

## **ENG 737: Seminar in Literary Criticism Ethics and Contemporary Fiction**

Fall 2009  
Tuesday 3:00 - 5:30 pm

Instructor: John Zuern, UHM Department of English  
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Office: Kuykendall 219  
Office Hours: MW 1:30-3:00  
and by appointment  
(can also meet in Laulima Chat)

### **Objectives**

This seminar will introduce you to the discussions and debates that have comprised the so-called “turn to ethics” in literary criticism over the past two decades. It will also engage you in modes of practical textual analysis aimed at identifying and illuminating the relationship between the ethical dimensions of literary fictions and the formal features of their narrative structures. You will come away from this course with an understanding of at least two of the major impulses within criticism’s turn to ethics. One of these orientations recuperates humanist ideals, emphasizing the role of literature as a repository of values and an agent of moral edification (e.g. Booth, Nussbaum), while the other extends the anti-foundational and in some cases anti-humanist commitments of poststructuralism and postmodernism into the domain of ethics, viewing literature as the occasion of an encounter with an intractable otherness that cannot be subsumed within presupposed values and conventional standards of conduct (e.g. Derrida, Spivak, Badiou).

We often claim—or at least intuit—that fictional and dramatic texts have an ethical impact on readers. In this class, we will challenge ourselves to account for *how* literary works might operate as stimulants to ethical thinking and conduct. What presuppositions underlie our beliefs in the moral value of literature, including “art for art’s sake” positions that seek to absolve literature of any moral obligations? One of the questions we will consider has to do with the “ownership” of stories: what are the philosophical underpinnings and moral entailments of the claim that certain stories belong to certain people? To what obligations, if any, are writers bound when they endeavor to represent groups and cultures other than “their own”? What are the ethics of the literary imagination? These concerns become especially pressing when literary texts engage historical and political situations that are themselves fraught with moral tensions.

The primary texts I have selected all pose problems that can be approached from a variety of literary-critical and ethical perspectives. All of the major primary texts are formally and/or linguistically inventive, offering occasions to reflect upon the complex interaction of narrative form and ethical function. All the primary materials deal with morally compelling topics, including post-apartheid society in South Africa (Coetzee), colonialism and settler society in Hawai'i and other parts of Oceania (Apio and Mitchell), colonialism and slavery in early America (Morrison), and the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants in the United States (McCarthy’s film *The Visitor*).

In order to establish a common frame of reference and a historical foundation for our discussions of ethics and literature, we will devote the first two class sessions to an overview of some of the central texts in the European philosophical tradition to which contemporary treatments of literary ethics frequently refer. These materials include excerpts from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Levinas, Derrida, and Butler. We will spend the remainder of the semester on “case studies” that examine the literary and cinematic texts alongside further readings in philosophy and literary criticism.

I have designed this seminar with the expectation that participants will have some experience with reading texts in philosophy, literary theory, and/or literary criticism, though not necessarily with the

specific texts and authors I am assigning. If you have any questions about your preparation for this class, please talk to me right away.

### Contacting Me

Email is the best way to reach me. My address is [zuern@hawaii.edu](mailto:zuern@hawaii.edu). I don't usually respond to email after 6:00 pm on weekdays or on weekends.

During my office hours (MW 1:30 - 3:00), you can reach me by phone at 956-3019. Outside those times I may not answer, but you can leave me a voicemail message.

### Required Texts

All books apart from *Kāmau* are available at Revolution Books, 2626 S King St # 201, 944-3106.

#### Novels

Coetzee, *Disgrace*  
Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*  
Morrison, *A Mercy*

#### Short Stories (in course packet)

Bowles, "A Distant Episode"  
Camus, "The Guest"  
Dib, "Amria and the Frenchman"  
Gorodé, "'Dos montes. . .'"  
Head, "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses"

#### Drama

Apio, *Kāmau*

#### Film

McCarthy, *The Visitor*

#### Philosophy and Criticism

Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*  
Butler, *Prearious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*  
Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*

#### Course Reader

Available at Professional Image, 2633 South King, 973-6599 (across the street from Revolution Books)

### Assignments

- in-class roundtable contribution (5 minute provocative statement based on a specific text or set of texts, followed by a structured discussion among 2-3 roundtable participants, then questions from the whole group) 15%

Your objective is to provoke discussion *and* to represent the argument of your chosen text(s) accurately. The best way to think about this task is as a "setting to work" of the material, which involves a reanimation of the ideas in a well-defined critical context.

- analysis (no longer than 5 pages) of a primary text drawing on at least three of the assigned readings in philosophy and criticism 20%

The goal here is to illuminate a literary text of your own choosing by way of at least three of the assigned readings (or others that you think are appropriate). It would be efficient to think of this assignment as the kernel of your longer paper. **You are required to submit a draft of this assignment.**

- abstract for a term paper 15%

Your abstract should be polished enough to send to the organizer of a conference or the editor of a collection.

- term paper (around 25 pages, excluding notes and bibliography; no longer than 35 pages) 50%

Use MLA style. Use endnotes rather than footnotes.

**You have the option of submitting a draft of this paper to me.** I will need to get a substantial draft no later than Tuesday, November 17, in order to get comments back to you in enough time to be useful.

All written assignments need to be uploaded as MS Word files to your Drop Boxes in the Lulima system. Let me know if you have any trouble with the Lulima site. I will return comments to you using Word's Track Changes feature.

### Grading

All assignments are due by class time on the day on which they appear in the schedule. You must complete all assignments to receive a passing grade in this class. I will not read drafts that are submitted more than two days past the deadline for drafts.

I will assign grades based on the +/- system. I will use the following values to compute your final grades:

Letter Grade	Points
A	4.0
A-	3.7
B+	3.3
B	3.0
B-	2.7
C+	2.3
C	2.0
C-	1.7
D+	1.3
D	1.0
D-	.7

A grade of A+ indicates incalculably exceptional work.

In compliance with university policy, I will give incompletes only in cases of documented medical or family emergencies.

### Attendance

I expect that you will attend seminar meetings regularly and on time. **More than four (4) unexcused absences from will result in a failing grade for the class.** If circumstances arise that make it difficult for you to attend discussion sessions or to complete your assigned work, please inform me immediately. Don't wait until the end of the semester, when it will be harder to make accommodations.

### Conduct

Your relationships with your classmates and with me are governed by the Student Conduct Code, which also applies in all the online environments we will be using this semester.

If you feel that the conduct of another student in the class is interfering with your ability to work productively, please speak with me about the problem immediately. If my conduct is causing you problems, contact the Associate Chair in the Department of English.

### Academic Integrity

You must adhere to the university's standards of academic integrity as stated in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Student Conduct Code:

Because UHM is an academic community with high professional standards, its teaching, research, and service purposes are seriously disrupted and subverted by academic dishonesty. Such dishonesty includes cheating and plagiarism as defined below. Ignorance of these definitions will not provide an excuse for acts of academic dishonesty.

1. Cheating includes but is not limited to giving or receiving unauthorized assistance during an examination; obtaining unauthorized information about an examination before it is given; submitting another's work as one's own; using prohibited sources of information during an examination; fabricating or falsifying data in experiments and other research; altering the record of any grade; altering answers after an examination has been submitted; falsifying any official University record; or misrepresenting of facts in order to obtain exemptions from course requirements.
2. Plagiarism includes but is not limited to submitting, in fulfillment of an academic requirement, any work that has been copied in whole or in part from another individual's work without attributing that borrowed portion to the individual; neglecting to identify as a quotation another's idea and particular phrasing that was not assimilated into the student's language and style or paraphrasing a passage so that the reader is misled as to the source; submitting the same written or oral or artistic material in more than one course without obtaining authorization from the instructors involved; or "drylabbing," which includes obtaining and using experimental data and laboratory write-ups from other sections of a course or from previous terms. (UHM Student Conduct Code).

### Schedule

**Subject to change.** You should complete the reading *for* the day on which it is assigned. I recommend reading the texts in the order in which I list them.

I would get going with the novel reading early; *Cloud Atlas* in particular is long and somewhat complicated.

#### Tuesday, August 25

Introduction to the course  
(handouts on first day)

Genesis 19, Genesis 22, Matthew 6, John 1  
Aristotle, selections from *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*

#### Tuesday, September 1

(all from packet)

Bowles, "A Distant Episode"

Camus, "The Guest"

Dib, "Annia and the Frenchman"

Head, "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses"

Gorodé, "'Dos montes. . .'"

Booth, "Why Ethical Criticism Fell on Hard Times" from *The Company We Keep*

Nussbaum, "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature" from *Love's Knowledge*

Harpham, from *Shadows of Ethics*

Buell, "Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics" from *PMLA* 114.1 (special issue on Ethics and Literary Study)

**Tuesday, September 8**

(all from packet)

Genesis 31-33

Barthes "The Struggle with the Angel" from *Image, Music, Text*

Aristotle, Books I-II from *Nicomachean Ethics*

Kant, Chapters 1-2 from *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

**Tuesday, September 15**

Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Nietzsche, "Second Essay" from *The Genealogy of Morals*

Genesis 22

Kierkegaard, from *Fear and Trembling* (packet)

Lévinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" from *Basic Philosophical Writings*; "Dialogue with Emmanuel

Lévinas" and "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable" from *Face to Face with Lévinas*; "Reality and Its Shadow" from *Unforeseen History*

**Tuesday, September 22**

Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Derrida, "Beyond" and "Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)" from *The Gift of Death*

Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear" from *Precarious Life*

**Tuesday, September 29**

Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Derrida, "*Tout autre est tout autre*" from *The Gift of Death*

Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics" from *Precarious Life*

Sanders, "'Don't Forget to Tell Us What Happened to You Yourself. . .'" from *Complicities*

**Tuesday, October 6**

Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Spivak, "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching"

Attridge, "Age of Bronze, State of Grace: *Disgrace*" from *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*

Meffan and Worthington, "Ethics Before Politics: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" from *Mapping the Ethical Turn*

**Tuesday, October 13**

Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (at least through "Sloosha's Crossin' An' Ev'rythin' After")

Agamben, "Friendship" and "The Politicization of Life," "Biopolitics and the Rights of Man," and

"Threshold," from *Homo Sacer*

Badiou, "Introduction" and Chapters 1 - 3 from *Ethics*

**DUE: draft of five-page analysis of a primary text (required)**

**Tuesday, October 20**

Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

Badiou, Chapters 4 - 5 from *Ethics*

Eagleton, "Levinas, Derrida, and Badiou" from *Trouble with Strangers*

**Tuesday, October 27**

Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

Apio, *Kāmau*

Calder and Turner, "Introduction" from *Journal of New Zealand Literature 20* (special issue on Settler Studies)

Turner, "Being Colonial/Colonial Being" from *Journal of New Zealand Literature 20* (special issue on Settler Studies)

**DUE: final version of 5-page analysis of a primary text**

**Tuesday, November 3**

Apio, *Kāmau*

Foucault, "The Ethic of Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom" from *The Final Foucault*

Badiou, "Appendix" from *Ethics*

Derrida and Dufourmantelle, from *Of Hospitality*

**Tuesday, November 10**

McCarthy, *The Visitor*

Kant, from *To Perpetual Peace*

Butler, "Infinite Detention," from *Precarious Life*

Appiah, "Imaginary Strangers" from *Cosmopolitanism*

**DUE: abstract for final paper**

**Tuesday, November 17**

Morrison, *A Mercy*

Morrison, "Romancing the Shadow" from *Playing in the Dark*

Phelan, "Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading" from *Ethics, Literature, and Theory*

**DUE: draft of final paper (optional)**

**Tuesday, November 24**

Morrison, *A Mercy*

Butler, "Precarious Life" from *Precarious Life*

Derrida, *Literature in Secret* (second part of *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*)

**Tuesday, December 1**

Morrison, *A Mercy*

**Tuesday, December 8**

Wrap-up

**Friday, December 11**

**DUE: final paper**