

ANG 6032: Modern Literary Theory

Fall Semester 2023

Professor E. Savoy

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**Description:**

This fall, the seminar will be organized around a persistent theme in recent literary theory: Metaphor and its Discontents.

Metaphor and the entire lexicon of tropes have been fundamental to theories of poetics since the ancient Greeks; their departure from literal signification, their turn toward linguistic 'otherness,' are essential to any consideration of how literary language functions to represent the complexities of human experience. From the postwar period to the present day, various schools of theory have presented radically divergent models of figurative language. Until the late 1960s, the American New Criticism – the dominant model of critical practice that professionalized literary education – sought to demonstrate via close reading and analysis that the poetic text offers a unified, coherent, transcendent meaning in which all contradictions and ambiguities are resolved by the power of the image, particularly metaphor. Subsequent movements – French and American deconstruction, psychoanalysis, affect theory – argue in various ways that totalizing or 'final' meaning remains persistently elusive, that (psycho)analysis is interminable, that reading and interpretation are caught up in the spirals of what Jacques Derrida called '*différance*' (this word draws on the double meaning of French verb *différer*, to differ from and to postpone). Cumulatively, recent theory posits a fundamental gap between signifier and signified, between signs and referents – and between literary discourse and our human desire for stable meaning. Language, in short, is always already queer.

All of this has enormous implications for metaphor. Recent affect theory has argued that the affects (such as shame, disgust, anger) have no literal language. Consequently, in our attempt to represent them in language, an enormous signifying burden is placed on figurative expression. For example: Andrew Solomon writes in *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* (note the double metaphors in the title) that 'linguistic vagary is attached to emotional vagary....Depression is a tumbleweed distress that thrives on thin air, growing despite its detachment from the nourishing earth. It can be described only in metaphor and allegory.' What is the reader to make of this striking and powerful figure? Would neuroscience agree that human suffering has no literal language? Why is metaphor an inevitable supplement? Why this reach to what Virginia Woolf called "the far side of language?" Is this specific metaphor about distress subject to a different kind of linguistic distress, i.e., the stress of *différance*?

During the fall semester we shall take up versions of this question in relation to the symbolic economy of literary texts. Our work will involve assiduous close reading of

literature and theory; the seminar will foster the indispensable skills of moving between and among different kinds of discourses, gathering evidence in order to develop coherent, if not totalizing, arguments about how literary language works.

**Required Texts:**

These books are available at the University bookstore. Because much of our work will involve close reading, students are requested to bring the editions specified below to class.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*. Oxford Classics.

Sigmund Freud, *The Wolf Man and Other Case Histories*. Penguin.

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*. Oxford Classics.

**Other Required Reading:**

The following essays and chapters will be posted on StudiUM.

“Formalism and Structuralism,” from *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

Cleantoth Brooks, “The Language of Paradox,” from *The Well-Wrought Urn*.

Emily Dickinson, Selected Poems.

Wallace Stevens, Selected Poems.

Jane Gallop, “The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading.”

Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text,” from *Le Bruissement de la langue*.

Jacques Derrida, “différance,” from *Marges de la Philosophie*.

Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” from *Writing and Difference*.

Coleridge on Symbol and Allegory

Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” from *Blindness and Insight*.

Henry James, “The Figure in the Carpet.”

Peter Brooks, “Freud and Narrative Understanding,” from *Reading for the Plot*.

Sianne Ngai, “On Disgust,” from *Ugly Feelings*.”

Andrew Solomon, “Depression,” from *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*.

Cathy Caruth, Introduction to *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," from *Tendencies*.

Judith Butler, Introduction to *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'.*"

**Evaluation:**

The specific modes of evaluation will be discussed in consultation with students very early in the semester. There will however be a mid-term examination (in which students will be asked to apply literary theory to a literary text) and a final examination (which will consist of two or three essay question). Both examinations will be written at home. No research essay is required in this course. Students will be asked to contribute to discussion by participating several times in the Forum on StudiUM, and they will be asked from time to time to speak to their posts on StudiUM. There will be no formal seminar presentations.

**General Protocols for this Seminar:**

During the first half of the seminar, I will present a formal lecture because much of this material is somewhat difficult. This lecture will offer some general overview, but will focus primarily on close reading of the texts. The second half of the seminar will be devoted to discussion. Some of this discussion will take up the students' posts on the Forum, and students are strongly encouraged to ask questions and to offer insights.

It is a basic courtesy to arrive at the seminar room on time. Interruptions at the beginning of the class are disruptive; they break the flow of discussion, focus, and thought. Students are reminded that graduate study is a professional formation.