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In this course, we’ll explore various ways of studying literature, including personal response, critical analysis, and historical research. Along the way, I’d like us to ask some big questions about the place of literature in our time and in times past, why people read and write, why stories matter, what makes literature different from other human activities, what makes for quality in literature, and so on, all questions that I think it’s important for English majors to ask. Also, since many people are planning a career as a teacher, I’d like us to be thinking about the place of literature in schools at various levels, and how best the skill and enthusiasm for reading might be encouraged.

Along with this sort of general discussion, we’ll be reading a few classics and learning as much about them as we can. Each edition has the original text, and a battery of critical essays, and we’ll be studying these to get a grasp of the variety of approaches to literary study available. I’ll also ask you to do some library work in relation to each text, to supplement what the books provide. My reason for choosing the books I have is fairly straightforward—they are all solid, if not great, works of art, that have prompted much appreciation and discussion over the years, and stand up to repeated readings. They are also the sort of books that come up regularly in a teacher’s life, and for various practical reasons, are worth knowing in some detail.

You’ll be doing a fair amount of writing and presenting in this class. I will be assigning papers as we go, and I will also designate people to take responsibility for leading class discussion, usually on one of the critical essays. I haven’t planned out the whole semester in order to let the class go the direction it wants to, so I will be coming up with various things for you to do. A tentative goal for the writing is that each of you will come up with about 25 pages of text during the term.

Evaluation for this class will be based on the quality of your written work and your overall performance in the class. Probably twice during the semester, there will be a round of conferences to discuss your work in detail and figure out the appropriate grade; I will also grade individual papers as we go along when it seems appropriate. My sense of your overall performance in the class will be based on things like attendance, participation in discussions, work ethic, degree of improvement, and general involvement in the work of the class. If you want an A, you have to come to class very regularly, and participate actively and consistently in discussion.