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ENG 4390-001: Puzzling Narratives

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Course Description

A riddle is essentially a charm in reverse: it represents the revolt of the active mind against the hypnotic power of commanding words. Charms control events by manipulating the hidden forces of nature. To exercise power over an object, charms involve actions as well as words. The root of the word charm, *carmen*, relates directly to the word spell, and indirectly to the other meaning of spell in the sense of reading letter by letter, or sound by sound. When the Keebler Elves practice their Elfin Magic and name their latest cracker "Crispbread" they practice a charm over the consumer. The consumer either enunciates the name of the hors d'oeuvre cracker crisply "Crispbread," or the consumer "spreads" it out: "Crisp-spread." In either case the consumer practices the action for which the product is designed. Only the reader who reads the riddle disarms the charm. Such a reader springs the "plot" without being caught.

This course will explore the narrative power charms and riddles continue to hold as the oral tradition of charms and riddles enter mass print culture. How do charms and riddles function in the elaborate plots of classic literary texts. Why does our reading experience so often involve puzzles—puzzles of plot, mysteries of relations, the charm of words? This course will explore the relationship puzzles hold to the cognitive challenges art demands by inviting readers to re-think cultural and conceptual boundaries. By exploring the oral and literary traditions of charms and riddles, we will come to a better understanding of the epistemological work literature performs—how literature tricks audiences into seeing and knowing their world anew. We will read important works of literature by Sophocles, Austen, Blake, Bronte, Dickens, Joyce and others as well as selections from anthropology.
and popular culture. Charming, amusing, and instructive—this course demonstrates the riddling nature of literary performance.

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Office Hours
MW 1:00-2:30 pm & by appointment

Texts

• Sophocles. The Theban Plays. ("Oedipus the King")
• Jane Austen. Emma.
• William Blake. Songs of Innocence & Of Experience
• Emily Bronte. Wuthering Heights
• Charles Dickens. Our Mutual Friend
• James Joyce. Ulysses
• Gifford. Ulysses Annotated

• Miscellaneous e-texts via WWW and e-mail

Goals. This course has three primary goals. The first goal is to read critically and widely from representative figures of Western Literature. The texts we encounter are peculiar for their clever use of riddles and word games. Proceeding from this first goal, the second aim is to work toward a wider vision of "word magic" and the ancient power of naming. Riddles, as we will discover, recover the power of "word magic" by renewing the chains of signification that circumscribe a word and charm it with its meaning.

The third aim of the course is the broadest, most practical, and probably the most difficult goal: to become more sophisticated and critical readers of fiction and poetry and its various modes, with a heighten understanding of the power of creative language in shaping our perceptions of the world.

Requirements.

• Literature Presentation and Paper (10-15 pages) 35%
• Final exam (comprehensive) 30%
• Midterm exam 20%
• Reading Quizzes / Participation / DSIR's 15%

Please Note!! You must complete the literature paper, the midterm, and the final exam to complete the course. Failure to complete any one of these three components represents incomplete work for the semester and any one with incomplete work will not receive a passing grade for the course—however masterfully he or she has completed the other components.
Course Participation. This is not a lecture course. The format of the course and its overall success depend upon your active and informed contributions. The response papers (or DSIR's) and reading quizzes will allow you a couple of "formal" ways to guide and participate in class discussion. Note that 15% of your final grade will be determined by your participation including your work on DSIR’s and Reading Quizzes (see below). That means a significant portion of your grade will be up to you and how much you want to participate in the course's various conversations.

Papers. You will write a major literature paper (10-15 pages). Due dates and subject choices will be scheduled during the semester. In conference, we will discuss in detail these projects. I will provide a list of possible topics to give you some ideas for the literature papers, although I'm quite flexible about the topics you decide upon or the methodologies you employ. Generally, I expect your literature paper to advocate and to develop an inventive reading of the work or groups of works you sign up to consider. Papers must involve some aspect of the theme of the course: puzzling narratives. Still, as you will see, the essay will come out of your own interests and concerns.

All research must be scrupulously documented. Plagiarism shouldn't be a problem, but if it is, it's a serious one, and can only result in failure.

Late Papers. Papers turned in after the assigned due date will be penalized one-third of a grade for each calendar day they are late. Although I encourage you to turn in your paper in class, you have until 4:30 p.m. on the due date to hand in your paper (either to me in my office or in my mailbox, 308 Coleman). In other words, I want you to be in class the day the final draft is due whether or not you have your paper fully completed.

Double-Sided Illuminated Readings. You will be required to submit a close reading (or brief analysis) for select class meetings. The close reading will be a critical analysis of some aspect of that day's assignment. The DSIR's will be a half page typed or hand-written summary and critical analysis of that day's reading assignment.

Illustrations, mathematical equations, doodles are welcomed. These close readings should cite a passage from the reading, and then analyze and interpret the passage. You should consider these open, free, and informal. This is the place to muse freely.

DSIR's cannot be made up or turned in after class. If you know you will not be in class to turn yours in, make arrangements to have someone else turn it in for you.

Attendance Policy. You need to be in class all the time. I allow up to four absences, whether excused or unexcused. Each absence after that will lower your final grade one full grade (if your calculated final grade is a B, for instance, and you have four absences, you will receive a C for the course). Seven or more absences will result in a failing grade.

Students with Disabilities. If you have a documented disability and wish to
receive academic accommodations, please contact the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.