

Writing 301
Critical Writing About Literature
Summer 2019

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Writing 301 is a course designed to develop your skills in *practical* literary criticism and analysis. I tend to prefer the phrase “literary analysis” because it fits more closely with the goals of the class: the creation of thoughtful, clear, and expansive analyses of works of literature. By way of comparison, we might think of the pejorative connotations of a word like “criticism,” as in “Why are you being so critical of my new haircut?” We are *not* doing that in this course. That is, we’re *not* going to be engaging in a “thumbs up/thumbs down” approach to what books we liked or didn’t like. Such judgments are perfectly permissible, but that’s not really literary analysis – that’s a statement of personal taste.

What Writing 301 *will* do is introduce you to the wide variety of interpretive and critical approaches used in the evaluation and understanding of works of literature and, most importantly, *explore ways to clearly express your interpretation*. Our initial task will be to enhance our appreciation and understanding of works of literature. Beyond that, however, we will try to develop a critical theory *and voice* about literature -- that is, we will try to develop written ways to express our understanding of works of literature (and all art, for that matter) that emphasizes their central importance to culture and human experience writ large. In the end, this is a *writing* class, and we will work on simple things: clear, crisp sentences that convey sharp ideas. The general rules will apply: good sentence structure, proper grammar, statements of theme and thesis (Can you state the difference?) and so on.

We are also going to ask some big questions about literature in this course, including questions like the following: Why do we “do” literature? What danger does it expose us to? On what subconscious levels does it affect us? What is its relation to madness? To excess? To social class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and the sublime? We will ask the question, “Why literature?” For pleasure? Entertainment? To challenge our everyday beliefs? To provide an opportunity for utopian daydreaming? And we will ask, “Is literature dangerous?” (as Plato suggested it was). We will look at literature as a form of criticism of the “existing order” -- as a way of challenging everyday cultural norms and practices. This list could go on and on, but I hope you can see that we’ll be asking truly important questions about literature and art, not the simple (and commercial) ones of what books we ought to read on the beach this summer.

Many of the approaches we will study are intuitive, even commonsensical. We will investigate the historical origins, and arguments behind, positions you may already embrace. Other approaches we study will seem obscure, even willfully so. And some approaches will plumb the depths of human consciousness and human experience. Ultimately, we will attempt to develop our capacity for generating and expressing sound, rigorous, interesting, and sometimes dangerous (we hope!) critical insights. That will be the practical part of the course: When we’re all done, we’ll be better at writing critical analyses of literature.

Required Texts

Three texts are required. Both Fitzgerald's stories and his novel, *The Great Gatsby*, are available in free e-versions at PSU's library and elsewhere. ANY COLLECTION OF HIS ESSAYS, OR ANY VERSION OF *GATSBY*, IS FINE WITH ME.

1. *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection*
Brucoli, ed.
Scribner
ISBN-13: 978-0684804453
2. *The Great Gatsby*
F. Scott Fitzgerald
ISBN-13: 978-0743273565
3. *Reading and Writing about Literature*
Janet Gardner and Joanne Diaz
ISBN-13: 978-1319035365

And here's a nice open-source copy of *The Great Gatsby*:

https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fitzgerald/f_scott/gatsby/contents.html

There's also an e-book of *The Great Gatsby* in PSU's library. Just go to the PSU library webpage, put *The Great Gatsby* in the search area, and filter for "e-book."

GRADES

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| 1. Three short writing assignments (2 pages each) | 10 points = 30 total |
| 2. One final paper (6 TO 8 pages, double-spaced) | 40 points |

NOTE: Your final essay will be partly comprised by your shorter assignments, with revisions. In short, it all "adds up." This is a *process-based* class.

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| 3. Research Assignments (2) | 10 points each |
| 4. Blogs/Discussions | 25 points |
| 5. Weekly Reading Journal | 20 points |

TOTAL POINTS = 135

Important Notes:

- Your final paper is due on Thursday, August 9th. *All work must be completed by that date.*

- E-mail policy: I review my student email every Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon. Thus, if you email me on Thursday, *you cannot expect a response before the following Friday afternoon.*
- Virtual office hours: To be announced. I'm going try to use some digital group video methods this term. We'll see how well that works! Stay tuned!

OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

Final notes on starting up for the class.

1. READ *The Great Gatsby* right away. Don't think too hard. Just read it. You may want to jot down words or things you don't understand, but don't get bogged down trying to understand everything. Let the novel flow over you. Absorb its tone and feel.
2. READ Chapter One in *Reading and Writing about Literature*

That will be week one. Our first assignments:

1. Introduce yourself on the blogs
2. Offer some general comments/responses to *The Great Gatsby*
3. Get ready for your first writing assignment, due Week Two.

COURSE SCHEDULE

IMPORTANT DUE DATES

- 7/3:** Two-page, one-paragraph, and one sentence summary of *The Great Gatsby*
7/10: Two research essays with annotations
7/19: Two-page "close reading" essay
7/26: One-page summary/outline of your planned approach to *The Great Gatsby*
8/2: First rough draft of your 6-8 page essay
8/9: Final essay due

NOTE: You will be required to join the blogs each week. They are part of your final grade. You will also be required to hand in a weekly "reading" journal – reciting your thoughts as you progress through *Gatsby* and other Fitzgerald works. I will also assign some very brief writing exercises from time to time.

A Preview of Everything We Will Read

- *The Great Gatsby* (we will read it at least twice)

- Stories: (The stories are offered to give us a sense of Fitzgerald's work and style. There are no *specific* writing assignments attached to the stories, though we will be discussing them in our blogs.)
 - Winter Dreams
 - Babylon Revisited
 - The Rich Boy
 - The Bridal Party
 - The Swimmers
 - The Curious Case of Benjamin Button
 - The Diamond as Big as the Ritz
 - The Lost Decade

- *Reading and Writing about Literature:*
 - Chapter One
 - Chapter Two
 - Chapter Three
 - Chapter Four
 - Chapter Five
 - Chapter Eight
 - Chapter Nine

(Note that we're not reading Chapters Six and Seven, though you may wish to do so)

A Preview of All Written Assignments:

1. Week Two: Summary of *The Great Gatsby* (Two-page, one paragraph, and one sentence)
2. Week Three: Two annotations of peer-reviewed critical essays
3. Week Four: Two-page *close reading* of a short section from *The Great Gatsby*
4. Week Five: One-page explication of your theoretical approach to *The Great Gatsby*
5. Weeks Six, Seven, and Eight: Final Essay (draft, revision, final edit of your longer essay)

Weekly Schedule

Week One: June 24-30:

1. Read *The Great Gatsby* in its entirety
2. Read Chapter One and Chapter Two in Gardner (*Reading and Writing about Literature*)
3. Introduce yourself on the first blog: Tell us who you are, what literature and art that you enjoy, authors that you like, add a picture (if you wish), and tell us what you hope to get from the class.
4. Take a look at the OWL at Purdue website: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
5. Offer some *first* thoughts on *The Great Gatsby*
6. Join the Blog and introduce yourself

Week Two: July 1-7:

1. Write your two-page, one-paragraph, and one-sentence summary of *The Great Gatsby*
 - a. DUE: 7/3
2. Read *Winter Dreams* (short story)
3. Read Chapter Nine in *Reading and Writing about Literature*
4. Join the blog

Week Three: July 8-15:

1. Research Week:
 - a. Find two essays on *The Great Gatsby* from our library database
 - b. Annotate those essays (write a one paragraph summary for each one)
 - i. DUE: 7/10
 - c. Go to the PSU library research website: LibGuide
 - d. Use the MLA (Modern Language Association) bibliographical database
 - e. Look at other databases as well: LION, JSTOR, Google Scholar
 - f. Understand the difference between a *scholarly* article and a *mass audience* article
 - g. Understand what *peer review* means in academic work
2. Join the blog

Week Four: July 16-23:

1. Close Reading:
 - a. Reading and discussion: What does it mean to engage in a “close reading” of a portion of a text?
2. Write a two-page close reading of a central passage in *The Great Gatsby*
 - a. DUE: 7/19
3. Read two short stories:
 - a. “The Rich Boy”
 - b. “Babylon Revisited” (often considered Fitzgerald’s greatest short story)
4. Join the blog

Week Five: July 24-31:

1. Re-read *The Great Gatsby*
2. Start your thematic outline and approach to *Gatsby*
 - a. Write a short *precis* or summary of what you want to write about in *Gatsby* (one page)
 - b. DUE: 7/26
3. Read two more short stories from among the following:
 - a. “The Swimmers”
 - b. “The Lost Decade”
 - c. “The Ice Palace”
4. Join the blog

Week Six: August 1-8:

1. Write your first rough draft of the longer essay
 - a. DUE: 8/2
2. Share your draft with your peer readers
3. Offer comments on your peers’ essays
4. Identify theme, thesis, and a general approach
5. I will comment on your draft as well
6. Join the blog

Week Seven: August 9-14:

1. Revise your longer essay
2. Work with your peer groups and with your professor to sharpen your essay
3. FINAL ESSAY DUE on FRIDAY August 9
4. Additional comments and discussions will take place online that week
5. Join the blog

Week Eight:

1. Week eight is “dead week,” and I’ll be writing to you, commenting on your essays, making further suggestions, and wishing you all well!