

## Sample Syllabus

### English 861: Studies in Narrative and Narrative Theory Form, Ethics and Aesthetics in Fiction and Nonfiction

#### Jim Phelan

DE 452 Office Hours: M 11:30—1:20; W 12-1:20 292-6669

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Objectives: This course will explore the interrelations among the three concepts of its title, with special attention to the interrelation of ethics and aesthetics, and the similarities and differences of those interrelations in fiction and nonfiction. Our main angle of vision will be that provided by rhetorical theory (including, for better or worse, various essays by the instructor), but we will also look at the issues from other vantage points and we will also allow the narrative texts to challenge that rhetorical vision. Students will be asked to try on the rhetorical glasses, but they are under no obligation to buy them. We should also bear in mind that we will not be able to do justice to these issues in ten weeks—there are massive quantities of theory that we will not be able to get to—but I do hope that we can develop some tentative hypotheses about them and even more get a clearer sense of the kinds of questions that we would like to pursue, given greater allotments of world and time.

#### Bookstore Order

Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*

Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita* (ed. Alfred Appel, Jr.)

Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*

Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Loren Slater, *Lying*

Packet of Readings at Uniprint

In addition, there will be other critical readings made available to you via Carmen or e-mail (see schedule below)

Schedule (subject to some change as our discussion develops)

Week 1 January 3 Introduction

Week 2 January 8 Hemingway, “My Old Man” (available via Carmen); Wayne Booth on ethics (Carmen); Phelan, “What Hemingway and a Rhetorical Theory of Narrative Can Do for Each Other”; and “Why Wayne Booth Can’t Get with the Program; Or The Nintentional Fallacy” from *Narrative as Rhetoric* (available at the OSU Press website <[www.ohiostatepress.org](http://www.ohiostatepress.org)>. Click on “Open Access” in the left-hand column; then on *Narrative as Rhetoric* in the list of books (arranged alphabetically by last name); then on the chapter titles.

January 10 Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* and “A Very Short Story” Martha Nussbaum on ethics (packet)

Week 3 January 17 *A Farewell to Arms*, Phelan, “Seven Theses about Narrative Judgments” (typescript, available as e-mail attachment);

Week 4 January 22 *In Cold Blood*; Cohn, “Signposts of Fictionality” (available on-line or for copying in DE 421) (journals collected)

January 24 *In Cold Blood*; Heyne, “Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction” (available on-line or for copying in DE 421); Lanser, “The ‘I’ of the Beholder” (packet)

Week 5 January 29 *In Cold Blood*, Phelan, “Rhetorical Aesthetics” (typescript, available as e-mail attachment) Ethical Criticism paper due

January 31 Viewing of Bennett Miller’s *Capote*. Scheduling of writing tutorials (see below)

Week 6 February 5 *Lolita*, Linda Kauffman, “Is There a Woman in This Text?” (available via Carmen)

February 7 *Lolita*, Phelan, “Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*” (typescript, available as e-mail attachment)

Week 7 February 12 *Lolita* Theory and Interpretation Paper due

February 14 *Girl, Interrupted*, Dan Lehman, “Nonfictional Narrative and the Problem of Truth”; Debate between Heyne and Lehman (packet)

Week 8 February 19 *Girl, Interrupted*

February 21 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Gates, from *The Signifying Monkey*

Week 9 February 26 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

February 28 *Lying*, Thomas Couser, “Disability as Metaphor: What’s Wrong with *Lying*” (available via Carmen)

Week 10 March 5 *Lying*

March 7 Conclusion

March 9 Final Paper Due

## Writing Assignments and Grading

Agenda Setting: 10%

Writing Journal: 20%

Ethical Criticism Paper: 20%

Theory and Interpretation Paper: 20%

Final Paper: 30%

Notes on these assignments:

1. Beginning with our session on January 17, each of you will have a turn to help set the agenda for our discussion by posting three questions about the reading that you would like to discuss on our Carmen site by noon on the previous day. You should also provide a brief (no more than 100 words) context for the questions by relating the questions you are posing to our ongoing course conversation (you always have the option of declaring that you want to change the focus of our discussion).

2. For weeks 2-6 (that is, between January 8 and February 7), you are responsible for writing 2 journal entries per week of approximately 500 words each. These entries can be very informal and addressed primarily to me, and they can be about issues that come up in any aspect of the course—the reading, the class sessions, your more formal writing. Their purpose is for you to deepen your engagement with the course through writing about it regularly for a particular, interested audience. I will collect the journals on Monday, January 22<sup>nd</sup> and then again on Wednesday, February 7<sup>th</sup>.

3. The first short paper (no more than 1500 words, due January 29) will be an analysis of the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling in a stretch of *A Farewell to Arms* or *In Cold Blood* that we have discussed extensively in class. We will use this paper as the basis for our writing tutorial—a one-on-one discussion about scholarly writing.

4. The second short paper (same word limit) will ask you to combine theory and interpretation by putting one or more of the theoretical points or perspectives we're developing into dialogue with one of the narratives. The paper can be an exercise in application, extension, or revision of the theoretical concepts through the encounter with the narrative. You can use this paper as a way to try out ideas that you will pursue at greater length in your final paper.

5. For the final paper, you should choose one issue from our course agenda that you find especially intriguing, develop your own question about it, and then answer it in about 6,000 words. You can write about a narrative not on the syllabus if you get my permission. I will ask you about your plans for the final paper during the writing tutorial.

**It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term "academic misconduct" includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations.**

Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct ([http://studentaffairs.osu.edu/info\\_for\\_students/csc.asp](http://studentaffairs.osu.edu/info_for_students/csc.asp)).

**Disability issues:** Anyone who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. Anyone with such needs should also be aware of the the Office for Disability Services in room 150 Pomerene Hall (614-292-3307) which provides services for students with documented disabilities.

Thoughts for the course: To the aesthetic temperament nothing seems ugly. There are degrees of beauty—that is all.

Max Beerbohm

A book at the time [it is written] is a good or a bad action.

Jean-Paul Sartre

It is not the policy or stance of this company that it doesn't matter whether a book sold as nonfiction is true.

Statement from Doubleday and Anchor Books about James Frey's  
*A Million Little Pieces*

