

**APPROACHES TO AMERICAN LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY
(BTP2NA_T_10)**

Time and Venue

Wednesday 14.00-15.40 MBlg. 55

Instructor

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Office hours

Tue 10.00-11.00; Wed 16:00-17:00.

Course goal and general requirements

The course is offered for 1st-year MA students and focuses on some of the major trends in American literary and cultural theory and criticism, which have been most influential in the United States and have decisively shaped the study of the human sciences worldwide. Within this wider scope, special emphasis will be laid on the theories and practice of interpreting texts and cultural phenomena. Accordingly, the reading material for the course consists of two kinds of text: (1) theoretical texts which construe problems of (mainly textual) interpretation in different ways from different vantage points; (2) texts which come from the broader discipline of cultural studies.

One of the chief objectives of the course is to help students in mastering certain complex problems of literary theory by examining how theoretical assumptions function in individual acts of interpretation, and how these individual acts relate to the problem of interpretation in the broader context of culture. To facilitate the proper understanding of the reading assignments, students will be given study questions pertaining to each text, which they will be expected to answer before showing up in class.

Under the current regulations, the course is planned to be a face-to-face, classroom-based course. However, if due to the pandemic we have to switch to remote teaching, please be prepared to use the University of Debrecen E-Learning system at elearning.unideb.hu. In case such a switch occurs, the course evaluation methods (e.g., for class participation) and grading rules may be subject to change. You will be notified of these changes by the instructor if needed.

It is our shared responsibility to observe effective hygiene rules and follow the relevant government, university and faculty regulations regarding the pandemic. If you become ill or experience any symptoms, please stay home to protect others from infection.

Requirements for a grade

Active participation in class discussion Active participation in class discussions is essential and will have a mighty influence on one's grade. The individual seminars are designed to address particular problems concerning the problematic of essentialism that arise from various discourses we focus on. Several of these questions may incite controversies, and you are all welcome to take your stances in relation to the given problem at hand and engage in debate.

Regular class attendance (15%)

Regular attendance is required: more than three absences will result in "no grade" for the course. Since at the end of the semester you will be tested on your knowledge of the assigned texts and the material covered, it is not a good idea to skip classes and readings, because doing so might severely lessen your chances of understanding what comes subsequently. Should you happen to miss a class for whatever

emergency, I am happy to consult anyone on the assigned texts in my office hours or at an appointed time.

End-term test (35%)

The end-term test will measure your knowledge of the texts covered during the semester, and your comprehension of the problems that we will have discussed. It will be evaluated on a “pass-or-fail” basis, and will serve as an entry to your assignment for a grade. The pass limit is 60%, and in case of failure you cannot run for a grade.

Graded assignment (50%)

a.) Take-home essay

If you chose this option of getting a grade, you will be required to submit a paper of 8-10 pages in length (formal parameters to be given later). The essay should either address a problem in the field of interpretive theory or should be a comparative analysis of *two different interpretations* of a specific literary work. Suggested topics will be provided later in the semester.

OR

b.) Oral review

This assignment consists in choosing a theoretical/critical text from a list of relevant sources (to be distributed later in the semester) to be discussed with the instructor in the last week of the semester.

SCHEDULE

Week 1 – Orientation: Does theory have a practical use?

Week 2 – Art and interpretation

Susan Sontag: “Against Interpretation”

Week 3 – Anti-foundationalism

Stanley Fish: “Is There a Text in this Class?”

Week 4 – American hermeneutics and reader response criticism

E. D. Hirsch Jr: “In Defense of the Author”

Jane Tompkins: “The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response”

Week 5 – Cultural Anthropology

Clifford Geertz: “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man”

Week 6 – Deconstruction I

Paul de Man: “Semiotics and Rhetoric” (Part 1)

Week 7 – Deconstruction II

Paul de Man: “Semiotics and Rhetoric” (Part 2)

Week 8 – New Pragmatism

Richard Rorty: “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”

Week 9 – CONSULTATION WEEK

Week 10 – Feminist theory and body studies

Jane Tompkins: “Me and My Shadow”

Susan Bordo: “Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body”

Week 11 – Postcolonial theory

Edward Said: Introduction to *Orientalism*

Week 12 – Deconstruction as life philosophy (movie session)

Derrida (a documentary by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman)

Week 13 – End-term test

Week 14 – Closing

Bibliography

Bordo, Susan. "Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body." *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. U of CA P, 1993. (1-44)

Butler, Judith. "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire." *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990. (3-44)

De Man, Paul. "Semiology and Rhetoric." *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1982. (3-19)

Fish, Stanley. "Is There a Text in This Class?." *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980. (303-21)

Hirsch, E.D. "In Defense of the Author." *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1967. (1-23)

Geertz, Clifford. "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. NY: Basic, 1973. (33-54)

Miller, J. Hillis. "Steven's Rock or Criticism as Cure II." *Theory Now and Then*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. (117-133)

Rorty, Richard. "Private Irony and Liberal Hope." *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. (73-95)

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. NY: Vintage, 1979.

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation" *Against Interpretation* (1966). NY: Anchor, 1990. (3-14)

Tompkins, Jane P. "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response." Jane P. Tompkins ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. (201-33)

Tompkins, Jane. "Me and My Shadow." Vincent Leitch ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. NY: Norton, 2001. (2126-2143)