Instructor: Don Ulin
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E-mail: ulin@pitt.edu
Prerequisite: Senior standing, English major

Classroom: 109 Swarts Hall
Time: Tues/Thurs 4:00-5:15

How to reach me:

1. **Come to my office during office hours:** Mondays 2:00 to 4:00, Wednesdays 1:00 to 3:00 or any other time. I may not be there during those other times or I might ask you to come back another time if I’m busy. But you can try, and we can at least set up an appointment. Or you can contact me by one of those other methods to set up an appointment.

2. **Telephone** me at my office (362-0243) or at home between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. (368-3440)

3. **AOL Instant Messenger (AIM):** my screen name is DrDonUlin, and I will have it on most of the time when I am home, especially on Monday and Wednesday mornings.

4. **E-mail me** at ulin@exchange.upb.pitt.edu

About this course

The fact that you are reading this handout means you must be a senior English major. You have spent a good deal of the last four years (or more) studying English. But what does it really mean to study “English,” or even to study “literature”? In this course we will look at the long and rocky road that the study of literature has taken to get to where it is today. We will begin by looking at some of the thinkers and documents from the nineteenth century that helped shape our understanding of literature and literary study today. We will explore the rise of English as a discipline and the reasons that something as benign as poetry provokes such strong reactions in people otherwise unconnected to literature. Finally, we will throw ourselves wholeheartedly into the debates that have both threatened and enlivened the study of literature during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Prospectus: the uses and abuses of literature

If you ask “what use is literature?” you may get some puzzled looks. To say that it is enjoyable doesn’t get us very far since that doesn’t distinguish literature from all the many other enjoyable things (roller coasters, filet mignon, sex). Sometimes equally plausible answers are even contradictory: literature is useful/enjoyable because it helps us to see the world through someone else’s eyes or because we identify with the characters or point of view. Is literature useful (as some people have maintained) because it gives intelligible form to an often incomprehensible world, or is literature useful (as others have maintained) because it breaks up the forms that have made seem all too obvious and commonplace? To some people the question may be nonsense: what makes literature different from rhetoric, newspapers, and instruction manuals is that it is not “useful” in any really practical way isn’t literature at all. When it comes to poetry, these
people can quote the poet John Keats: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, ---that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (Then again, we might ask with Lily Tomlin, “If truth is beauty, how come no one has their hair done in the library?”)

If the idea of the use of literature is puzzling, the idea of its abuse will seem stranger still. Is that the addiction of the avid reader, wearing out his or her health by reading late into the night, neglecting the duties of career and family to find out who did the terrible deed or whom the hero would finally marry? Possibly, but there are other answers depending on what you determine to be the appropriate use for literature. Those who argue that poetry should have no practical purpose will think literature abused when it is studied in relation to social or political movements. A more complex but equally valid argument is made by those who value literature as a form of social action; to these people it is an abuse of literature to study and teach it in isolation from those social and political movements.

I will not pretend to give you any final word on what constitutes “abuse” vs. what constitutes legitimate “use” of literature, but by way of disclosure I will say that I lean toward those who would rather treat literature as something very much a part of the messy social and political realities that govern the rest of our lives. As an English major, it is not a matter that you can afford to ignore without discounting the value of your degree and your own intellectual identity. The purpose of this course is to survey some of the arguments that have been made recently on this subject and to begin developing some of our own ideas on the subjects.

These are difficult ideas to talk about and often elicit strong reactions. Oddly enough, some of the most vehement participants in this discussion are those who argue that the discussion itself is all an abuse of literature, which should not be subject to such partisan squabbling. But of course the more vehemently you make that argument, the forcibly are you reaffirming the very great importance of distinguishing between the uses and abuses of literature. Besides, it is simply undeniable that literature has played a great role in every aspect of social and political life and history from the formation of nations to the relationships between men and women.

In this course, I will be pushing you to examine, reexamine, and reexamine again your ideas on these matters. The readings are designed to challenge you both by their difficulty and by their strongly polemical nature. I will challenge you first to accept and adopt (at least provisionally) the ideas of every one of these writers but then, second, to challenge those ideas as rigorously and honestly as you can. In responding to your own ideas, I will do the same, working from the assumption that intellectual respect for someone means a willingness to engage seriously with their ideas in the same ways that I have urged you to engage with the ideas in the readings.

**Assignments and Grades:**

Most of your work in this class will revolve around a publication-length essay on some aspect of the field of literary production, consumption, or academic study (which may be a form of production, consumption, or both). “What does that mean?” you ask. Let me start by saying what is excluded: this is not to be a typical English paper analyzing one or more works of literature. It cannot be, for example, an analysis of water imagery in the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Broadly considered, there are two sorts of papers that fit this description, but don’t let these descriptions put you off of any other ideas you have:
1. One type of paper would deal with readers, reviewers, publishers, and/or authors. Last year I had an excellent paper on “after-life” of Sherlock Holmes in fiction by people other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as well as in films, Internet, and even advertising. Students in the Wordsworth class might consider looking at some aspect of Wordsworth’s reception among critics. One very original paper just waiting to be written would be on the use of his work in school books. Pitt has its own vast and well-organized digital collection of 19th-century school books, which would provide all the primary material you would need for such a paper.

2. The other type would deal with the study and teaching of literature as a discipline, such as its obligations to the canonical texts of western literature in the face of challenges by the advocates of women and minority writers or even of other cultural forms besides the literary text. You might write an essay on the place of some marginalized tradition (e.g. Irish literature) within the discipline of English studies. Last year, after everyone had chosen topics, I suggested a paper on anthologies of women’s literature or African-American literature, and they all wished I had suggested that one earlier, so there you have it. If you are interested in elementary or secondary education, you might choose to write an essay on higher education’s obligation to the earlier stages of education (following up on Charles Muscatine’s essay).

After you have given the conference paper, you will have the option of either developing that paper into the longer essay or else changing topics and writing a second medium-length paper (after giving me a polished printed version of your conference paper). In neither case should you be giving just a report or overview of what other people have said on the subject; nor should it be an extended reflection on your own opinion about the matter. It should be polemical, but any solid argument begins with an understanding of what others have said on the subject and keeps that material in sight throughout the essay. The number of references you have in your paper is less important than the quality of those references, but you should expect to make good use of at least a dozen solid sources (or half a dozen for each medium-length essay). That means either articles from refereed journals, books or book chapters from scholarly or other major publishers. Feel free to use online or printed reference sources for background information, but they do not count as solid sources.

Components and partial timeline:

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<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>Thursday 9/16</td>
<td>Draft proposal due (2 pages)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday 9/23</td>
<td>Revised proposal (2 pages)</td>
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<td>Thursday 10/7</td>
<td>Draft conference paper due (7-8 pages)</td>
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<td>Thursday 10/14</td>
<td>Revised conference paper (7-8 pages)</td>
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<td>Thursday 11/26</td>
<td>Draft essay (18-20 pages)</td>
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<td>Thursday 12/9</td>
<td>Final essay (20-25 pages)</td>
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<td>Working Papers and Participation</td>
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Readings, working papers, and participation: This is a participatory class. I see my own role in two parts. The first and more minor part is to help you understand any exceptionally difficult parts of the readings. The second and more important part is to facilitate the class discussion, which I feel is a more effective method of learning. To that end, you will find me playing a lot of the devil’s advocate, challenging the class to go beyond the simple but familiar answers to the very difficult questions that confront our discipline. Your role is to do all the readings thoroughly and on time and come to class prepared to play an active role. To help you keep track of the many different ideas you will encounter in this class, I am asking everyone to write brief working papers for each day on which there are readings due. This is not merely a summary or abstract of the readings, but an effort to engage seriously – either sympathetically or antithetically – with the ideas presented by the writer. How can you use these ideas? Can they be applied to any situation you have encountered or read about? Do they support or challenge the ideas in something else we have read? What parts of the essay seem most original, compelling, useful, sensible, etc.? How so? What parts of the essay seem flawed or wrong-headed? How so? As part of each working paper, you need to pose at least two clearly focused questions for discussion. In my lower-level classes, I often provide those discussion questions on the syllabus. In this class, I will be asking you to provide the questions, to begin thinking about them, and to bring them up in class. These may be questions about things you don’t understand, but they should be questions that will provoke discussion in the class.

Other things to keep in mind

Attendance: This class meets twice a week, and I will expect you to come to every class. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed. You cannot expect to miss class and still learn the material or get a good grade; you cannot expect to miss a lot of classes and still pass the course. Beyond three absences (for whatever reason) I will begin deducting one letter grade for each additional absence.

Late papers: I expect all assignments, both reading and writing, to be completed by the date specified. If you need to hand in an assignment late, please see me beforehand; I will be much more willing then to grant an extension. If you do not talk with me about a late paper at least by the date it is due, I will deduct one letter grade for each day it is late (two for a weekend).

How to reach me: My office hours, room number, and phone number are listed at the beginning of this document. I may be there at other times as well, and you are welcome to drop by, but to save yourself a trip, I recommend you call first. No matter how well you are doing in the course, or what you need to talk to me about, I want to talk with you, so don't be shy.

Plagiarism: Any time you use someone else's ideas you must acknowledge the source, even if you translate those ideas into your own words. If you use someone else's words as well, you must put quotation marks around them--even if its only a brief phrase in the middle of your own sentence. Citing your sources shows your reader that you understand the issue and have done some research. Not citing your sources is called "plagiarism" and is a serious offense. One case of plagiarism usually results in an "F" for the paper along with a permanent note in your college record. A second case is grounds for failure in the course, and persistent plagiarism will almost certainly get you expelled from the university. If you have ANY questions about what plagiarism is or how to avoid it, see me. Most cases of plagiarism are due to misunderstanding, but that is no excuse.