice each student will also choose a literary text on which to perform different styles of readings. Those literary works could be just about anything, from Shakespeare’s King Lear to a fascicle of Emily Dickinson’s poems to a contemporary transnational novel. By the end of the course you will be an expert in that text and in a dozen different ways of reading and asking questions about it.

We will also learn how to ask them ourselves in relation to particular pieces of literature. As a class we will read:

- Sophocles, The Theban Plays, tr. Robert Fagles (Penguin, 978-0140444254)
- Herman Melville, Billy Budd, Bartleby & Other Stories (Penguin, 2016; 978-0143107606)
- Octavia Butler, Clay’s Ark (Aspect; 978-0446603706)

Please buy these editions. Our primary textbook is:

- The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism (Norton, 2009; 978-0393932928)

Theories of literature are by nature limited; they bring certain aspects of a text into focus by, necessarily, obscuring others. That’s why we’re reading a broad range of approaches: Close, Suspicious & Distant Reading; Historicism; Deconstruction; Psychoanalysis; Queer Theory & Feminism; Marxism; Postcolonial Theory; Critical Race Theory; and more.

[Graduate Sections: if the number of graduate students in the course reaches a certain threshold—say, three or four—I will hold a separate, hour-long graduate section where we’ll read an extended work of criticism or theory across the term, 20-30pp/wk. This could be very recent (e.g. Anne-Lise François’ Open Secrets: the Literature of Uncounted Experience) or less so (like Marx’s Grundrisse or Derrida’s Politics of Friendship)—I’m up for anything.]
Assignments:

-Critical Applications (20%): By the beginning of Week 2, and in consultation with me and your TF, you will have chosen a literary work that we are not reading this term. Across the term you will write five two-page readings of that work that employ different critical methodologies we’ll be studying in class. “Close reading” or “New Criticism” will be your first, but should be built into all of your subsequent readings. If your chosen text resists a critical model so much as to break and incapacitate that kind of reading, that’s also interesting—a two-page section could be written about how that breakdown happens. You’ll turn in a final, revised packet of these readings that includes a two-page introduction reflecting on how your chosen work reflects, refracts, and resists your chosen models. If you pick a work written in another language, you must be able to read and translate that language.

-Dictionary of Critical Terms (20%): Over the course of the term you’ll build up your own personalized dictionary of important terms; each entry will be between 250-400 words, and should cite texts we’ve read in class, as well as any other sources you’ve consulted. You’ll turn in ensembles of them across the term (see schedule) and a revised version at the end of reading period. Note: not all theorists will agree on what a term means—Marx, for instance, will think about ideology differently than Althusser, or Butler. You may emphasize one use or interpretation in your definition, but should cite and reference others, if only critically.

-Quizzes (15%): six randomly distributed across the term—we count your best 5; these should be fairly easy if you’ve done the reading.

-Final Exam (25%): a take-home exam distributed during reading period; you’ll turn it in along with the final version of your Critical Dictionary and Critical Applications packet.

-Attendance & Participation (20%): this is primarily a discussion-based course, and your attendance and active participation is crucial. Part of this grade will be connected to a “Ten-Hundred Words” presentation. Your job in the presentation is to break down an article’s basic argument, and provide us with three important quotations that we can discuss as a group. Breakdown summaries should last no more than five minutes (= about 500 words), though the discussion of the quotations may last longer. Also, there’s a catch – presentations must be written using only the “ten hundred” most common words in the style of Randall Munroe’s Thing Explainer: Complicated Stuff in Simple Words (2015). You’ll do what he does, but with a critical essay, not a space rover. It’s actually incredibly fun.
**SCHEDULE**

*complete the readings for the dates listed; “@” signifies a “breakdown” presentation

**on days without a breakdown, everyone must bring in a passage & question for discussion, unless a different assignment is given for that day**

T January 23  | Introduction I: Literary Theory – What It Is & How to Use It


**PART 1 – IN THE TEXT**

I. CLOSE & SUSPICIOUS READING
   (Literary Example: Keats & Joyce)

T January 29  | Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819)
               | @*Brooks, “Irony as a Principle of Structure” (1949)

Th February 1 | Joyce, “The Dead” (1914)

Exercise #1 – Two-page recapitulation of Norris’s or Vendler’s argument & reading strategies

II. LITERATURE AS GENRE & REPRESENTATION
   (Literary Example: Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King & Antigone*)

T February 6  | Plato, from *The Republic* (c.380BCE; 41-77)
               | @from *Phaedrus* (ca 370BCE; 77-83)

Th February 8 | Aristotle, *Poetics* (ca 330BCE; 83-115)
               | @ Freud, from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900; 814-18)

Pick Your Literary Work (YWL) & Meet with One of Us to Talk about It

T February 13 | *Hegel, on Antigone, from Aesthetics* (1835; 1208-1220)

Th February 15 | Lukacs, from *The Historical Novel* (1937; 905-21)
               | *Dames, “The Theory Generation” (2012)
Exercise #2 – Write a) a 1.5-page Close Reading of a Passage from YLW (Your Literary Work) b) a list of things you are “suspicious” about in the work

III. LITERATURE AS EXPRESSION
(Literary Example: Emily Dickinson’s “Split the Lark”)

T February 20
David Hume, “On the Standard of Taste” (1757; 388-406)
Burke, from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757; 450-58)
@ Wollstonecraft, from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792; 493-502)

Th February 22
Immanuel Kant, from The Critique of Judgment: “Introduction,” “Analytic of the Beautiful” and “Analytic of the Sublime” (406-450)
@ Kant on “Genius” (CPJ §46-50)

Five Critical Dictionary words due (5)

IV. DECONSTRUCTION - SPEECH, WRITING, LANGUAGE
(Literary Example: Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener”)

T February 27
Austin, “Performatives Utterances” (1961; 1286-1301)
@* Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context” (1972)

Th March 1
* Foucault, from Madness and Civilization (1961)
* Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness” (1963)

Five More Critical Terms Due (10)

T March 6
Lévi-Strauss, from Tristes Tropiques (1955; 1273-86);
* Derrida, from Of Grammatology, “Writing and Man’s Exploitation by Man” (1967; 118-43)

Th March 8
Saussure, from Course in General Linguistics (1916; 845-66)
* Derrida, “Différence” (1968)

Exercise #3 – Two-page Deconstructive or Ordinary-Language Analysis of YLW

ENTERTAINMENT

T March 13
Spring Break – No Class
read Melville’s short texts & Butler’s novel

Th March 14
Spring Break – No Class
PART 2 – OUT OF THE TEXT

V. PSYCHOANALYSIS & STRUCTURALISM
(Literary Example: Melville, Billy Budd)

T March 20  Freud, *“Fort/Da” from Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920; 12-21); The Uncanny (1919; 824-41)
             @*Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot” (1977)

Th March 22  Lacan, “The Mirror Stage” (1949)
             @Johnson, “Melville’s Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd” (1979; 2258-77)

Exercise #4 – Two-page Psychoanalytic Reading of YLW

VI. POWER, RACE, COLONIALISM
(Literary Example: Melville’s Benito Cereno)

T March 27  Hegel, from The Phenomenology of Spirit: “Master/Slave Dialectic” (1807); from Lectures on Fine Art (1835; 536-55)
             *de Man, “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s Aesthetics” (1982)

Th March 29  Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” (1973; 1423-37)
              @Althusser, “Ideology & Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970; 1332-60)

T April 3    Bakhtin, from Discourse of the Novel (1934-35; 1072-1106)

Five More Critical Dictionary terms due (15)

Th April 5  Foucault, “What Is an Author?” (1969; 1469-90)
             Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1967; 1322-26)
             @Iser, “Interaction between Reader and Text” (1980; 1524-32)

T April 10  Adorno, from “The Culture Industry” in The Dialectic of Enlightenment (1110-27)


Th April 12  Fanon, from The Wretched of the Earth: “On National Culture” (1961; 1437-46)
             @Gates, “Talking Black” (1988; 2430-38)
Exercise #5 – Two-page Application of One of These Works to YLW

VIII. GENDER & QUEERNESS
(Literary Examples: Melville’s “Paradise of the Bachelors,” Butler’s Clay’s Ark)

T April 17
Gilbert & Gubar, from The Madwoman in the Attic (1979; 1923-38)
Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975; 1938-59)
@Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983; 2114-26)

Five More Critical Dictionary terms due (20)

Th April 19
Butler, from Gender Trouble (1990; 2536-53)
@Hayles, from How We Became Posthuman (1999; 2161-87)
@Berlant & Warner, “Sex in Public” (1998; 2597-2613)

Exercise #6 – Two-page Queer or Feminist Reading of YLW

T April 24
*Love, “Close Reading and Thin Description” (2013)
*Marcus & Best, “Surface Reading” (2009)

Final Day of Reading Period: Revised Critical Dictionary of terms due (25)
Packet of Readings of YLW, together with Critical Introduction, due
Take Home Exam – also due
The Fine Print

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person’s ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. It is extremely naughty. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS’s policies on Academic Honesty, available here: http://webdocs.registrar.fas.harvard.edu/ugrad_handbook/current/chapter2/academic_dishonesty.html

Collaboration: You are absolutely encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others’ work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, or take-home exams), academic collaboration and external sources should be cited.

Attendance: Your attendance in class and in sections is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole. I will allow each student a “free” absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the class: 2 lates = 1 absence. If you have attenuating circumstances, you must communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss how to deal with it.

Computers, Tablets, Phones: No, no and no. No Google Glass or iWatches or Experimental US Military Augmented Reality Contact Lenses either. At least not in class.

Email: I’ll use our course listserv to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it’s too late. Also, please let me know if you’d like to use a non-Harvard email address.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: “Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term, (2/5/2017). Failure to do so may result in the Course Head’s inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”