



Instructor: Lawrence Switzky

~ lawrence.switzky@utoronto.ca

Course Number: ENG140Y5Y (L0301)

Course Title: Literature for Our Time

Course description: What makes a book feel particularly significant to readers in the twenty-first century? Are there certain types of literature – writing that supports a particular political cause, science/speculative fiction – that tend to lose their relevance more quickly than others? When a work of literature has apparently lost its topicality, how can it recover its urgency for us? This course is primarily an investigation of why particular works of modernist, avant-garde, absurdist, feminist, and post-colonial literature do or do not “speak” to us, and why they were particularly important to their original audiences in articulating their most pressing concerns.

We’ll read a broad range of texts, including short and longer prose fiction, poetry, and plays, and discuss the terms and concepts that literary critics most frequently use to discuss them – for close analysis, pleasure, and the pleasure of close analysis. In the process, we’ll survey seminal topics in twentieth and twenty-first century thought, including: the problem of other minds, including the minds of animals; science fiction and new ways of describing the place of the fantastic within everyday life;

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literatures of protest and social change; the problem of defining obscenity; the peculiar operations of memory; and the real and apparent connections between individual experience and large-scale catastrophes.

Tentative texts for the first term: Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” and *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Bernard Shaw, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*; H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*; Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, “Middlebrow”; T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*; short stories by James Joyce; selected poems by W. B. Yeats, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens; Eugene O’Neill, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*

Tentative texts for the second term: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*; James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*; poems by W. H. Auden; Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (selections); Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*; Art Spiegelman, *Maus*; Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*; Ian McEwan, *Saturday*; Tony Kushner, “Homebody”; Junot Diaz, *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

First three texts: T. S. Eliot, “What is a Classic?”; J. M. Coetzee, “What is a Classic?”; Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying”

Method of Instruction: Lectures, discussions

Method of Evaluation: Four writing assignments (a combination of in-class writing assignments and essays) (40%), two tests (20%), final exam (30%), participation (10%)