

EN 082.14 Literature and Society
MWF 10, Carney 204
Spring 2010

Prof. Judith Wilt
Carney 436, x2-3702
OH: Tues. 10-12, W 1-3
and by appointment

“Master Narratives” in Literature and Society

Canadian journalist Robert Fulford writes: “A master narrative that we find convincing and persuasive differs from other stories in an important way: it swallows us. It is not a play we can see performed, or a painting we can view, or a city we can visit. A master narrative is a dwelling place. We are intended to live in it.”

“Master Narrative”: call it “myth” or “worldview” or “archetype” or even “stereotype,” it’s the deep story behind other stories – the assumptions that generate our stories about what things are and how things work. “Camelot.” “The Monster.” “The American Dream.” We can view a “master narrative” through two lenses alternatively, or maybe even simultaneously. It embraces us and sharpens us – or it entraps us and cuts us. It enables us to understand and organize meanings – but does it limit the meanings we can see and make? As soon as we see the story we’re in, the script written for us, should we reject it? If we inherit it, can we make it our own? If it’s alive can we make it sing our own tune? Is it the box – we think outside of?

Some questions as we begin. The master narratives, the standard stories we tell ourselves/our culture tells us: where did they come from? How long have they been operating? How do they hang together, or impinge on different fields—art, economics, history, science? Gender? The spiritual life? Our individual temperaments, or the time-frames we inhabit, may incline us differently to a “hermeneutic” (interpretation) of suspicion about master narratives, or to a hermeneutic of engaged replenishment. Let’s dive in and see what we can recognize, widen our capacity to identify (as well as identify-with), some master narratives as they develop from medieval European through English culture and on to our American culture.

The task is learning, the task is feeling; the task is reading, speaking, and writing – to learn and to feel. We’ll begin with some practice-pieces, move on to stories still with us from medieval, Renaissance and ‘Romantic’ eras, to epic-novels from the last century and then visual storytelling from more contemporary times, as we reflect on the storytelling that is suggesting, overtly or covertly, what the master meanings of THIS time are.

This course requires steady reading, and speaking about that reading: regular in-class writing will help to facilitate that discussion. In some classes we’ll move into smaller groups for some assigned discussions, and you’ll also do some writing and reporting work in smaller groups. **I’ll ask for four short papers over the first months of the course, due on January 29, February 26, March 26, and April 14:** these papers will

constitute 50% of your grade. A final take-home exam, consisting of essays comparing and contrasting works in the course, will count for 25% of the grade. Your in-class work – discussions, presentations, writing, contribution to class discussion, will count for 25% of the grade.

I'll ask you to meet twice with me in my office in groups of 2 or 3 during the first month of class, first to talk informally about your relationship to “reading” and then to pick up loose threads on the concept of “master narratives” and to establish some ideas about the contemporary TV “narrative” you’ll be working on for reports at the end of the semester. I take “office hours” seriously, and hope you’ll visit frequently after these assigned meetings.

Schedule of readings, writings, discussions

1) Camelot: the once-and-future master narrative

Jan. 20-22: Introduction: why is literature in the Core/what is the core of literature? Master narratives and why we like but also fear them. Practice pieces, Robert Frost’s (slyly misleading) “The Road Not Taken,” Peter Davison’s “Peaches,” an Emily Dickinson poem on the self. The sagas of King Arthur; history and myth, nation and passion: **reading for Friday’s class is the short Dover text of King Arthur’s Last Battle**. I’ll also hand out a packet of further Arthurian storytelling for next week’s work, and on Friday I’ll assign everyone to watch and report on (at least) one contemporary film about King Arthur, for next week. The films, on reserve in O’Neill Media Center, with three of them also showing on BC cable TV, are the film version of the musical Camelot (1965, based on T. H. White’s 1938-1958 novel The Once and Future King), the hilariously slapstick Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975), the mystic and visually stunning Excalibur (1981), the hyper-romantic First Knight (1995) and the heroic, if historically challenged, King Arthur (2004).

Jan 25-27-29: reading the course packet of Arthurian stories, finding Arthurian tropes, types, and values, reporting on contemporary Arthurian films. **Handout Wednesday will suggest subjects for first 3-4 page paper, due Friday.**

2) Two fables of Monsters

Feb. 1-3-5: Shakespeare’s The Tempest (1613), with pre-reading in Thomas More’s Utopia (1516: handout), which is a key text in a long tradition of “island” stories with readings political, aesthetic, and in the case of The Tempest, romantic. The required course text includes excerpts from the critical history of The Tempest, as its setting, its “monster,” and its “Brave New World” become “readable” in different ways over the centuries. Some reading quizzes along the way.

Feb. 8-10-12: Tempests and “Renaissances”: spotlight on Prospero, Miranda, and especially, Caliban. Some in-class writing and group discussions.

Feb. 15-17-19: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus (1818), Parables of creation, family, education, and 'the self.' Gothic horror as a political genre, as a field for gender study.

Feb. 22-24-26: The endless end of Frankenstein. **Handout will suggest subjects for second 3-4 page paper, due Friday.**

Spring break

3) From American Adam to American Idol

Mar. 8-10-12: John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939) and Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead (1943): two wildly different epic voices. Listen to them both by reading chs. 1 and 2 of Grapes and ch. 1 of Fountainhead, as well as some materials on the American Dream and the American Adam from John Winthrop, R. B. Lewis and others (handout). Then we'll continue with Grapes.

Mar. 15-17-19: The Grapes of Wrath: themes biblical, psychological, national. American community in the 1930's. Epic, lyric and symbolic in the novel.

Mar. 22-24-26: Grapes; **handout will suggest subjects for third 3-4 page paper, due Friday.** Return to The Fountainhead: American singularity, the gospel of "work," and the redefinition of "the fall." Romantic perversity and the novel of ideas.

Mar. 29-31-(Easter): The Fountainhead, continued

Apr. x-7-9: The Fountainhead.

Apr. 12-14-16: The Fountainhead: **handout previous Friday will suggest subjects for fourth 3-4 page paper due Wed.** Begin sequence on two films from the 20th century with mini-epic ambitions: Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window (1956), discussions and reports Fri and next Wed., and Robert Altman's Nashville (1976), discussions and presentations Wed. and Fri.

Apr. x-28-30: continue discussion, Rear Window and Nashville.

Apr. 26-28-30: master narratives in contemporary TV: American Idol, "24," others chosen by students in the first month of class: discussions and reports.

May 3-5: discussions and reports on master narratives in contemporary TV:finale.

The final take-home exam for this course will be given out in the last class, May 5, and is due to me in person in my office at the scheduled exam time for MWF 10 a.m. courses, that is, Wed. May 12, between 12:30 and 3 p.m.

Please note that the Academic Integrity “contract” which is part of your citizenship in the Boston College university community (see www.bc.edu/integrity) requires that all written work submitted for academic credit be entirely your own. I’ll suggest the proper citation form when you write about a text, or use a critical text – you may also occasionally need to cite an internet research source. Using someone else’s work without citation is entirely unacceptable and subject at the discretion of the teacher to penalties ranging from re-doing the assignment to failure of the assignment to failure in the course. The primary responsibility for maintaining standards of personal integrity and honor in academic and intellectual activities rests with the individual student. I’m always available by email and am in my office for a portion of just about every day during the semester for conferences or inquiries about this.

I keep attendance records and save most materials you generate in class, reflecting upon them at the time of making out final grades. If you know you will need to be absent from a class let me know about this; the same if you wake up sick some morning: we may need to figure out ways of compensating for what you miss.

Practice pieces for first class:

Reading for clarity, making the right pictures: famous poem with trick

Robert Frost: The Road Not Taken (1916)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

Notable poem on the language, and language itself...

Peter Davison, Peaches (1989)

A mouthful of language to swallow:
stretches of beach, sweet clinches,
breaches in walls, pleached branches;
britches hauled over haunches;
hunched leeches, wrenched teachers.

What English can do: ransack
the warmth that chuckles beneath
fuzzed surfaces, smooth velvet richness, splashy juices.
I beseech you, peach,
clench me into the sweetness
of your reaches

Our subject, mysteriously, literature contemplates self and society

Emily Dickinson #303 (c.1862)

The Soul selects her own Society-
Then shuts the door-
To her Divine Majority-
Present no more-

Unmoved-she notes the Chariots-pausing
At her low Gate-
Unmoved-an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat

I've known her-from an ample nation-
Choose One-
Then-close the Valves of her attention-
Like Stone.