

# English 273: Contemporary Literature

## *Beyond Realism*

Prof. Ryan Claycomb  
ryan.claycomb@mail.wvu.edu  
Class meets T/Th 2:30pm-3:45pm

305 Colson Hall  
304-293-9710 (office)  
Office Hours: W 9:30-12:30 pm  
or by appointment

### Course Description:

Though the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is hardly known for straightforward literary representation, the last fifty years have seen radical departures from the idea that literature needs to be a mirror to the world. Or if it must be, then a cracked funhouse mirror. What better way to represent a world where sinister power lurks in hidden nooks, where desire transforms bodies, and where the page and the world are equally strange?

If modernism conducted its experiments by trying to discover new ways of accessing truth and reality, post-modernism—what we might call the major artistic paradigm of the past fifty years—assumes that there is no objective reality, so let's have fun with the alternative realities we might imagine, or better, poke holes in the false realities presented to us.

The guiding principle over this semester, then, is to gather the major ideas of postmodernism, with its doubt about what is real and what is reliable, its play with the surfaces of experience, its belief in the potency of language to make worlds, and its almost fantastical sense that we can find as much truth in stories as we can in the world outside those stories. We will set those ideas to work unpacking several major works from around the globe, looking not just for their undeniable sense of play, but also the very serious philosophical and political issues that this sense of play takes up. In the end we may find that these are not just texts beyond realism, but in fact texts the work against the very idea of reality itself.

Our **Course Objectives** will be multiple. By the end of the semester, students will:

- Recognize several features of postmodern literature and place them in the cultural context of the present moment or recent history.
- Engage non-realist representational tactics for their formal, aesthetic, political and philosophical effects.
- Develop greater comfort and confidence with experimental texts, emphasizing textual play over precision.
- Improve close-reading and writing skills.
- Read some really fun texts that poke fun at themselves and the world, that question the nature of reality, and generally blow your mind—a little at a time, but on a regular basis.

### Texts:

These texts are available at both the University Book Store and the Book Exchange. Please obtain them immediately. It is generally important to obtain the same edition as is denoted here.

- Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*
- Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*
- Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*
- Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*
- Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*
- Art Spiegelman, *Maus*
- Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

Several texts (both primary and secondary) will be made available in PDF format on the e-campus site. Those readings will be marked with three asterisks (\*\*\*) and clearly labeled on the site. For primary texts (stories and poems), please print them and bring them to class. For secondary texts, you may print, but if not, please bring reading notes to class.

## Major and GEC requirements

Historically, courses in the English department at this level enroll a wide array of students, from freshman non-majors trying to fill GEC requirements, to senior English majors getting in their last courses before graduation. This is a very diverse group to teach to, and no teaching style will always work for everyone. Therefore, I identify the primary target audience for this course as early-career English majors—freshmen and sophomores—and we will be working on both the content and skill knowledge that those students will need. That said, this course fulfills one of the survey components for the English major, and it also fulfills GEC requirement 5, **Artistic Expression: Apply methods and principles of critical inquiry to the analysis of literary or artistic expression.** Rationale: Courses in the study of literature, theater, music, and the visual arts enable students to develop skills of critical thinking concerning human experience as reflected in various forms of artistic expression. *Learning Outcome:* After completing requirements for this Objective, students will be able to apply understanding of methods and principles of critical inquiry to the analysis of one medium of artistic expression in art, dance, literature, music, or theatre.

## Course Requirements:

You are expected to meet the following requirements to achieve a passing grade.

1. Complete all reading by the date it is listed in the syllabus. There is a fair amount of reading in this course, so be sure to budget your time accordingly.
2. Complete all work by the date listed in the syllabus
  - Grades on all assignments will drop one letter grade for every weekday they are late.
  - Work handed in more than one week past the due date will automatically be graded F (55%).
  - Work handed in more than 2 weeks past the due date will earn a zero.
  - A paper is not considered turned until I have a hard copy in my hand.
  - Electronic versions via email or disk are unacceptable unless I give explicit permission beforehand.
3. Participate in class activities in such a way that enhances learning for both yourself and your classmates.

## Assignments and Grading:

- 37.5% Response Papers: The semester is divided into roughly three units, each of which is accompanied by a response paper. For each paper (12.5% each), you will write a short argument (750-1000 words) that stakes a claim about a text read during the previous unit. The response may extend a discussion from class, apply a theoretical framework to a text, or draw out an interesting connection between texts. Excellent responses will make a claim about a text that exhibits original, independent thinking beyond the class discussions: see guidelines for graded work below. More details to follow.
- 15% In-Class Participation: See course requirement #3. Attendance will also factor into this grade, so please see the attendance policy. I will assign a class participation grade every three weeks based on attendance, preparation, meaningful contribution to classroom discussion and in-class activities, and absence of disruptive behavior. Should reading quizzes become necessary, they will be factored into this component of the grade.
- 7.5% Group Presentation: Throughout the semester, students in groups of 2 or 3 will read a theoretical description of some element of or approach to postmodernism. These essays may be dense and complicated, but most of them are quite influential, and often have inspired some interesting and informative websites that explain their ideas. Groups together will work through the essay, present on its major ideas for 15-20 to the class on the date specified in the syllabus, and prepare a handout that the class will be able to refer to should this essay come back up. Guidelines to follow.
- 15% Midterm: The midterm will ask students to engage with several specific passages and their literary significance from the first half of the semester.
- 25% Take-Home Final Exam: On the last day of class (12/4), I will distribute the take home final, which students will be able to complete over the weekend, and return by 3pm on Monday 12/8. The exam will like consist of two essays that can be completed in a variety of ways that will marshal multiple texts from across the semester.

### Format for Papers:

All out-of-class assignments must adhere to the following criteria: typed or word-processed, Times New Roman 12-point font double-spaced, 1 inch to 1.25 inch margins, spell-checked, page-numbered, and finally, stapled or paper-clipped. Since paper assignments are based on word counts, a good rule of thumb is that each page is approximately 300 words. Please head your papers with your name, the date, the course, my name, and the word count, followed by a (creative) title that is centered above your essay.

Submissions that do not meet these requirements will be dropped as much as a letter grade. Please note: I am seriously troubled by students who fiddle with the physical appearance of the paper so as to achieve the illusion of length. This belief assumes that I cannot tell the difference between quantity and quality, and I find that personally offensive. A paper that is shorter than the assigned length but presented in an honest way will earn far more respect. That said, word counts should reduce the impulse to indulge in this practice.

### Grading Written Work

Grades on written work will follow the guidelines laid out below, guidelines used in the University's writing program:

**A:** This is an outstanding essay that reflects a perceptive and thoughtful response to the assignment. It is well organized with excellent development of its ideas. It reflects the writer's command of appropriate rhetorical strategies. The prose is vigorous and fresh, and the writer is clearly in control of the standard conventions of American prose.

**B:** This is a very good essay that fulfills the assignment and shows evidence of clear thought and good planning. It is well organized with good supporting details. The writing is fluent, and there are only minor errors in the mechanics of writing which do not interfere with reading the essay.

**C:** This is a standard, satisfactory essay that fulfills the assignment and is adequately developed. This is the basic grade from which all others are derived. Higher grades than this *exceed* the expectations for the assignment, and grades lower than this fail to meet some major component of the assignment. The writing is clear and coherent with relatively few errors in usage and mechanics, but the writer fails to demonstrate any particular strength which would distinguish an above-average essay.

**D:** This is a below-average essay that fulfills many components of the assignment but exhibits major problems in writing. It may have difficulty with the presentation of ideas (e.g., lack of a clear thesis, weak organization, poor development of ideas, or inappropriate diction, poor spelling) or be marred by enough errors in the mechanics of writing to seriously distract the reader.

**F:** This is an essay that relates to the topic but is so poorly presented that it fails to fulfill the assignment. It fails to present its basic ideas, either because of poor organization and lack of clarity or because the writing reflects a lack of control over the basic conventions of standard American usage. Such an essay may have sentence boundary problems, poor use of idiom, inappropriate diction (words used incorrectly), agreement errors, or verb tense problems.

**O:** This is an essay that is either completely unrelated to the assignment, or that represents dishonest work by the student, principally the use of ideas or writing which are clearly not one's own work. Refer to the West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog for the University policy on Academic Dishonesty.

### Attendance Policy:

Attendance for this class is required. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to gather notes or make up any material. If you accumulate 4 **or more** absences (two full weeks of class) for any reason, you **will forfeit your entire class participation grade (15%)**. If a circumstance arises that drastically impacts your attendance, perhaps in all of your classes (serious illness, family tragedy, etc.), I'd strongly encourage you to contact Dr. Thomas Sloane, Sr. Associate Dean of Students, at 293-5611 or [Tom.Sloane@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:Tom.Sloane@mail.wvu.edu).

### Tardiness:

Excessive tardiness is also a problem and will negatively impact your class participation grade. When you are late, you miss important class announcements, handouts, and the framework for the day's in-class work. Late entrance into class is disruptive to the workings of the class, assignments are collected at the beginning of class, and with so much material to cover, every moment is precious. Assignments turned in late because of tardiness will be considered late.

**Office Hours:**

My office hours are times that I am committed to being available to consult with students. Please note that I am always willing to review drafts with students in office hours above and beyond designated draft workshopping dates and times, as well as to discuss any other concerns you may have about the class, its content, and its procedures. I am also around campus outside my stated office hours if you would like to make an appointment. Research suggests that students who are in the habit of seeking out additional contact with their teachers tend to do better, even if you're coming by to discuss the latest Project Runway episode or a good recipe for hamburgers (just ask!). Point is: come by, have a cup of tea, chat. It'll be good.

**Social Justice:**

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I support that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veterans status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Disability Services (293-6700).

**Academic Dishonesty:**

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Because the various forms of academic dishonesty have proliferated recently, I have begun to take this problem very seriously, and will aggressively pursue full punishment (an unforgiveable F for the course) if I find significant evidence of academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty cheats you out of your education. Moreover, there is an underlying assumption of absolute disrespect for your classmates, your instructor and your institution. If you are panicking and feel like you might be forced to rely on academic dishonesty, please please please try to see me about other options. It is your responsibility to be informed about your responsibilities. For more information on the University's Code of Academic Integrity, visit <http://www.arc.wvu.edu/admissions/integrity.html>

**Class Schedule/ Syllabus**  
**English 273: Fall 2008**

Wk	Day	Date	Class Schedule, Readings, Assignments
1	T	8/19	Introduction to the Course: What is(n't) Postmodernism?
	TH	8/21	Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths" *** "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" ***
2	T	8/26	Borges, "The Library of Babel" *** <u>Presentation: John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion"</u>
	TH	8/28	Italo Calvino, <i>If on a Winter's Night a Traveler</i> , 1-90
3	T	9/2	Calvino, <i>If on a Winter's Night a Traveler</i> , 91-end <u>Presentation: Frederic Jameson on Pastiche</u>
	TH	9/4	Calvino, <i>If on a Winter's Night a Traveler</i> <u>Presentation: Brian McHale, Postmodernist Fiction (Introduction)</u>
4	T	9/9	Tom Stoppard, <i>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead</i> (Act I)
	TH	9/11	Stoppard, <i>R&amp;G</i> , Act II <u>Presentation, Jean-Francois Lyotard on The Postmodern Condition</u>
5	T	9/16	John Ashbery, Selected Poems***
	TH	9/18	<b>Due: Response Paper #1</b> Angela Carter, <i>The Bloody Chamber</i> : "The Werewolf," "The Company of Wolves" Review Little Red Riding Hood tales from your childhood. In particular, see The Red Riding Hood Project at <a href="http://www.usm.edu/english/fairytales/lrrh/lrrhome.htm">http://www.usm.edu/english/fairytales/lrrh/lrrhome.htm</a>

6	T	9/23	Angela Carter, <i>The Bloody Chamber</i> "The Bloody Chamber" "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," "The Tiger's Bride," (Read "Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast"*** if you don't know the tales well. Find good versions online at <a href="http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/talesindex.html">http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/talesindex.html</a> ) <u>Presentation: Linda Hutcheon on Postmodern Parody</u>
	TH	9/25	Anne Sexton, Selected Poems from <i>Transformations</i> ***
7	T	9/30	<b>Midterm Exam</b>
	TH	10/2	Jeanette Winterson, <i>Sexing the Cherry</i> , 1-61
8	T	10/7	Jeanette Winterson, <i>Sexing the Cherry</i> , 62-124
	TH	10/9	Jeanette Winterson, <i>Sexing the Cherry</i> , 124-end
9	T	10/14	Amiri Baraka, "Slave Ship"*** <u>Presentation, bell hooks "Postmodern Blackness"</u>
	TH	10/16	Class Cancelled: Please try to attend Mike Sell lecture, TBA
10	T	10/21	<b>Due: Response Paper #2</b> George Saunders, "I CAN SPEAK!™" "Four Institutional Monologues"***
	TH	10/23	George Saunders, "My Flamboyant Grandson,"*** "Jon"*** <u>Presentation: Jameson on <i>Postmodernism and Late Capitalism</i></u>
11	T	10/28	Garbiel Garcia Marquez, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,"*** "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World"***
	TH	10/30	Salman Rushdie, "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers"*** <u>Presentation, Jean Baudrillard on Simulation and Simulacrum</u>
12	T	11/4	Milan Kundera, <i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i> Pts 1-3
	TH	11/6	Milan Kundera, <i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i> Pts 4-5 <u>Presentation: Hayden White on Postmodern History</u>
13	T	11/11	Milan Kundera, <i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i> Pts 6-7
	TH	11/13	Milan Kundera, <i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i>
14	T	11/18	Art Spiegelman, <i>Maus: A Survivor's Tale</i> , All
	TH	11/20	<b>Due: Response Paper #3</b> Spiegelman, <i>Maus</i>
<b>Thanksgiving Break</b>			
15	T	12/2	Salman Rushdie, <i>Haroun and the Sea of Stories</i> , All (I know! I am asking you to read a whole novel, over Break, to discuss during so-called dead week. But it's ostensibly a children's novel, so it shouldn't be <i>too</i> hard. I think it'll pay off).
	TH	12/4	Rushdie, <i>Haroun</i> Take-Home Exam distributed
16	M	12/8	Take-Home Exam Due, in my office, by 3pm.