

Syllabus

English H597.04 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Narrative in the Contemporary World: “Rhetoric and Ethics in Fiction and Nonfiction”

Jim Phelan

Denney 452

Office Hours: MW 1:30-3:30 and by appointment

Office phone: 614-292-6669

GEC Statement

English H597.04 meets GEC Category 5: Capstone: Issues of the Contemporary World.

The goals and outcomes for this GEC category include the following:

Goals

By drawing upon multiple disciplines—philosophy, history, and literary analysis—coursework for H597.04 “Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Contemporary World” provides a capstone experience that helps Honors students enrich their experiences of narrative (fiction and nonfiction) in the increasingly global nature of the contemporary world.

Expected Learning Outcomes:

1. Students synthesize and apply knowledge from a range of disciplines vis-à-vis narrative.
2. Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationships between information derived from different disciplines by interacting majors across the university campus.
3. Students write about or conduct research on narrative using the tools of the different disciplines that include philosophy, psychology, neurobiology, and cognitive science.

Expected Learning Outcomes:

1. Students synthesize and apply knowledge from a range of disciplines vis-à-vis narrative.

By drawing upon cutting edge research in multiple disciplines (philosophy, literary analysis, and history, for instance), H597.04 “Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Contemporary World” coursework provides an intensive capstone experience whereby students will put the question of ethical and aesthetic judgment front and center. In their study of various contemporary narratives it will also provide an understanding of how history factors into such ethical and aesthetic judgments in an increasingly global contemporary world.

2. Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationships between information derived from different disciplines by interacting majors across the university campus.

The course's theoretical texts will provide tools derived from different disciplines across the university for students to evaluate significant contemporary narrative fiction and nonfiction works and the difference between the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told.

3. Students write about or conduct research on contemporary narrative using the tools of the different disciplines that philosophy, literary analysis, and history, among others.

1. The theoretical readings from philosophy, literary analysis, and history, among others, provide a fresh perspective from which to understand how narrative fiction and nonfiction directly addresses the importance of thinking and acting ethically in the contemporary world. The intellectually demanding readings require a sustained focus, not a previous knowledge in the relevant disciplines, and will provide the tools and critical thinking opportunity for students to be able to discuss, write, and conduct research on how narrative fiction and nonfiction reflect on questions of ethics and about the distinctive powers of each genre. The sequence of topics within the two broad units—technique and ethics; the ethics of unreliability; writing about oneself; writing about others; rhetoric, ethics, and aesthetics—provides one model of how to break down a critical problem into its component parts and then synthesize the results. Finally, the sessions at the end of every unit about the relevance of narrative ethics to contemporary issues explicitly addresses the goals of the capstone Honors course. (All previous knowledge necessary will be supplied in user-friendly manner, especially during discussions.) The readings perhaps imply an added effort for readers not acquainted with approaches in philosophy, literary analysis, and history, but they provide also an important opportunity for students to develop information literacy and to sharpen reading and critical skills, together with clear-writing abilities.

Assessment Plan

The effectiveness of this course to achieve the learning objectives above will be assessed in an ongoing manner over time. Measures include:

1. Macro level assessments such as a midterm course evaluation that asks students a series of questions such as “are readings clear and relevant to the topics? Are the different disciplinary approaches clear thus far?” It will also include an assessment of a random sampling of writing assignments collected during a 5-year period and will be used to evaluate if the class is meeting the three Expected Learning Outcomes. (Please see grid provided in the enclosed GEC Rationale and Assessment Plan.).
2. Micro level assessments such as assignments analytical essay assignments (direct measures) as well as SEIs and discursive evaluations (indirect measures).

(For more information on goals and assessment, please see additional document “GEC Rationale and Assessment Plan.”)

Course Description and Objectives: This version of H597.04 seeks to make good on Kenneth Burke’s claim that literature provides “equipment for living” by, first, examining the ethical dimensions of literary narratives and, second, addressing the relevance of these ethical dimensions for responsible citizenship in the twenty-first century. Literary narrative provides a rich site for thinking about ethics because its concrete particularity (the representation of these characters in these situations facing these ethical choices) and its affective power engages its audience in the complexities of ethical thinking in ways that more abstract approaches to ethics cannot. Furthermore, the course seeks to move from analyzing these complexities to considering their relevance to our age of political dirty tricks, unscrupulous mortgage lenders, investment advisors running ponzi schemes—and new technologies that are rewriting the lines between the public and the private, making possible decisions about reproduction, health, and longevity that were not possible even twenty years ago, and so much more. More specifically we will take both halves of the term “narrative ethics” very seriously and think about how interconnected they are. We will examine not only the ethics of the told (that is, the ethical dimensions of character’s choices) but also the ethics of the telling (the ethical dimensions of author-narrator-audience relationships). We will also consider the similarities and differences of the ethical dimensions of fiction and nonfiction. And at the end of every unit, we will discuss how to move from our analyses of literature to our ethical judgments about one or more aspects of contemporary culture. By the end of the course, students should have not only a deeper understanding of some significant narratives of the last two centuries but also useful practice in ethical thinking.

Thoughts for the course:

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

Jean-Paul Sartre

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

Max Beerbohm

Longer Narrative Texts:

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

Frank McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

A packet of short literary texts (provided on our Carmen site)

A packet of theoretical texts (ditto)

Course Requirements and Grading:

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 Monday session in the third week, 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 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 at the end of the third week and at the end of the sixth week.

3. The first short paper (750 words) will be an analysis of the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling in an excerpt from one of the narratives. 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 relate the work of the course to a particular event (e.g., John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin as his running mate) or ongoing issue in the contemporary world (e.g., race relations). In other words, answer the following question: how does studying narrative ethics inform your understanding of some aspect of the contemporary world? Papers should be approximately 4,000 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.

Plagiarism:

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).

Students with Disabilities.

Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office for Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated, and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office for Disability Services is located in 150 Pomerene Hall, 1760 Neil Avenue; telephone 292-3307, TDD 292-0901; <http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/>.

Schedule

Theoretical readings will average 25-35 pages per week with no week having more than 50 pages. The longer narrative texts average about 300 pages each.

Unit I: Narrative Theory and the Rhetorical Approach

Week 1: Ethics within Narrative and Rhetorical Theory

Monday Introduction: The ubiquity and significance of narrative. What do we mean by the ethics of reading? How is the ethical dimension of narrative related to its cognitive, affective, and political dimensions? Ring Lardner, Jr. "Haircut"; Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess"

Wednesday: Authors, Audiences, and Ethics. Peter Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Re-examination of Audiences;" Martha Nussbaum, Introduction to *Love's Knowledge*; Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess," Edith Wharton, "Roman Fever"

Unit I: The Ethics of Fiction

Weeks 2: Ethics of the Telling and Ethics of the Told

Week 2: Technique and Ethics

Monday: Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chapters VII and VIII; Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Wednesday: Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep*, Chapters 6-7; *Persuasion*, continued

Week 3:

Monday: Adam Newton, Narrative Ethics, Chapter 1; “Roman Fever” revisited

Wednesday: Taking Stock: The Relevance of the Ethics of Fiction to the Contemporary World

This session will be devoted to exploring the relation between our work so far and the ethical judgments of various current events and controversies. (What would Jane Austen and Edith Wharton think about Sarah Palin?)

Week 4–6 The Ethics of Unreliable Narration**Week 4: The Unreliable Monologist****Monday:**

James Phelan, “Six Types of Unreliability” and “The Implied Author and the Location of Unreliability” Edgar Allan Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado”

Wednesday: Katherine Anne Porter, “Magic”; Ring Lardner, “Haircut”

Weeks 5-6 The Challenges of *Lolita*

Monday: Linda Kauffman, “Is There a Woman in This Text?”

Lolita

Wednesday: James Phelan, “Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*”

Monday: Peter J. Rabinowitz, “*Lolita*: Solipsized or Sodomized?; or Against Abstraction in General.”

Wednesday: Taking Stock: Narrative Ethics and the Contemporary World
How many sides are there to every story, and how do we decide which side is the most reliable?

Unit II: The Ethics of Nonfiction**Week 7: Writing about Others**

Monday Dorrit Cohn, “Signposts of Fictionality”; Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

Wednesday: Heyne, “Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction”; Dan Lehman, “Nonfictional Narrative and the Problem of Truth”; Debate between Heyne and Lehman *Dispatches*, continued

Week 8 Writing about Oneself (and Others)

Monday: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, Chapter 2
Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Wednesday: Taking Stock: The Ethics of Nonfiction and the Contemporary World
What does it mean to tell the truth in an age that emphasizes the subjectivity of all storytelling?

Week 9 Unreliable Narration in Memoir

Monday: Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*. Bonding and Estranging Unreliability Redux

Wednesday: *Angela's Ashes*, continued

Week 10 Rhetoric, Ethics, Aesthetics

Monday: The Interrelation of Ethics and Aesthetics in Unreliable Narration
Wayne C. Booth, "Is There a Standard of Taste in Irony"

Wednesday: Conclusion: Narrative Ethics and the Contemporary World
Has the course met its goal of providing better equipment for living?