ENGL 301/01
Intermediate Fiction Writing
Spring 2010
T/TH 12:30 - 1:45 p.m.
Palmer 203

Texts
- The Stories of John Cheever, Vintage
- Stories by Anton Chekhov, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Bantam
- To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf, Harcourt
- Pnin by Vladimir Nabokov, Vintage
- How Fiction Works by James Wood, Picador

Overview
A premise: point of view is the fundamental riddle of prose narrative. All other aspects of craft must submit to its dominance. Furthermore, one could argue that the deployment of point of view in fiction changed in uncharted ways over the last 150 years, moving from a reliable omniscience down into a more elastic third-person narration and unreliable first-person narration. In this workshop, you will work on your own fiction under the glare of our ongoing discussion of these point of view issues. We will read four books of fiction, both collections of stories and outright novels that each play with point of view in interesting ways. We will see how this POV play affects the telling of these stories and how you might use these techniques in your own work. We will also read some criticism by James Wood, who directly addresses three of these authors, to see how his arguments can inflect our own. This course is designed to be the middle station between your Introduction to Fiction Writing and your eventual, triumphant portfolio in Advanced Fiction, and the discussion and your fiction should reflect this increasing sophistication.

More broadly, just as in 201, in this workshop we will read, discuss, write, and revise literary short fiction. Literary fiction discloses truths about human experience in a moving and artful way. It strives for seamless mimesis while simultaneously making resourceful and aesthetically sound use of all the various aspects storytelling, including language, point of view, plot, character, setting, metaphor, symbolism and tone. In short, you will endeavor to write literature. For the purposes of the class, you cannot write genre fiction—that is, fantasy, science fiction, mystery, children’s fiction, young adult fiction, and so on. (At the same time, potentially our discussions will also reveal how this prescription gets a little complicated at this point in literary history.)

Writing Load
Everyone will write four (4) complete short stories over the course of this semester. At the end of the semester, you will hand revised versions of two (2) of these stories. Each story submitted for discussion should be “complete,” with a worked-out ending—even a bad one. (Fixing bad endings is one of the things workshop is for.) Each story submitted must exceed 6 pages, double-spaced, in length at time of submission. You are free to write about whatever you wish and employ whatever points of view or narrative techniques you wish, so long as a) each story is complete with a beginning, middle, and end (though not necessarily in that order) with some sort of epiphany/climax (or at least some aesthetically
justifiable absence thereof); b) you maintain a consistent point of view within each story; and c) each story is grammatically and stylistically correct.

You will gather together the original stories, my comments on these stories, and the revised versions of the two stories into a final portfolio, which you will submit to me at the end of the semester for final evaluation. This portfolio should consist of polished, well-crafted fiction. In assessing the merit of the completed portfolio, I will pay special attention to the revisions you have made to stories that originally appeared in workshop. The portfolio should run anywhere between 12-25 pages but can certainly be longer.

You will also write two (2) exercises, which I will grade. The average grade of these two exercises will constitute your “exercise average.” Typical length: two double-spaced pages.

**Story Submissions**
During workshop weeks, we will workshop roughly six stories per class period. You will submit your stories to me via email attachment, and I will then compile all the stories into packets corresponding to the days when they will be workshopped and email them back to the class. Each of you is then responsible for printing out that day’s packet. Moreover, you will write at least a half-page of typed, single-spaced comments for each story up for discussion. Please bring two copies of these typed-out comments, one for me and one for the author up for workshop. Your name should be on these comments.

**Workshops**
This class is not really a lecture. No doubt I will do a lot of talking and you will do a lot of listening but the primary goal is to force you to write and to force the rest of the class to discuss that writing in sympathetic and constructive ways. Your task as a student is split between writing short narratives (as well as the exercises) and discussing the work of your peers, which means your in-class discussion/comments and your written critiques are as important as your own writing. It will not only help your fellow students—giving them valuable feedback, giving them an actual audience, turning a private creation into a public act—it will sharpen your own critical skills. You will be able to view your own writing differently after critiquing your peers’ work.

What to say? You should look at your classmates’ writing with an eye toward how it works and how well it works, as a piece of narrative.

**Attendance**
You are allowed to miss two classes for any reason. For every missed class after two, your final grade for the course will be reduced by one third. I make no distinction between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. **If you miss more than 4 classes total, you will fail the course.** In addition, consistent tardiness will be counted as an absence.

**Quizzes**
We’ll only have quizzes if class discussion lags. If these occur, they’ll be folded in with your participation grade.

**Grade Breakdown**
2 exercises—25%
Final portfolio (four original stories accompanied by two revised versions)—60%
Participation (written comments, class discussion)—15%

Your individual pieces of writing won’t receive a letter grade but written and verbal feedback instead. How can you make a good grade? Hand in complete stories on time; contribute constructive, energetic
feedback on your peers’ stories throughout the entire semester; contribute something to class discussion at each class meeting; engage in a concentrated revision for every story in your portfolio, not simply fixing the spelling and changing a character’s name; and meet the other particular requirements for the various exercises along the way.

A note about grammar/style: I’m all for aesthetically justifiable rule-bending of standard written English within your short stories. Such as the emphatic use of the incomplete sentence. However, what I won’t permit is the disregard of grammar/style conventions that’s merely the consequence of a) laziness or b) ignorance of proper usage. For example, incorrect comma and semi-colon usage or failure to properly punctuate dialogue will severely affect your grade. So be deliberate and exceedingly precise in your writing.

*The four original stories and the two revisions constitute major assignments for this course; as such, if you do not hand in one of these major assignments, you will fail the entire class.*

**Late Papers**
Each assignment is due on the day stipulated on the syllabus. Any late assignment will be reduced 1/3 of a letter grade for each day that it is delayed (A- to B+, etc.). Any assignment turned in 5 class sessions after the original due date will receive a grade of F and can result in failure of the course itself. Also, if you don’t hand in a story in time for it to be properly workshoped, you will fail the class.

**Plagiarism**
As per the Honor Code, all work you hand in during the semester must be entirely your own and produced exclusively for this class.

**Disability Accommodation**
If you need any accommodations related to a disability, please schedule an appointment with Melissa Butler McCowen, Coordinator of Disability Services, 843-3994, mbutler@rhodes.edu.

*This syllabus and the following daily schedule are subject to change with adequate notice.*
**Tentative Daily Schedule**

1/14  Introduction to class

1/19  Chekhov: “Introduction,” “Vanka,”
      “Sleepy,” “Gusev,” “Ward No. 6”

1/21  “Rothschild’s Fiddle,” “The Student,”
      “Anna on the Neck”; Wood on Chekhov
      (handout); **story #1 due**

1/26  “The Man in a Case,” “Gooseberries,” “The
      Darling”; “About Love” (handout)

1/28  “The Lady with the Little Dog,” “In the
      Ravine,” Nabokov on Chekhov (handout);
      **story #1 due**

2/2   workshop story #1

2/4   workshop story #1

2/9   workshop story #1

2/11  workshop story #1


2/18  Wood, *How Fiction Works*, 139 – end; **ex 2
due**

2/23  Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, vii – 111

2/25  Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 112 – end

3/2   Woolf continued; Wood on Woolf
      (handout); **story #2 due**

3/4   workshop story #2

3/9   workshop story #2

3/11  workshop story #2

3/16  Spring Break

3/18  Spring Break

3/23  Nabokov, *Pnin*, chapters 1 – 4

3/25  Nabokov, *Pnin*, chapters 5 – 7; **story #3 due**

3/30  workshop story #3

4/1   Easter Holiday

4/6   workshop story #3

4/8   workshop story #3

4/13  Cheever: “Preface,” vii; “Goodbye, My
      Brother,” 3; “The Enormous Radio,” 33;
      “Reunion,” 518

4/15  “O Youth and Beauty!” 210; “The
      Housebreaker of Shady Hill,” 253; “The
      Country Husband,” 325

4/20  “The Swimmer,” 603; “Just One More
      Time,” 248; “Another Story,” 624; **story #4
due**

4/22  workshop story #4

4/27  workshop story #4

4/29  workshop story #4; last day wrap up

5/3   **Portfolio due by 5 p.m. in box outside my
      office door, 302 Palmer**