

English 285: Text and Context
The Incident Room: Investigations into Literature,
Tina Barr (tinabarr@rhodes.edu, office is 308B Palmer Hall, 843 3979)
Office Hours Wednesdays 2 to 4 and by appt.

Like detective work, literary study involves methods of analysis; we learn critical writing and critical thinking in the process of asking questions and positing conclusions with regard to the challenges of technique as well as content. In this course we will consider twentieth century and contemporary novels, short stories and poems that present us with psychological mysteries. The three genres will include work by fiction writers such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, William Trevor, D.H. Lawrence, Alice Munro, and Cormac McCarthy, poets Robert Lowell, Stanley Kunitz, James Dickey, Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden and Philip Levine. We will use a film---Nicholas Roeg's "Don't Look Now," as an introduction to methods of analysis such as the use of symbols. Each discussion will invite students to consider the influence of literary ideas and backgrounds, as well as understanding literary terms.

English 285 is designed to equip majors with the tools required for middle- and upper-division courses in English. It will focus on the necessary skills for understanding the verbal texture of literature, the development of argument and critical response, and the ability to frame discussion of texts in relation to a series of significant contexts. Such contexts might include a text's historical and cultural circumstances, or its situation in the wider history or discipline of literary studies. The course will introduce a critical vocabulary through the demonstrated use of these terms in analysis. As a gateway course, this class will be writing intensive, allowing students to practice their analytical writing skills as well as thinking critically about the literature under discussion.

Class Schedule: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00 – 12:15, Buckman 204

Course Requirements & Grading: Students will fulfill all reading and writing assignments by the due dates. There will be **three required essays---two of 7 – 10 pages, (60% of grade). Each student will be assigned a third essay of 3 to 5 pages (20%). Class participation and preparation for discussion will count towards (20%) the final grade. If anyone knows he or she has difficulty or questions with punctuation or grammar, he or she should attend a series of tutorials at the Writing Center, and should set these up himself or herself. Essays that include grammatical or punctuation errors will receive a grade no higher than a C range.**

Texts: *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, *The Story of Lucy Gault*, by William Trevor, (2 novels) and the film "Don't Look Now," by Nicholas Roeg. We will also read "A Rose for Emily," by William Faulkner," as well as other stories from the *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. We will read in the **Course pack** the following stories: "Runaway," by Alice Munro, "Tickets Please," by D.H. Lawrence, and "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," by Ernest Hemingway. We will examine the following poems, (**coursepack**) "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage," "Skunk Hour," by Robert Lowell, "The Testing Tree," by Stanley Kunitz, "Traveling Through the Dark," by William

Stafford, "Falling," and "The Sheep Child," by James Dickey, "The Man-Moth," by Elizabeth Bishop, "To A Child Trapped in a Barber Shop," and "They Feed They Lion," by Philip Levine, "Bogland," by Seamus Heaney, "Yet Do I Marvel," by Countee Cullen, "A Winter Sunday" by Robert Hayden. We will use a Penguin dictionary of literary terms, as well. **You will be given supplementary reading on literary terms, as well as handouts, background reports and questions to prepare for discussion. Some of this contextualization will be included in a list of possible topics for your three essays, although you are free to design your own topics, as you will see when you read the syllabus.**

Course Structure: We will focus on questions of fixed character, or its fragmentation, in "The Story of Lucy Gault," "A Rose for Emily," and "The Testing Tree." We will read *The Road* with other works that focus on existential and ontological questions, such as "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," as well as poems like "A Winter Sunday." We will consider the absence of closure or solution, in a poem like "To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage," by Robert Lowell, even absence of plot, as a post-modern element. By the end of term, students should have a general sense of some of the major elements of technique in modernism and post-modernism.

Essays: Each student will be required to undertake a 3 to 5 page brief essay on a choice of topics, which will reflect a clearly articulated response to limited aspects of the work read. Since the course has a focus on close reading with attention to specific techniques, the student should choose only ONE element (depending on the work itself) of technique within the poem, short story or novel to discuss, for example, the use of imagery or a particular scene's imagery, the use of dialogue from a particular section with a focus on its historical or cultural reflection, the elucidation of an opening paragraph. You could write on rhythm or word choice in a poem, or descriptive similes associated with a particular character in a story. You have a whole range of possible ways to think about an isolated element in a work. The essay should help the student **to focus and thus be able to lead a discussion** on the work of literature. **The first set of topics will be handed out early in the term, and the first group of essays will be due on 2/10.** It might be advisable to choose from one of the suggested topics, depending on student's background in literary analysis. Subsequently, the students will write a total of 3 essays.

Week 1: (1/14) Introduction to course, texts, paired interviews, distribution of Wright's poem, "The Journey," introducing various technical terms & elements, suggested ideas when reading *The Story of Lucy Gault* this weekend. (Historical background and specific questions to examine)

Assignment for next week: Read, the poem "The Journey," the story, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," and read the first half of the novel, *The Story of Lucy Gault*, by William Trevor, with special attention to background handouts.

Week 2: (1/20 & 1/22) discussion of techniques used in the Wright poem, "The Journey," and the Hemingway story (voice, metaphor, narrative structure, ambiguity,

imagery, point of view). Use of Penguin dictionary to research any unfamiliar terms. Bring your Penguin text to class! Introduce discussion of novel.

Assignment for next week: Finish the Trevor novel.

Week 3: (1/27 & 1/29) discussion of novel. We will begin discussion of **Chapter 1 with historical context as central to its setting**, then discuss the uses of **point of view, irony and diction** in subsequent chapters. **Handouts distributed on first essay.**

Assignment for next week: Read poems “Skunk Hour,” by Robert Lowell & “Falling” by James Dickey. **Consider a topic for your first essay** on some aspect of *The Story of Lucy Gault*, or one of the other poems by Lowell or Dickey included in the coursepack.

Week 4: (2/3 & 2/5) discussion of novel, and 2 poems.

Assignment for next week: Read poems “The Man-Moth,” by Elizabeth Bishop, “They Feed They Lion,” by Philip Levine & “Yet Do I Marvel” by Countee Cullen. Work on **brief essay, due on 2/10, while keeping in mind ideas for your first 7 to 10 page essay** --- on ambiguity, imagery, point of view, voice, metaphor or some other *specific technique* in the Trevor novel OR one of the poems by an author whose work we have read, but did not discuss, including Bishop, Levine or Cullen. Please consult me for specifics if you do not choose one of the topics I have designed for you. You could also examine, in a very *focused* way, an historical or cultural context, an exemplification that we have not explored, in a character, a scene, an interchange of dialogue in the novel, etc. Be ready to ask questions about the poems. **Please turn in your proposal for the first 7 to 10 page essay by 2/12.** Read Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

Week 5: (2/10 & 2/12) Discussion of poems, **brief essays due on 2/10. Proposals on first 7 to 10 page essay due on 2/12.**

Assignment for next week: Finish Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

Week 6: (2/17 & 2/19) **Return of proposals for first 7 to 10 page essay.** Discussion of *The Road*.

Assignment for next week: **Write your first 7 to 10 page essay.** If you have not finished reading the McCarthy novel, please do so!

Week 7: (2/24 & 2/26) **Turn in essay on 2/26.** Discussion of novel. Lecture & discussion on techniques as well as modernist & postmodernist structures & themes, in contrasting work we have read. Handouts on ideas for **brief essay, for those who did not turn one 3 to 5 page essay in on 2/10.**

Assignment for next week: Read “Tickets Please.” Write **3 to 5 page essay, due on 3/3.**

Week 8: (3/3 & 3/5) Discussion of Lawrence story. Discussion of techniques in Roeg's film, "Don't Look Now" with Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie.

Assignment for next week: Consider ideas for 2nd 7 to 10 page essay.

Week 9: (3/10 & 3/12*) Begin viewing of film.

Assignment over Spring Break: None.

Week 10: (3/24 & 3/26) Finish viewing film and discussion of film.

*Assignment for next week: Read the following: Hayden's poem "A Winter Sunday," Stanley Kunitz's "The Testing Tree," "Traveling Through the Dark," by William Stafford, and "To a Child Trapped in a Barber Shop" by Phil Levine. Begin to devise a topic for your 2nd essay. Devise a topic for your second essay on some aspect of one of the works we have read that we did NOT cover in class, or on a work by the same poet or fiction writer, perhaps. You may also write on some aspect of the Faulkner story, "A Rose for Emily." I will be available in conferences next week for you to discuss **any problems** with topics. Again, narrow the focus of your approach by beginning with a particular character, in a specific scene, for example, or discuss one to three of the following technique(s) of YOUR choice: voice, point of view, metaphor, irony, ambiguity, diction, rhythm, some aspect of language or linguistic usage. In a sense, I am asking you to take a magnifying glass to style. I am also open to other topics of your choice on other materials, that might have to do with the context in which we read,---- for example, some aspect of southern social, cultural, or historical context in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" which you may want to read this week. Submit a proposal for the 2nd 7 to 10 page essay topic in paragraph form to Dr. Barr by 4/2.*

Week 11: (3/31 & 4/2)

Discussion of 4 poems. **Submit your proposals.** *If I foresee difficulties I will email you and ask to meet with you in conference!!!! If you do not hear from me immediately, proceed with the essay.*

Assignment for next week: Read "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner.

Week 12: No classes will meet. Conferences to discuss topics.

Assignment for 4/16---Write the second essay— (average of 7 to 10 pages) Read "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner.

Week 13: (4/14 & 4/16) Turn in your second essay on 4/16 --- Professor Barr will discuss the following poems, so bring your coursepacks: "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage," and "The Sheep Child"--- to classes this week. Discussion of "A Rose for Emily."

Assignment for next week: Read three Heaney poems, including “Bogland,” and “Punishment” and “Requiem for the Croppies,” with the idea of historical context in mind. We will have come full circle in terms of context during the course of the term. Read “Runaway,” the short story by Alice Munro. All students should read the assigned works very, very carefully.

Week 14: (4/21 & 4/23) Discussion of Heaney poems on Tuesday & discussion of Munro story.

Assignment for next week: Reread materials.

Week 15: (4/28 & 4/30) Discussion of Munro story. **Essays returned.** Final class and party.