

English 273

Katy Ryan, ENGL 273, Fall 2000, Contemporary Literature

ENG 172: Contemporary Literature: Public Records and Private Stories

Katy Ryan

Stansbury Hall 354

Office Hours: Mon and Wed 10:00-11:00 and by appt.

293-3107 X 424

All your life you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye. --
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and
what it is down there. The rest is weather.
--Beloved

In this course, we will consider how the past—literary and historical—is recreated in works by contemporary British and US American writers. We will read short stories, novels, poems, and plays that revisit fairy tales, Shakespeare's works, and Western operas, fashioning old plots into new shapes. Other writers return to historical events that seem to defy artistic representation, such as slavery in the United States and the bombing of Dresden in the Second World War. These narratives reflect both on the violence that occurred and the fictional apparatus that conveys the past (and present), urging readers to rethink notions about truth and representation. In addition to the questions generated by your reading, we will discuss the postmodern impulse to challenge the idea of a singular, accessible, objective history. We will begin by reading Grace Paley's short story "A Conversation with My Father," which dramatizes conflicting notions about what a story is and how it should be told.

Freedom is variously imagined in our texts—over the border. Characters cross the borders that separate the North from the South (Beloved), women from men (M. Butterfly), then from now (Slaughterhouse-Five; An Artist of the Floating World), major from minor characters (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), and human animals from nonhuman animals (Wolf-Alice). How successful are these border crossings, and what is learned in the travel? How do readers participate in these transformations, and what impact does the revision have on our understanding of history and culture?

Class participation will be central to this class. There will be two essays, occasional in-class writing, and a final exam. (I will give you the essay questions for the final in advance.) You will also be in a performance group with approximately four other students. Each group will be responsible for performing in some way a chosen text. This performance is not graded, nor does it have to be professionally acted; it simply has to be a thoughtful response to the literary text. Think of it as your gift to the class and as a way to begin our discussion. Performances should be an interpretative engagement with the story, novel, or play rather than a direct reading. You will have some in-class time to prepare, but it will be necessary for each group to meet outside of class.

At least once before the middle of the semester, you should meet with me for a conference about your progress in the class. You can just appear during my office hours or make an appointment.

Goals:

- a. to strengthen your critical writing, analytical thinking, and creative imaginings
- b. to consider how memory, perspective, and desire shape the telling of history

Required Books:

Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Vonnegut

The Bloody Chamber, Angela Carter

M. Butterfly, David Henry Hwang

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard

Beloved, Toni Morrison

An Artist of the Floating World, Kazuo Ishiguro

Work Requirements

Two essays (5-6 pages) 40%

Final Exam 25%

Class Participation 25%

Performance Group 10%

Mon Aug. 21: Introductions

Wed Aug 23: "A Conversation with My Father," Grace Paley

Mon Aug 28: "All Stories Are True," John Wideman
Introduction to Telling the Truth about History, Joyce Appleby, et. al

Wed Aug 30: "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," "The Truth the Dead Know," "A Curse Against Elegies," Anne Sexton

Mon Sept 4: Labor Day — No class
Wed Sept 6: Slaughterhouse-Five pp. 1-86

Mon Sept 11: Slaughterhouse-Five and "The Wreck of Time," Annie Dillard

Wed Sept 13: Bring to class

--at least 1 contemporary account of the fire-bombing of Dresden
--2 questions that you have about Slaughterhouse-Five
Performance Group

Mon Sept 18: "The Snow Child" and "The Lady of the House of Love," Angela Carter

Wed Sept 20: "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves"

Mon Sept 25: "Wolf-Alice"

Wed Sept 27: "The Bloody Chamber"
Performance Group

Mon Oct 2: M. Butterfly, David Henry Hwang. Act 1 and Act 2

Wed Oct 4: M. Butterfly
Performance Group

Mon Oct 9: Muriel Rukeyser, "Song," "In a Darkhouse," "Effort at Speech Between

Two People," "What Have you Brought Home from the Wars?"

Wed Oct 11: Ben Okri, "What the Tapster Saw"

Mon Oct 16: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard, Act 1

Film version of Hamlet (time and place to be announced)

First Essay Due

Wed Oct 18: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Performance Group

Mon Oct 23: "History Makes a Nation" and "Postmodernism and the Crisis of
Modernity," Appleby, et. al.

Wed Oct 25: Beloved, pp. 1-63

Mon Oct 30: Beloved, Toni Morrison, pp. 64-117

Wed Nov 1: Beloved, pp. 118-165

Mon Nov 6: Beloved (entire novel)

Performance Group

Excerpts from African Slave Trade, Cowley and Mannix

Wed Nov 8: Beloved

"Rediscovering Black History," Morrison

Mon Nov 13: June Jordan, "Poem about my Rights" and "Rape is not a Poem"

Wed Nov 15: Edward Bartók-Baratta, "Devoted," "The Men Who Killed My Brother,"
"The Fifth Crime"

Second Essay Due

Thanksgiving Holiday Nov 18 — Nov 26

Mon Nov 27: An Artist of the Floating World, Kazuo Ishiguro pp. 1-127

Wed Nov 29: An Artist of the Floating World, Kazuo Ishiguro pp. 1-127

Mon Dec 4: An Artist of the Floating World (entire novel)
Performance Group

Wed Dec 6: An Artist of the Floating World and preparation for final

Final Examination Dec 12, 8:00 AM
Sept. 13 Slaughterhouse 5

Wed Sept 27: "The Bloody Chamber" (3)

Wed Oct 4: M. Butterfly

Wed Oct 18: Ros and G

Mon Nov 6: Beloved

Mon Dec 4: An Artist of the Floating World