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ENG 4775-001: Studies in Literary Theory and Cultural Criticism: Inquiry and Imagination

Dana Ringuette
Eastern Illinois University

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We often speak of a literary text as a work of imagination, yet just as often leave unquestioned what work the imagination does and how it goes about doing that work. If such work usually proceeds in a complex, systematic way, and yields something meaningful (a poem, for example), then there is a relation between inquiry and imagination in literature that is well worth pursuing and studying.

**Required Texts:**
- William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* and *Spring and All* from *Imaginations*
- Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. Robert Fagles
- Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
- Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*
- A *Course Packet* available from Copy Express, in the MLK Jr. Union, containing work by Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Descartes, Kant, Coleridge, Peirce, Searle, and Kuhn.

The primary focus of this course is on the relation between inquiry and imagination in poetry as it concerns both writer and reader. Speaking of inquiry, Coleridge asserted the importance of “method.” Method, he says, “becomes natural to the mind which has been accustomed to contemplate not things only, or for their own sake alone, but likewise and chiefly the relations of things, either their relations to each other, or to the observer, or to the state and apprehension of the hearers.”

What is the relation between the poem and the world or experience, between poet and poem, between reader and poem? How can an understanding of these relations help us understand the function, the work, and the value of imagination? William Carlos Williams, for example, insists that “Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations; it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it.”

Our initial work with Williams will serve to focus attention on the issues of inquiry and imagination. We will also read a variety of philosophers and theorists—ancient to modern—who have influenced how we perceive such issues. From our close attention to specific readings, we will try to draw reasonable—perhaps tentative—generalizations concerning shifts, changes, and differences in ways of thinking about poetry. Such reading will in turn serve to motivate and augment our study of Williams’s poetry-prose, Sophocles’s and Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry, and O’Brien’s poetic prose. In a way, like Wallace Stevens, we will undertake an exploration of “what will suffice” as an understanding of the imaginative act.
Course Requirements:

1. Careful reading, engaged discussion.

2. Newspaper: Subscribe to a newspaper or other reputable news source (sorry, the DEN doesn’t count). I recommend the free online subscription to The New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com).

3. Commentaries: Over the semester, you will write four commentaries focused on various readings and our study of them. Basically, you’ll be locating a passage, identifying why it is important in terms of the work itself and its context, and what ramifications the passage has for our continued study. More instructions to follow, but due dates are listed on the class schedule. You will submit these electronically.


5. A longer, critical, research essay, due at the end of the semester, focusing on one or more of the literary texts we’ll be reading and studying. This essay should be written in accordance with standard practice as described in the MLA Handbook, 7th edition.

6. A final, exam—probably of the take-home variety.

7. Sustained, engaged participation throughout the semester. This means more than simply being here: read like crazy, turn in all assignments (and on time), and contribute thoughtfully and often to class discussion.

Grades & Evaluation:

1. The following percentages make up the total of the final grade: Commentaries=30%; Shorter essay=15%; Longer essay=40%; Final exam=15%.

2. You are expected to complete all, not just part, of all assigned work.

3. A brief note on academic dishonesty: cooperation among all of you is encouraged, but submitting others’ work as you own is plagiarism. And plagiarism is not tolerated. No exceptions or excuses. Plagiarism will result in an immediate failure of the course and a report filed with the Office of Student Standards.

If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, then 1) please inform me as soon as possible, and 2) contact the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.
Schedule of Meetings
[ALL CHANGES WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN CLASS]

Week 1
1/11: Introduction / Welcome
1/13: Some thoughts on where we are and where we're heading

Week 2
1/18: William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*
1/20: *Kora in Hell*

Week 3
1/25: Plato, selections from *Republic*
1/27: selections from *Republic*

Week 4
2/1: Aristotle, *Poetics*
2/3: *Poetics*  
**Commentary #1 due**

Week 5
2/8: Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
2/10: *Oedipus the King*

Week 6
2/15: Francis Bacon, from *The New Organon*
2/17: René Descartes, from *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*  
**Commentary #2 due**

Week 7
2/22: continued work with Descartes and Bacon
2/24: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Week 8
3/1: *The Tempest*
3/3: *The Tempest*

Week 9
3/8: Immanuel Kant, selections from *The Critique of Pure Reason*;  
3/10: *The Critique of Pure Reason*  
**Midterm Paper Due**

< Spring Break – March 14-18 >

Week 10
3/24: continued discussion of “Essays on Method”

Week 11
3/31: continued discussion of “On a New List of Categories”  
**Commentary #3 due**

Week 12
4/5: Leroy F. Searle, “From Inference to Insight: A Peircean Model of Literary Reasoning”
4/7: continued discussion of Searle, “From Inference to Insight”; begin discussion of Thomas S. Kuhn, “Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice”

Week 13
4/14: continued discussion;  
**Commentary #4 due**

Week 14
4/19: Tim O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*
4/21: *In the Lake of the Woods*

Week 15
4/26: William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*
4/28: *Spring and All*
4/29: **Final Paper Due**

Final Exam: Tuesday, May 3, 2:45-4:45 pm