

ENGLISH 771

## POSTMODERN PASTS:

THE USES OF HISTORY IN

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE

PROF. RYAN CLAYCOMB

TUESDAY 7:00-9:50 PM

### OFFICE HOURS:

305 COLSON HALL ..... T 2:30-4:30

126D HONORS HALL ..... BY APPT.

[RYAN.CLAYCOMB@MAIL.WVU.EDU](mailto:RYAN.CLAYCOMB@MAIL.WVU.EDU)



### Course Description

Given the UK's radically shifting position in the world over the past 65 years, writers from the metropolitan center and the empire alike have been forced to reconsider the grand narrative of British history. Narrative history may have indeed hit its generic pinnacle in Victorian England, where history-making (in both senses of the phrase) often seemed to be an imperial imperative. But as Modernism established for us the "pastness" of the past, and the postwar period unsettled both British political power and literary ontological and epistemological certainty, our sense of that historical narrative has been up for grabs. This course, then, will examine the varieties, ideologies, and concerns of historical narrative in literary form.

We will therefore consider a variety of examples of the uses of historical narrative in British, Irish, and postcolonial Anglophone literature—specifically fiction and drama—to understand how the relationship between history and narrative inflect notions of identity, politics, memory, and experience.

We will also work from a variety of historiographic frameworks:

- Iterations and reanimations of a Marxist historical dialectic;
- Postmodern approaches to metahistory and metafiction;
- Feminist interventions into masculinist narrative tactics;
- Postcolonial challenges to historicity as the domain of Western imperialism
- Queer interrogations of temporality and futurity.

Using these theoretical guideposts (along the axes of emplotment, style, metaphor, temporality, reference, and ideology) the course will consider the range of ways that authors have approached historical literature (primarily fiction and drama), and to what cultural ends. We will explore political, formal, and ethical dimensions of various literary historiographies as they rewrite British and Imperial history, and with it, the place of Great Britain in the contemporary world.

Primary readings will be paired throughout with critical and theoretical work that interrogates, among others, the following questions:

- To what degree does ideology inflect both the content of historical narrative and the formal dimensions of its literary expression?
- How much can literary representations of the past depend upon or distrust the possibility of historical referentiality, from the reliability of truth claims to the possibility of any linguistic reference?
- To what degree does literary genre and even narrativity itself alter our sense of the historical past and the historical real?
- Can and should historical representation be a metaphor for the current moment, or a metonymy of an accessible past?
- Is literary style itself a component of historical representation, and how might it be interpreted as a maker of meaning?
- How do philosophies of time and literary theories of narrative temporality inflect our reading of texts??

Obviously, designing any course is an exercise in omission. Various versions of this syllabus have included more primary texts, more secondary texts, and different units entirely. For virtually every author listed here, I could imagine a

different representative text. The syllabus I present here represents the happiest medium available. This is, therefore, not an exhaustive survey of the range of ways we might think about historiographic literature. I am, for example, deeply disappointed that we couldn't include Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Alan Moore's *From Hell*, or any narrative poetry. **While many other possible options didn't make it onto the syllabus, they will certainly arise in our deliberations over the course of the semester, and please consider them as possible topics to explore for final papers.** I can also suggest a whole range of others as we near that time in the semester.

Finally, this isn't a history course, per se. But a basic knowledge of history, particularly of the period in question, may be useful, and while I haven't ordered it, Kenneth Morgan's *Britain since 1945: The People's Peace* is a useful reference, but as with any historical narrative, it is susceptible to critiques of the way that history might be represented. This will raise important questions of methodology, and patience will be necessary as we expand our mental models on the many possible shapes and uses of history. In fact, one of the most crucial questions to ask about any of these texts is "Why does it *matter* if

this is history?" Asking that question about these texts will yield answers that I hope will provide ample insight into historiographic literature specifically, as well as the larger categories of history and literature more broadly. I'm looking forward to hearing how you all will approach these questions.

### Required Texts

- Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*
- David Hare, *Stuff Happens*
- Brittain and Slovo, *Gunatnamo: 'honor bound to defend freedom'*
- Robin Soans, *Talking to Terrorists*
- Tom Stoppard, *Travesties, Arcadia*
- Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*
- Julian Barnes, *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*
- Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*
- Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*
- Jeannette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*
- David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

All other readings will be available electronically, either on the course e-campus site, or if you need, via cd-rom (let me know and I'll burn one for you). Please have all readings accessible for reference during class, either by printing them at your own expense or by bringing a laptop or tablet to class.

### Required Work

*Unless otherwise specified or agreed upon beforehand, all work is due at the beginning of class on the date listed. If I request the electronic submission of an assignment, please make sure that I confirm receipt before you consider it submitted.*

**10% Participation/Discussion Questions:** graduate work is predicated on frequent, substantive participation—the classroom climate is as dependent upon what you bring to the classroom as any other element. I will expect significant contribution to classroom discussion from every student, every week. It is my belief that at this level, participation is more than just a “bump” grade. With many of you effectively in some stage of training for the professoriate or another teaching position, you should be able to generate and sustain dialogue about texts. Obviously, I hope to be an active part of this process, and perhaps even the most regular participant, but this class should never be reduced to monologue or regular lecture.

To facilitate this, please submit two discussion questions for class every week. You will email them to me by noon the day of class. The questions should be designed to get at salient issues in the readings in a way that provokes dialogue in the class while engaging critical issues that most interest you. Do be prepared to have something to say about each question, preferably with relevant textual evidence at your fingertips.

Good discussion questions are open-ended, have no obvious answer, and are based on more than simple opinion. At their best, they should do many of the following:

- They should avoid yes/no formulations or simple factual responses, and should resist value-based judgments of the text (was it good/bad?) in question.
- They should first and foremost generate discussion (hence the name) or even debate. Good questions might even propose two conflicting views to tease out.
- They may take a sentence or two to set up, e.g. pairing a theoretical concept with a moment in the text that complicates or fits uneasily with that concept, and then asking a question that might help disentangle that apparent contradiction.
- They should connect with the theoretical and critical issues we've been discussing in the class; they should avoid simply working out an issue local to a primary text.
- They should attempt to move as much as possible past the obvious questions and try to capture subtler nuances of the text.
- They should reference, when possible, specific sections of or moments in the primary texts.
- They should open up a more complex understanding of the field, rather than a simpler one.
- They might well reference other texts we've read in the class.

Finally, collect all of your discussion questions from over the course of the semester in a single document. You may find use for them later in the semester.

**5 % Discussion Leadership:** For most weeks, one or more secondary texts will feature prominently in our discussion. For each designated reading, one member of the class will be responsible for teaching that text, leading the rest of the class (aim for about 20-30 minutes) through the finer points of the argument for the purposes of a) engaging that reading with other theories of historiographic literature, and b) applying that reading to the primary text for the day. Your purpose is to effectively lead your peers, more so than to impress me—therefore: theoretical sophistication at the expense of accessibility will limit the effectiveness of the task, though ideally both theoretical sophistication and an inclusive accessibility to the ideas is desirable. Please come prepared with *at least* a handout of important ideas from the text to distribute to the class. Remember, you are *leading discussion* more than you are *presenting*.

**15% Proposal, Annotated Bibliography, and Presentation:** These three components will be graded collectively as part of the preparatory work for your final paper. Your proposal and your annotated bibliography are due on November 13.

- The proposal should take the form of an abstract for the final paper, laying out the central critical question that you are researching, the texts/performances you'll use to plumb those critical questions, the general way that existing scholarship has tackled the question, and the intervention that you imagine your work will make in the discussion. It should run between 400-600 words (1½-2 pages), and will serve as the preface to your annotated bibliography.
- The annotated bibliography should analyze 7-10 critical secondary sources of use to your final project, of which no more than two may have been used in class. Each annotation should summarize the main points of the source, zero in on its contribution to the critical conversation, read the text for critical gaps or omissions (attending particularly to points where your work might intervene), and identify ways in which the source will be useful to your research. Each annotation will likely run 200-300 words.
- The presentation on 12/4 will be a brief (10-15 minutes) précis of your research and central argument, addressed to the class, and tackling the same issues as your proposal, but with a more definitive focus. You may want to bring handouts/visuals as appropriate. The goal of the presentation is to both present the shape of a thoughtful final project, and also to get feedback on your research, process, and argument from the entire class as you approach *final* revisions of your paper. The understanding is that you will be well into a first, or ideally, second draft of your paper by the time of the presentation, so that your presentation will be neither speculative nor tentative.

70% **Seminar Paper:** The seminar paper should be a polished draft of an argument that could feasibly be submitted to an academic journal in the field of contemporary literature. The paper should be roughly 25 pages, thoroughly researched, theoretically informed, and meticulously cited in MLA parenthetical format. After you submit your proposal I'd like to try to meet with each of you to shape the argument. It should be a focused, theoretically-engaged argument that engages a specific primary text/theoretical approach, but does so in such a way as to also engage the larger critical discussion of historiographic literature. While your primary text need not necessarily have been one we read and discussed this semester, it must fall within the purview of the course, which is to say that it must be by a British or postcolonial Anglophone author, and it must engage historical narrative in a substantive way. The argument should follow the conventions of academic argumentation, including MLA format for all citations.

In general, the best seminar papers exhibit the following features, in roughly this order of importance:

- The argument makes a significant original contribution to our understanding of the text and the critical field in question.
- The argument is enhanced by a sophisticated deployment of relevant theory and criticism, well-researched, elegantly framed, and ethically cited.
- The argument is well stocked with ample close-reading evidence from the text(s) in question.
- The argument is well-written, well-organized, readable, and cleanly edited.

#### **A Note about Seminars:**

On the one hand, this is a 700-level class, and is designed to be the most advanced coursework available in this field at this institution. On the other hand, the class serves many populations, and each person brings to the class a different level of expertise. For those of you who intend to go onto the professoriate (not all of you, I recognize), please think of this classroom in that context. My ideal seminar classroom is one in which I can set the class in motion, but then participate merely as a somewhat more experienced member among peers. Insofar as I hope to treat you as peers, I hope you will do so with each other as well.

Doctoral students (particularly advanced doctoral students) I expect will be classroom leaders, in bringing a robust knowledge to the classroom, in keeping discussion lively, and, importantly, in helping along other classmates in ways that are neither impatient nor condescending. Less experienced students in whatever program, I expect you to learn quickly when necessary, both from me and from your fellow students, and to actively contribute what you have to contribute. I dislike equally the tendency to sit silently in discussion for fear of failure, and the kind of academic snobbery that engenders that fear of failure in the first place. In a graduate classroom, the boats all rise together.

#### **Special Circumstances:**

If you have a *registered* disability that might affect your performance in this course, let me know as soon as possible and I will make whatever accommodations are warranted. If you have a disability that is not registered, please contact the Office of Disability Services (G30 Mountainlair, 3-6700, TDD3-7740) here on campus as soon as possible in order to get the documentation to me. If you suspect that some other circumstance may affect your performance this semester, please let me know as soon as possible.

#### **Social Justice:**

I am committed to promoting social justice in the classroom, which translates into an inclusive classroom space that resists discrimination based on race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color, or national origin, or other identity categories. Please let me know if you have suggestions for better accomplishing this goal.

## Academic Integrity:

It probably needn't be said at this level, but I will say it anyway: The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the Student Conduct Code [http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office\\_of\\_student\\_conduct/student\\_conduct\\_code](http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office_of_student_conduct/student_conduct_code). Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me before the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

## Course Schedule

Subject to change pending in-class announcement, or in the case of unavoidable last-minute changes, via email.

- Week 1, August 21:     **Introduction to the course**  
                          **Major critical avenues: Emplotment, Style, Ideology, Reference, Temporality**  
                          Read: at least first 100 or so pages of Woolf, *Between the Acts* (or all of it, if you can manage it)
- Week 2, August 28:     **Marxist/ Modernist approaches to Pastness**  
                          Read: Finish *Between the Acts*; Berlatsky Chapter 1; Ricoeur, "Narrative Temporality";  
                          Walter Benjamin "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Available at (among other places):  
                          <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>
- Week 3, September 4:   **Brechtian Marxism and Political Theatre**  
                          Read: Edward Bond, *Bingo*; Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*; Bertolt Brecht, "Short Organum"  
                          Elin Diamond, Selections from *Unmaking Mimesis* (1)
- Week 4, September 11:  **Documentary Theatre**  
                          Read: David Hare, *Stuff Happens*; Brittain and Slovo, *Guantanamo*, Soans, *Talking to Terrorists*;  
                          Claycomb, "Voices of the Other";  
                          Peter Weiss "Fourteen Propositions for Documentary Theatre" (2)
- Week 5, September 18:  **Pastiche and the stylistic past**  
                          Read: Tom Stoppard, *Travesties*; Angela Carter, Selected Stories TBA;  
                          Frederic Jameson, selections from *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (3)
- Week 6, September 25:  **Emplotment of/as history**  
                          Read: Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*; Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" (4);  
                          James Phelan, "Narrative Progression"; Brian Richardson, "Beyond Story and Discourse";  
                          Gerard Genette "Order, Duration, Frequency" (5)
- Week 7, October 2:     **Historiographic Metafiction**  
                          Read: Julian Barnes, *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*;  
                          Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction"; Berlatsky, Introduction and Conclusion (6)
- Week 8, October 9:     **The Scientific and the Historical: Discourses of the Real**  
                          Read: Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*; Wertenbaker, *After Darwin*;  
                          Jernigan, "Tom Stoppard and Postmodern Science";  
                          Elizabeth Grosz, Sel. from *Nick of Time* (7); Get a head start on Rushdie. Really.
- Week 9, October 16:    **Historiographic Metafiction in a Postcolonial Context**  
                          Read: Rushdie: *Midnight's Children* 1-288; Spivak, "Deconstructing Historiography" (8);

Week 10, October 23: **Historiographic Metafiction in a Postcolonial Context**, Cont.  
Read: Rushdie, 289-end; Berlatsky Ch. 3 (9)

Week 11, October 30: **Performing Postcolonial History**  
Read: Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (also check out Oba Waja in DKH p74);  
Friel, *Translations*; Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History" (10)

Week 12, TBA: **Queer Pasts, Queer Futures** (NOTE: Reschedule--Election Day)  
Read: Jeannette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*;  
Kristeva, "Women's Time" (11);  
Boellstorff, "Queer Time"; or Edelman, Sel. from *No Future* (12)

Week 13, November 13: **Class Canceled: RC at a conference**  
Due via email by 4pm: Proposal and Bibliography

### **Thanksgiving Break**

Week 14, November 27: **Past and Future, and everything in between**  
Read: David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*  
Discussion assignment: Come prepared to speak about novel from perspective of the critic  
for whose essay you led discussion.

Week 15, December 4: **Presentations**

Finals week: Final papers due via email any time before December 11 at 12 noon