

Missouri Western State University
Division of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Department of English, Foreign Languages and Journalism



ENG 210-04: Approaches to Literature: Murder and More
TR 12:30-1:50 - Murphy 119
Spring 2006

Instructor: Dr. Donaher
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Office Hours: TR 11:00-12:00, 2:00-3:30 pm and by appointment
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Course Philosophy and Objectives

Mordre wol out, that see we day by day.

-- Geoffrey Chaucer

Merely state your evidence, and the reader will mislead himself.

-- John Dickson Carr

What the detective story is about is not murder but the restoration of order.

-- P.D. James

There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.

-- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

In this course, we will follow the rise of mystery and crime fiction from its roots in gothic literature and the memoirs of master criminals to its most modern ancestors, the hardboiled and the screwball, with stops along the way for the cozy, the historical, the thriller, the romantic suspense, and more. We will develop working definitions of the mystery and crime fiction in general, as well as of the various subgenres we encounter. We will examine such topics as the influence of the 19th Century's concern for scientific reasoning on the early classical detective story, the importance of deterministic philosophy on the hardboiled stories of the mid-20th Century, and the ethical and social concerns of the genre in general.

As part of MWSU's General Studies program, this course is also designed to fulfill the Category IV General Studies Requirement. Upon completion of English 210, a student should be able to:

- Recognize the major characteristics of literary genres
- Discuss literature, orally and in writing, with assurance
- Appreciate literary works which are encountered
- Understand the different ways in which literary theme may be treated in literature.

To reach these goals, the student is expected to:

- Read prose fiction and drama
- Investigate various methods of approaching and understanding literature
- Write papers, including themes and essay examinations
- Read a variety of works in which a chosen theme is dominant.

This course also meets the state level Institutional Competencies, as follows:

Skills Area - Valuing:

- Compare and contrast historical and cultural ethical perspectives and belief systems.
- Utilize cultural, behavioral, or historical knowledge to clarify and articulate a personal value system.
- Recognize the ramifications of ones' value decisions on self and others.
- Recognize conflicts within and between value systems.

- Recognize and analyze the effect of context on ethical decisions.

Knowledge Area - Humanities and Fine Arts:

- Identify works in humanities and fine arts.
- Explain historical, cultural, and social contexts in humanities and fine arts.
- Identify aesthetic standards used to make critical judgments in humanities.
- Understand differences and relationships between formal and popular culture.
- Apply aesthetic standards to works in humanities and fine arts

For more information on the general studies requirements and institutional competencies for this course, see the English Department website at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/EFLJ/>.

Required Materials

Texts:

- Andrews, Donna. *Murder with Peacocks*. NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Christie, Agatha. *The Mousetrap and Other Plays*. NY: Signet, 2000.
- Hammett, Dashiell. *The Maltese Falcon*. NY: Vintage Books/Random House, 1992.
- Hillerman, Tony and Rosemary Herbert. *The Oxford Book of American Detective Stories*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Perry, Anne. *The Cater Street Hangman*. NY: Random 1990.
- Rinehart, Mary Roberts. *The Circular Staircase*. NY: Dover, 1997.

Other:

- Good humor, exuberance, a "happy to be here" attitude
- Computer disks
- Photocopies of your work and various sources

Assignments

Daily and Group Work

Your first responsibility is to read somewhat carefully and come to class to share your wisdom. There is probably not a lot of motivation to do so, except of course the embarrassment of not having read as necessary in order to participate fully in class--oh, and you won't do well on the occasional surprise quiz. Down the road, this failure to read will haunt all of your efforts to succeed at other assignments, like the literary interpretation, the final exam--geez, just about everything we do.

Your second responsibility is to participate fully in the assigned tasks, whether individual or group ones. The mechanics of a successful class come down to each of us accepting responsibility for our place within the classroom microcosm of the universe. Among your individual responsibilities will be to write a mystery short story and a formal literary interpretation of a work or related group of works. Group work will focus on creating working definitions of particular subgenres of the mystery.

Short Story

You will craft a flash mystery or crime story that uses some of the literary and genre techniques examined in class. Your story might incorporate a "twist" ending which does not utilize as many of the elements of the classic mystery, but instead concentrates on a surprising ending. Thus, your tale might not have a traditional detective or "who-done-it" format. Your story could also take the form of a character or an atmosphere sketch.

Formal Literary Interpretation

You will write a formal literary interpretation of 1600-2000 words in which you analyze a particular work(s) read for class.

Midterm and Final Exam

Drawing upon the readings, films, and discussion we have done this semester, I will craft a midterm and a final exam that includes quotation identification and explication, questions about the subgenres, and an essay portion. Broad, unabashed hints about what to expect will be sprinkled liberally towards the end of the semester. The essay portion of the exam will focus on the importance of ethical or social concerns within the various genres of mystery and crime fiction.

Have Fun

And I mean it.

Grading

The quality of your work, the percentage of the work that you complete, and your effort will determine your final grade.

Your Final Grade Distribution is as follows:

- Daily and Group Work = 10%
- Short Story = 20%
- Literary Interpretation = 20%
- Midterm Exam = 20%
- Final Exam = 30%

Other Requirements

Attendance and Promptness

Attendance is mandatory. School functions, illness, and personal crisis do not absolve you from your classroom obligations, so while due consideration is given to the student struck by lightning on the way to class, an absence cannot be designated as "excused" or "unexcused"--it simply "is." I consider two absences to be reasonable, but keep in mind that any absence can affect your final grade, as you are not here to participate or turn in your work. Chronic lateness will count toward this total.

Regular attendance is an essential part of the student's educational experience and a requirement for an adequate evaluation of student academic progress. You are responsible for material covered or assignments given which you missed because of absence. All out-of-class assignments are due at the beginning of the class period, whether you are here or not. No late assignments are accepted unless you have a well-documented emergency.

You should note, however, that mere attendance does not mean you will pass the course. You must perform adequately on the tasks required and show initiative in completing the course requirements.

If I should be unable to meet class, you will most likely have a sub since each class period is so important. If a sub is not available, you will be notified in person by a secretary, a fellow instructor, or by the Lab Manager--NOT by a note on the classroom door. Be sure to note any assignments due upon my return.

Participation And Preparation

You will be expected to make significant contributions to the class in the form of participation and preparation. Participation includes the oral contributions you make and your efforts to be a part of our discourse community. Preparation includes doing the daily readings and assignments, as well as engaging exuberantly in our activities. Keep in mind that live classroom discussion

- gives you practice arguing with others respectfully and professionally
- gives you opportunities to formulate applications of principles
- gives you prompt feedback on difficult or confusing issues and material
- increases your retention of material through explaining, summarizing, and questioning.

Sharing Your Work

Students are expected to share their writings and other work with members of the course, and all work that a student produces may be shared by the instructor with the class for purposes of example and training. Such work will be as anonymous as possible. Finally, the instructor may share your work anonymously with future classes or in her own writing and research.

Classroom Courtesy

You are expected to be courteous and respectful in all of their exchanges with the instructor and other students. We, as students of language, should be particularly careful to note how tone and language contribute to the overall impression of our words. The University expects all students to conduct themselves so as to maintain an effective environment for learning, to act responsibly in accordance with good taste, and to respect fully the rights of others.

Student Disability

Any student in this course who has a disability that prevents the fullest expression of abilities should contact me **during the first week** so that we can discuss class requirements.

Late Work

All assignments are due at the beginning of the hour on the due date, unless otherwise specified. Learning is a cumulative process and each assignment in this course is designed to build on the last assignment; **therefore, NONE of the daily work or group work will be accepted late without a well-documented emergency. The short story and literary interpretation have a grace period of NO MORE THAN 24 hours from the due date and time for technical difficulties. After the 24 hour grace period, the short story and interpretation will be penalized by 10% of its final grade for EACH additional 24 hours late.** No work will be accepted after the last class day before the final exam.

Computer Usage

You will be called upon to read materials online and to use computers in and outside of class time. Further, assignments for this course must be word processed.

Plagiarism

. . . *it is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation.* -- Herman Melville

Plagiarism is literally the stealing of others' words and ideas and using them as your own. Make every effort to give credit where credit is due, and if you are not sure of "how"--ask. You are responsible for proving that all work turned in for grading is your own original work. Papers with evidence of plagiarism will receive a zero and will result in failure of the course. Other forms of academic dishonesty, like cheating, will also result in failure of the course. Don't think that you won't be caught; writing style is distinctive and verifiable.

Final Thoughts

Despite Einstein's assurances that even the motions of dust motes have pattern, life to us mere mortals is unpredictable. I recognize that at times your outside life may interfere with your classroom life. It is up to you to set your priorities and to realize that "doing it all" is not always possible or even desirable. If you are feeling overly stressed about all you have to accomplish, you need to come see me.

Course Schedule

January

- 17 (T)
Introduction to the Course
Defining the Mystery
Film: Edgar Allan Poe
- 19 (Th)
Readings: Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" AD pp 10-39 and "The Purloined Letter" (handout)
Assign Short Story Writing Assignment
- 24 (T)
Film: Sherlock Holmes - *Scandal in Bohemia*
- 26 (Th)
Reading: Doyle, "Silver Blaze" (handout)
- 31 (T)
Film: *Agatha Christie: A Life in Pictures*

February

- 2 (Th)
Reading: Christie, *Mousetrap* pp 297-380
- 7 (T)
Reading: Christie, *Ten Little Indians* pp 5-86
Film: *And Then There Were None*
- 9 (Th)
Film: *And Then There Were None*, continued
- 14 (T)

Christie, *Appointment with Death* pp 87-182

Film: *Death on the Nile*

16 (Th)

Film: *Death on the Nile*, continued

21 (T)

Reading: Queen, "The Adventure of Abraham Lincoln's Clue" AD pp 587-601 and Stout, "Christmas Party" AD pp 526-569

23 (Th)

Film: *Dashiell Hammett*

28 (T)

Film: *The Maltese Falcon*

March

2 (Th)

Short Stories Due

Film: *The Maltese Falcon*, continued

Reading: Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

7 (T)

Reading: Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, continued

Review for Midterm

9 (Th)

Midterm Exam

March 14-16: Spring Break

21 (T)

Readings: Gardner, "Leg Man" AD pp 261-294 and Bellem, "Homocide Highball" AD pp 375-413

Assign Literary Interpretation

23 (Th)

Readings: Barnes, "Lucky Penny" pp 621-638 and Grafton, "The Parker Shotgun" AD 639-654

28 (T)

Reading: Perry, *The Cater Street Hangman*

30 (Th)

Reading: Perry, *The Cater Street Hangman*, continued

April

4 (T)

Reading: Andrews, *Murder with Peacocks*

6 (Th)

Reading: Andrews, *Murder with Peacocks*, continued

Guest - Author Donna Andrews

11 (T)

Hitchcock and the Suspense Film

Film: *Vertigo*

13 (Th)

Film: *Vertigo*, continued

18 (T)

Reading: Woolrich, "Rear Window" AD pp 326-355 and Rinehart, "The Lipstick" AD pp 356-375

20 (Th)

Readings: Green, "Missing: Page Thirteen" AD pp 93-123 and Eberhart, "Spider" AD pp 239-260

25 (T)

Reading: Rinehart, *The Circular Staircase*

27 (Th)

Literary Interpretations Due

Film: *Nero Wolfe Mystery* - TBA

Review for Final Exam

May

4 (Th)

Final Exam - 11:30 am - 1:20 pm