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LIT 110L.80: Introduction to Literature - Literature and the Brain (Honors)

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Literature and the Brain [LIT 110L.80]

Dr. Ashby Kinch (Prof. of English)

TTh 11:00-12:20: Gilkey Executive Education 105

Office Hours: TBD; By email for Zoom appt: [Zoom Link 6010737443](#)

Course Description

The subject of this course is a staggering human phenomenon: your brain engaged with a work of literature. Indeed a compelling literary text creates a vast and complex network of brains spread through time, linked together by a common stimulus: a mesmerizing web of words. How does literature engage your brain? What distinctive characteristics of human intelligence are manifest in literature? Can approaching literature through the insights of neuroscience reveal important facets of how we think?

We will explore these questions through readings in neuroscience that introduce students to some of the exciting recent research on the capacity and function of the brain, connecting that work with literary texts. We will conduct case studies in poems, novels, and films that demonstrate astute awareness of basic brain characteristics, including theory of mind, elastic temporality, narrative modes of consciousness, and the perceptual processes that link us with the world around us.

General Education Goals Met by This Course: Literary and Artistic Studies:

Upon completion of the "L," a student will be able to:

1. Analyze works of art with respect to structure and significance within literary and artistic traditions, including emergent movements and forms; and
2. Develop coherent arguments that critique these works from a variety of approaches, such as historical, aesthetic, cultural, psychological, political, and philosophical.

Course Requirements (*explained IN DETAIL in a separate document*)

Weekly Grade / Moodle Forum Participation: 30%

Art and Science of Reading (3-5 pp): 10%

Literary Analysis Essay (4-6 pp): 30%

Revised Reading Paper with Annotated Bibliography (6-8 pp): 30%

Texts: Available at the UM Bookstore / Online

Chris Comer and Ashley Gallagher, *Mind, Brain, and Literary Imagination*, Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming (2021) (ONLINE)

(OPTIONAL) Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. New York: Vintage, 2004. **ISBN-10: 1400032717**

Ian McEwan, *Saturday*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005. **ISBN-10: 1400076196**

Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Del Ray / Ballantine Books, 1968; rpr. 1996. **ISBN-10: 0345404475**

William Shakespeare, *Othello*. Pelican Shakespeare. Ed. A.R. Branmuller, Penguin Classics, 2016.

COVID-19 Precautions for Fall 2020

In addition to the email I have sent each of you about the availability of course materials online, I am including in my syllabus the official safety precautions from the College of Humanities and Sciences. Whether in my class or others, it is imperative that students follow these basic protocols. We all want to maintain as much face-to-face instruction as possible this Fall; that depends upon our behavior!

1. Mask use is required within the classroom
2. Each student is provided with a cleaning kit. The expectation is that students will clean their personal work space when they arrive for class, and before they leave the classroom
3. Classrooms may have one-way entrances / exits to minimize crowding
4. Students should be discouraged from congregating outside the classroom before and after class
5. Specific seating arrangements will be used to ensure social distancing and support contact tracing efforts
6. Class attendance will be recorded to support contact tracing efforts
7. Drinking liquids and eating food is discouraged within the classroom (which requires mask removal)
8. Information on the nearest "refill" stations for cleaning supplies/hand sanitizer if applicable
9. If the class is being recorded, students must be notified of the recording
10. Stay home if you feel sick and/or if exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms
11. If the student is sick or displaying symptoms, please contact the Curry Health Center at (406) 243-4330
12. Up-to-Date COVID-19 Information from the University of Montana
13. UM Coronavirus Website: [UM Corona Virus Website](#)
14. UM COVID-19 Fall 2020 website: [Um Fall 2020 Covid 19 Website](#)
15. Strongly encourage students to remain vigilant outside the classroom in mitigating the spread of COVID-19

Class Policies

Attendance

You may miss class three times with no immediate impact on your final semester grade, but I expect you to justify each absence in a short e-mail. In the absence of such an e-mail, you will lose all of your weekly points for class for that week. An excused absence does not, however, excuse you from the work: in order to make up the missed points in your participation grade, you need to write an additional Moodle post of a minimum of 250 words that summarizes the reading for that day. After you have missed four classes (two weeks), your weekly grade will automatically be docked by 20 points, and each subsequent absence will cost 20 additional points (4 absences = 20 points; 5 absences = 60 points; 6 absences = 80 points). By the time you reach 8 absences (4 weeks), it will be difficult to pass the class. These points can only be made up by extra credit work (see Work Requirements), and will only be possible in extreme cases of sickness or extreme family or personal crisis. If you are participating in a sponsored University activity, you must provide an explanation **BEFORE** the event, not after, and the burden is on you to make up the missed work.

Obviously, we will do our best to make accommodations during COVID-19, which has put extraordinary stress on our normal systems. The main burden on the student is communication of plans to make up the missed work. With this class design, most students should be able to stay up by completing online assignments.

Class Discussion

A good class discussion should have the buzz of new discovery, as we share the insights we have gained from reading and thinking about compelling literary texts. You will no doubt come to the class with the idea that there are no right or wrong answers in discussing a literary text, but that is a very low bar for a good discussion. There are, in fact, better and worse approaches to a literary text, and those approaches are defined by whether they lead to productive, engaging, and stimulating dialogue (better) or attempt to shut such dialogue down (worse). The latter are usually characterized by evaluative claims—“This book sucks” / “I hated this book” or “This book was awesome” / “I loved this book”—with no substantive intellectual rationale.

For poetry, in particular, an unproductive approach is often characterized by statements such as “I have no idea what this poem is about” or “I really don’t like poetry.” A failure to engage with a poem is a failure on the reader’s part, not the poem’s. While there are better and worse poems, you can assume that the poems we are reading have withstood the test of time and are worth discussing. They may be quite difficult, experimental, and sometimes strange. But giving up in the face of difficulty will differentiate the lazy or indifferent reader from the engaged reader: cultivating the habits of the engaged reader is the principal goal of this class. Linking our reading habits with our ethical selves, Erasmus famously, “Reading becomes action.” Reading well—and closely—is an enhancement of your ethical self.

So come to class with observations, well-developed questions, passages you want to discuss, and problems you want to explore with your peers. These cognitive habits form the core traits of a well-educated person: curiosity, openness to new ideas and experiences, a willingness to try multiple paths of interpretation, and a genuine interest in the ideas of others.

Luckily, literature is especially good at provoking interesting discussion, but we have to be willing to be dynamic partners in the exercise to reap the full benefits.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism—representing another person’s intellectual work as your own—is an affront to the fundamental values of an academic institution, indicating a lack of respect for intellectual labor and a lack of responsibility for each student’s part in sustaining academic community. Acknowledge, by citation of name, title, and page number, all work that has influenced your thinking, including all work that you cite in whole or in part. The University’s official warning on plagiarism is spelled out in the University Student Conduct Code (Academic Conduct), available on the web:

http://www.umt.edu/vpsa/policies/student_conduct.php

Add-Drop Deadlines, Incompletes

For information on these topics, please see the Academic Policies section of the current catalog:

Disability Accommodation

The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and [Disability Student Services](#) (DSS). If you have a disability that adversely affects your academic performance, and you have not already registered with DSS, please contact them in Lommasson Center 154 or 406.243.2243 VOICE/TDD. I will work with you and Disability Services to provide an appropriate modification.

Reading /Work Schedule (*Subject to Revision: changes will be posted on Moodle*)

*For every meeting date listed on the schedule below, the work listed should be completed before that class meeting. In the case of "Online" work (Assignments, Lessons, Quizzes, Videos), I will be checking participation in the morning before class, as we will be using the material you complete to generate our class discussions, questions, and activities. See Online Logistics handout on Moodle for more detail.

***Online Tip:* In Moodle, the Lessons are not complete until you reach the end of the Lesson, so make sure you follow the buttons at the bottom of the Lesson, which describe the next content or activity, until there are no more buttons.

Introduction:

See the required online work components, including 4 "History of Neuroscience" videos you should watch in the first 3 weeks of the semester, completing short comprehension quizzes.

You should also complete the first Online Lesson ("Reading: A self-reflective inventory") and short writing assignment on Emily Dickinson prior to the first class. This material, which should take you about 2-3 hours, will make up all of the time we will miss due to the foreshortened semester, which ends at Thanksgiving.

Week 1: Reading Literature: Practical and Expert Strategies

Aug 20: Introductions; syllabus; course requirements

Online Assignment: Emily Dickinson, "The brain is wider than the sky"

Reading: Michael O'Shea, "Thinking about the brain," from *The Brain: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 1-11 (MOODLE)

Week 2: Reading Closely, Reading Deeply: Brain Engagement (Video Lecture)

Aug 25: *Video & Reading Online:* Interview with Stanislaus Dehaene, "The Brain and the Written Word," *Scientific American Mind* March/April (2010), 62-5.

Nicholas Carr, "Tools of the Mind" and "The Deepening Page," from *The Shallows*, pp. 50-77 (MOODLE);
Poetry: Wallace Stevens, "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "Adagia" (HANDOUT)
Online Lesson: "Your Brain and Your Culture: Telling Our Stories of Reading"
Aug 27: Read: Maryanne Wolf, "The Unending Story of Reading's Development," excerpt from *Proust and the Squid*, 134-62 (MOODLE; PDF)
Video Lecture: "Literary Genre, Short Story, and Shklovsky's Defamiliar"
Online Short Story Reading: Ted Chiang, "Exhalation"
Online Theory Reading: Excerpt from Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique"

Week 3: Reading Poetry: Your Brain at Work (Video Lecture)

Sept 1: *Poetry Lesson Online*: "A History, and Guided Reading"
"America," by Claude McKay, "First fight, then Fiddle," by Gwendolyn Brooks
selection of Shakespeare Sonnets 15, 73, 129, 130, 138
Reading Online: Chris Comer and Ashley Gallagher, "Structure of the Brain"
Video Lecture: "A Close Reading of Sonnet 73"
Sept. 3: *Poetry Lesson Online*: "Re-reading a Poem: A 5-Step Approach"
Ofelia Zepeda, "Walking with Language"; Jorie Graham, "Mind"; Wallace Stevens, "Of mere being" and "The Snow Man"; Ron Padgett, "Nothing in that Drawer"; Marianne Moore, "Poetry"
Reading Online: Comer and Gallagher, "Deep Substrates of Narrative Imagination"

Draft of "The Art and Science of Reading" due online 09-07 before 5 p.m.

Week 4: Reading the Mind: Theory of Mind, Autism, and the Social Brain (Video Lecture)

Sept. 8: *Video Overview*: Reading Minds: Theory of Mind, Autism, and Cultural Evolution
Video: "Why Reading Matters," Rita Baker (TEDx-Cluj)
Online Video: Origins of Language and Theory of Mind
Online Reading: Chris Frith and Uta Frith, "Theory of Mind," *Current Biology* 15.17 (2005), 644-45; Comer and Gallagher, "Evolution of Culture, Language, and Writing"

Sept. 10: *Video Lecture*: Dana Fitzgale, "A brief intro to Neurodiversity/Autism"
Online Quiz: on language evolution and Theory of Mind
Online Reading: excerpt from Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (pp. 1-45)
Online Forum Post: Short response to Haddon reading

"The Art and Science of Reading" due Sept. 14th by 11:59

Week 5: Reading from the Body: Sensory Perception and Awareness (Video Lecture)

Sept. 15: *Video Lecture and Quiz*: Diana Lurie, "Visual Perception"

Online Lesson: William Wordsworth, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802"; Jonathan Swift, "A Description of a City Shower"

Online Lesson/Quiz: Figures and Forms of Poetry

Online Reading: Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas"; e.e. cummings, "since feeling is first"; Theodore Roethke, "The Waking"

Online Lesson: Annie Murphy Paul, "Your Brain on Fiction" (NYT, 3-17-12)

Lacey, S., Stilla, R. and Sathian, K. (2012). "Metaphorically feeling: Comprehending textural metaphors activates somatosensory cortex." *Brain and Language* 120: 416-421.

Sept. 17: *Video Lecture and Quiz:* Diana Lurie, "Auditory Perception"

Extra Credit Activity: Robert Frost, "The Sound of Trees"

Online Reading: William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"; William Stafford, "Traveling Through the Dark"; Gerard Manly Hopkins, "Pied Beauty"

Forum: close reading of a single poem from this week's unit

Week 6: Embodied Cognition: Multi-Sensory Literary Experience (Video Lecture)

Sept. 22: *Reading/Lesson:* G. Gabrielle Starr, "Multisensory Imagery"

Video: Poetry in America episode on Edward Hirsch, "Fast Break"

Online Lesson: Sound Mimesis in Poetry

Online Reading: George Herbert, "Easter Wings," John Hollander, "Swan and Shadow"; Mark Doty, "Veracity/Shape," from *the Art of Description: World to Word*. Graywolf Press, 2010, 95-98: includes e.e. cummings "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" and Cole Swensen "How Everything Happens"; William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow," "The Dance," "The Great Figure"

Online Lesson: Concrete and Kinesthetic Poems

Forum Post: Short response (500 words) to a single poem

Sept 24: *Reading:* Comer and Gallagher, "Sensory Perception and Imagination"

Online Perception Quiz

Reading/Lesson: Raymond Carver, "Cathedral"

Assignment: Short essay (500 words) on Carver's story

Week 7-8: Memory, Identity, and Crisis (Video Lecture)

Sept. 29: *Video:* Nathan Insel (UM Psychology), "3 Basic Mechanisms of Memory"

Online Reading: Dalmeet Singh Chawla, "To Remember, The Brain Must Actively Forget"

Video: Nathan Insel, "The Literature of Memory and Forgetting"

Online Reading: Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes, the Memorious"

Forum Post: 500 words on Borges story with annotations from your reading

Oct. 1: *Online Reading:* Comer and Gallagher, "Memory, Imagination, and Self"

Video: "Poetry in America," episode on "Those Winter Sundays"

Online Reading/Lesson: Sunday Poems: Yusef Komunyakaa, "Sunday Afternoons," Langston Hughes, "Birmingham Sunday," Kris Kristofferson,

“Sunday Morning Coming Down,” Frank O’hara, “The Day Lady Died”
Forum: 250-500 word post on one of the Sunday poems of your choice

Oct. 6: *In-class screening of Memento*, a film by Christopher Nolan (2000)
Quiz: neuroscience of memory

Oct. 8: Discuss *Memento*; Memory and Identity
Forum: Short essay on *Memento* (500 words)

Week 9-10: Fiction and Narrative Consciousness (*Saturday*)

Oct. 13: *Saturday*, Part 1, pp. 1-52

In-class Recitation of Poems

Oct. 15: *Saturday*, Part 2, pp. 53-120

Online Assignment (Annotation): Mar, R.A. et al. (2011). Emotion and narrative fiction: interactive influences before, during and after reading. *Cogn. Emotion* 25:881-83.

Oct. 20: *Saturday*, Part 3, pp. 121-178

Online Reading: Comer and Gallagher, “The Feeling of What Happened”

Oct. 22: *Saturday*, Part 4, pp. 179-289

Week 11-12: Literature, Empathy, and Embodied Simulation (*Androids*)

Oct. 27: Phillip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* 1-83

Oct. 29: *Androids*, 84-195

Iacoboni, Marco. 2009. “Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons.” *Annual Review of Psychology*. 60: 653-670.

Forum: Short post (250 words) on *Androids* and the problem of empathy

Nov. 3: ELECTION DAY

Nov. 5: *Androids*, 196-244

David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, “Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11.5 (2008). 197-203.

Forum: short, informal essay on *Androids* (500 words)

Weeks 13-15: Desire, Deceit, and Social Cognition (*Othello*)

Nov. 10: *Othello*, Act I-II

Video: Nathan Insel, “Social Cognition”

Nov. 12: *Othello*, Act III-IV

Video: Nathan Insel / Ashby Kinch, “Social Cognition and Literature

Analytical Essay due by Friday, Nov. 13th at 11:59

Nov. 17: *Othello*, Act V

Final Exam: Scheduled for Thanksgiving Week: Tuesday Nov. 24th 10-12

Revised "Art and Science of Reading" paper due by Nov. 25th at 11:59.