

EN 827 Master Narratives/Fielding to Lessing
 Thurs. 4:30- 6:55, Gasson 207
 Fall 2008

Prof. Judith Wilt
 Carney 436, x2-3702
 Tues/Wed. 1-3 p.m.
 and by appointment

I taught a course like this one some years ago under the title “Trekking the Long Novel” – we’re in for some **extreme novel reading** here, with correspondingly less emphasis on reading theoretical or cultural criticism (though of course we’ll be reading “critically”). Think of it as a tasting menu for all its famous authors, or as gap filler for a historical period, or type of novel, you haven’t thoroughly broken into. The writing assignments, as you’ll see, lend themselves to use as practice pieces for elements of the MA comprehensive exam. But mainly, the course aims at creating a community of exhilarated if sometimes exhausted readers. We will be thinking about the novel form and canon formation, and depending on the interests of class members, thinking a bit about those Foucauldian, psychoanalytic, post-modern, post-colonialist and gender-studies exposures of POWER which make us suspicious of the cultural master-narratives we inherit, and of the novels which both embody and (to a degree) critique these. But mostly we will be talking to each other in every class about the reading experience itself, and how it arouses and (to a degree) satisfies what Peter Brooks calls “narrative desire.” This should be helpful for thinking about teaching fiction too.

I will want to meet with each of you in the first ten days or so of class, to hear about your hopes and intentions for graduate courses, including this one, and to work out a tentative plan for how you want to use writing assignments. I will not assign a long research paper, but would like to have 12-15 pages of writing from each of you, to grade and comment on. The simplest option might be three 5 page papers along the way, one per century, on novels that particularly capture your interest, or a 2-3 page paper on each of the six novels as you finish them. You may wish consciously to vary the approach you take in each of these papers – a single character or image study, comparative study of some theme or event or character in two novels, an analysis of something in a novel which rings the bell of a particular theorist or theory you have become interested in, asking a (deceptively) simple question about an event or happening and then answering it, puzzling out a particular quality of structure or of narration....

Or you may even wish to try the SAME kind of writing operation or approach in each of your writing pieces, deepening whatever theory or approach you use, reaching almost for a single paper with several chapters. Use your writing plan, in other words, to try out new skills or refine familiar ones. Or both. We will experiment with these varieties of approaches especially in reading Tom Jones and Clarissa, both in class discussions and reports and in some “facilitation” exercises I will give you. Filling out a preliminary handout reflecting on what kinds of papers you like to write, or have had most success in writing, will help us both in thinking out a good writing plan for you. And a take-home final exam from me will I hope stimulate further comparative thinking and also allow you to return to write about some things you didn’t have room for in your initial writing plan: I’ll also design a part of that exam in the style of the ‘historical’ portion of the MA exam, so some of you may get some practice for that.

Let’s say, for this reading-centered course, that your contributions to class discussion and presentations, echoing and building upon your reading, will constitute 30% of the grade, the writing from the writing plan will constitute another 30%, and the final take-home exam will be worth 40% of the grade.

Schedule of readings, discussions, presentations, writing:

Before class....let's take a few shortcuts: in the O'Neill Library Media Room I have put on Reserve for this class filmed versions of our first four novels: Tom Jones, Clarissa, Bleak House, Daniel Deronda. In an email I'm assigning several of you to watch at least the first hour of each of these, so we can begin a discussion Thursday of (master) plots and varieties of narrative. I'm also asking you to bring to the first class your class texts of Tom Jones and Clarissa for discussion about the design of books as well as plots.

Fielding "vs." Richardson: a myth of 'origins'

Sept. 4: myths, archetypes, master plots, and now, "master narratives," from Aristotle (The pleasures of literature arise from its 'imitation of life' through the consoling, if artificial, screen of the 'plot'—a beginning, a middle, an end) through Propp's analysis of elements, or "narratemes" in folklore and Frye's depiction of linked "modes" from mythic, and romantic through high and low mimetic to ironic, to Lyotard's skeptical "exposure" of grand or master narratives, particularly of progress, modernization, and emancipation (The Postmodern Condition, 1979). Plus: a brief discussion of Peter Brooks on Plot and Michael McKeon on the 'origins and development' (a master narrative) of the English Novel. Plus....some textual and filmic beginnings on Tom Jones and Clarissa.

Sept. 11: Fielding's The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling (1749): discussion of text up through Book XI ch. Vii (p. 602). The narrator/the reader/the critic (reading aloud your chosen discussable passages); the fable/allegory and the realist; the romance and the political background.

Sept. 18: finish Tom Jones: changes of tone? The generically (and morally) "mixed" character. Elements of retardation and "digression."

Sept. 25: Richardson's Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady (1759); discussion of text up through p. 316 (the end of Lovelace's letter of Sunday June 18, following "the black transaction"). I'll make available a cheat sheet (spoiler alert), Wilt map of Clarissa events in time-frame. I will hand out a full version of the hero/villain's first 'letter' so we can see something of the original Richardsonian characterization and ponder the 'abridgements'....and will seek a few volunteers to read and discuss with us some of the abridgements in the second half of the novel.

Oct. 2: finish Clarissa....depending on the writing plan we've set up, I'll need one or two pieces of writing from each of you by Friday of this week.

Dickens "vs" Eliot: the 'golden age'

Oct. 9: Dickens's Bleak House (1853); discussion of text up through chapter 34, "A Turn of the Screw" (p. 554). A few volunteers to "present" on key images, characters, and themes as vehicles for 'desire' and 'intention' in this expansive but also closely strung together plot.

Oct. 16: finish Bleak House; share theoretical perspectives on Dickensian rhetoric and narration, on serialization, on the cultural politics of the novel.

Oct. 23: Eliot's Daniel Deronda (1876): discussion of text up through chapter 34 (part four, "Gwendolen Gets Her Choice), p. 340. Volunteers present on Eliot's rhetoric and narration, image clusters, etc.

Oct. 30: finish Daniel Deronda.: close-reading of key scenes, and volunteers present on key areas of critical debate – the racial, cultural and gender politics of the ‘placement’ of protagonists at the end. Again, one or two papers due, depending on writing plan.

Joyce and Lessing: modernismo

Nov. 6: Joyce’s Ulysses (1922): discussion of text/s through the “Nausicaa” episode. Cheat sheet: Stuart Gilbert’s redaction of Joyce’s plan matching The Odyssey to Ulysses. Reading as skipping....

Nov. 13: finish Ulysses, reading aloud from “Oxen of the Sun,” particular pleasures/difficulties in the dream/drama of “Nighttown”, the “catechism of “Ithaca,” and the monologue of Molly/Penelope.

Nov. 20: Lessing’s The Golden Notebook (1962): Lessing’s chapter headings and introduction, as with Joyce, offers a pathway through the labyrinth of “notebooks” making up this novel, a beginning, but not an ending of discussion about structure. Read through the end of the third section of “Free Women.”

Thanksgiving Holiday

Dec. 4: finish The Golden Notebook. Finale: “from their fragments can come something new”: a utopian project? the 20th century project? The human project?

In this last class I will hand out the take-home final exam of short essays and passages; it will be **due in to me in person in my office on Friday Dec. 13 between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., or, if you require an extension, on Mon. Dec. 15 between 10 and 12 noon.**

Three excerpts from Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (1984)

(from chapter one). Plot, then, is conceived to be the outline or armature of the story, that which supports and organizes the rest. From such a view, Aristotle proceeds to derive three consequences. First, the action imitated by the [work] must be complete in itself. This in turn means that it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end—a point wholly obvious but one that will prove to have interesting effects in its applications. Finally just as in the visual arts a whole must be of a size that can be taken in by the eye, so a plot must be ‘of a length to be taken in by the memory.’ This is important, since memory—as much in reading a novel as in seeing a play—is the key faculty in the capacity to perceive relations of beginnings, middles, and ends through time, the shaping power of narrative.

But our English term ‘plot’ has its own semantic range, one that is interestingly broad and possibly instructive. The American Heritage Dictionary helpfully reduces it to four categories:

1. (a) A small piece of ground, generally used for a specific purpose. (b) A measured area of land: lot.
2. A ground plan, as for a building; chart; diagram.
3. The series of events consisting of an outline of the action of a narrative or drama.
4. A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; scheme.

There may be a subterranean logic connecting these heterogeneous meanings....

Plot as we need and want the term is hence an embracing concept for the design and intention of narrative, a structure for those meanings that are developed through temporal succession, or perhaps better: a structuring operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time. A further analysis of the question is suggested here by a distinction urged by the Russian Formalists, between fabula and sjuzet. Fabula is defined as the order of events referred to by the narrative, whereas sjuzet is the order of events presented in the narrative discourse... We must, however, recognize that the apparent priority of fabula to sjuzet is in the nature of a mimetic illusion, in that the fabula, “what really happened”—is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the sjuzet, which is all that he ever directly knows.

(from chapter six) My understanding of plots as intention and dynamic in narrative, as that which actively shapes our experience a readers of narrative, has led me to talk of desire as a thematic instrumentality of plot and as a basic motivation of its telling and its reading. If plots seem frequently be about investments of desire and the effort to bind and master intensive levels of energy, this corresponds on the one hand to narratives thematically oriented toward ambition, possession, mastery of the erotic object and of the world, and on the other hand to a certain experience of reading narrative, itself a process of reaching for possession and mastery. Speaking reductively, without nuance, one might say that on the one hand narrative tends toward a thematics of the desired, potentially possessable body and on the other toward a readerly experience of consuming, a having that, in an era of triumphant capitalism, is bound to take on commercial forms, giving to the commerce in narrative understandings a specifically commercial tinge. What follows is a reflection largely devoted to the vicissitudes and destinies of the erotic body in a context of commercialized literature, specifically in a prime example of the popular serialized novel characterized by the critic Sainte-Beuve as ‘industrial literature.’

(from chapter 8). As we continue to talk of plots and plotting, we shall be paying ever greater attention to dramatizations of telling and their relation to implications of listening. This progression of emphasis is partly in the logic of our argument and partly determined by a historical shift, an increasingly acute self-consciousness about the status of narrative within art that is itself self-consciously ‘modern.’ Curiously, this intense awareness of the epistemological and linguistic problems posed by storytelling is less a discovery of ‘modernism’ than a rediscovery of a concern central to earlier fiction, particularly in the eighteenth century. These issues are not absent of course from the nineteenth-century novel. Yet during this golden age of narrative there was an apparent need for and confidence in the shaping order of plot whatever its ultimate inconsistencies and limitations as an explanatory system. With what we call all too loosely ‘modernism,’ things become more suspicious.

(see also excerpts from Michael McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740.)