

LITERATURE AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

INSTRUCTOR: David Peimer

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“Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate; our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure” – Nelson Mandela

COURSE AIM:

The aim of the course is to explore literature of social critique as a literature of dissent; against the status quo, social conventions, culturally determined personal behaviour, challenges in times of great political upheavals. We will also ask; what is the difference between subtle, “personal” covert dissent, and overt, direct social critique? And: what makes the aesthetic form of the writing (not only the content) also an act of social critique/dissent? Some of the writers we will explore include Kundera, Coetzee, George Orwell, Pinter, Sarah Kane, Monty Python, Heiner Muller, Tim O’Brien, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Tarantino, Hemingway, Wiesel, Orwell, Kafka, Mamet. The genres will include realism, magical realism, post modernism, modernism, satire. The course will be structured around certain concepts and debates in relation to history and cultural pressures. In this way it will not follow an historical chronology.

METHODOLOGY:

The sessions will combine introductory comments by the instructor, student presentations and debates about these, and detailed discussions of the assigned reading, together with close reading of selected passages.

ASSESSMENT:

Students will be required to:

1. Do the assigned reading
2. Present an in-class presentation each (approx 20 minutes with class discussion to follow). Dates of presentations will be decided in class.
3. Write a 5–6 page mid-semester essay
4. Write a Final essay of 10 pages. Deadline for essay abstracts is three weeks before the final essay is due.

NB: Active participation in debates is a condition of attendance.

The final grade will be based on the results of :

- (a) the Final essay
- (b) the quality of the in-class work (i.e., the in-class presentation, mid semester essay, participation in debates and attendance).

The Final essay constitutes 50% of the final mark
All the in-class work constitutes 50% of the final mark

SCHEDULE:

1. Introduction:
Course outline, aims, expectations, notion of Literature as Social Critique
2. Harold Pinter; The Birthday Party
See also: Martin Esslin; The Theatre of the Absurd
Covert/Overt critique or dissent debate
3. Ernest Hemingway; Short story
Covert/Overt critique or dissent debate
4. Sarah Kane; Blasted and Psychosis 4.48
Britain and Bosnia: 21st Century Literature of Extreme Dissent
5. David Mamet; Edmond
American nightmares, dark comedy
6. Kafka; The Trial
Social critique and existentialism
7. Tarantino: Pulp Fiction movie
Post modernism and satire
8. Kundera: The Unbearable Lightness of Being and The Art of the Novel
Covert/Overt dissent debate in content and aesthetic form
9. Bob Dylan and John Lennon lyrics
Dissent/Critique using popular forms
10. Heiner Muller: HamletMachine and The Task
Ambivalent intellectuals/Radical Ophelias and First/Third world cultural exploration
- recognition/denial of the “other” in questions of identity theory, contemporary applications to Islam
11. Tim O’Brien: How to write a War story
Representation of war. Vietnam and memory deconstructed.
12. Elie Wiesel: Night
Savage critique, aesthetics of narrative structure and drive
13. George Orwell: 1984

Overt or covert critique/dissent, aesthetics of form.

14. Final class discussion

Further recommended reading lists will be given in class