Course Description

“That’s uncanny!” we say when confronted with something bizarre, amazing, unexpected, disquieting, shocking or disturbing, but what do we really mean by the “uncanny”? It seems to name a feeling at once extremely specific and devoid of definitive content, which both fascinates and repels. Freud attempted to find the psychological underpinnings of this elusive aesthetic effect, and argued that their structure could be given shape in narrative. In this course, we will explore the way in which modernist literature can evoke the uncanny. We will begin with Freud, then move on to later literary critics who have reworked the Freudian uncanny in the attempt to explore the social and political contexts of what Freud considered as primarily an intra-psychic phenomenon; specifically, we will concentrate on how successive theories of the uncanny have attempted to discover why the body, as a site of identity, confrontation, vulnerability, or power, is such a persistent image in uncanny literature. The goal of the course is for students to critically examine literary texts as various responses to a set of problems that are perhaps universally present but that manifest themselves differently according to the situation of the author, as well as to critically evaluate the success of scholars in interpreting the phenomenon of the uncanny.

Course Texts

The following texts can be found in the bookstore:


All other reading materials for this course will be made available in electronic format on the class Coursework site. Daily reading assignments and supplementary materials can be found under “Course Materials.” STUDENTS MUST HAVE TEXTS IN CLASS ON THE DAY THEY ARE TO BE DISCUSSED (either in hard copy, or on a laptop).
Course Requirements

Midterm Paper (6-8pp): Students will choose one literary text and one theoretical text from among the course readings for a paper that explores the conceptual concerns of our class through close-reading of literature. For this paper, no outside sources will be used (though students may, on consultation with instructor, read and utilize the full texts of works from which we have read excerpts). This paper should interrogate how your chosen theoretical text deepens the understanding of your chosen literary text, or vice versa.

Final Paper: Students will choose at least one literary text and at least one theoretical text from among course readings. For this project, students may include another literary text, which may or may not be included in the readings for the course. In addition, students will research 3-5 scholarly sources extrinsic to the course materials; these may be texts that explore a theoretical problem, give historical background, or may be textual criticism of a primary source. There are 2 options for the format of this paper:
- 12-15pp on a different topic than the student’s midterm paper
- 18-25pp that expand and deepen the analysis of the midterm

Kick-off: Each student will choose one literary text from among the course readings for which s/he will be responsible for initiating class discussion. To this end, the student will open the discussion of a text with a short (approx. 10 min) presentation that draws out themes or problems in the text, proposes possible readings, but leaves open alternatives and gestures towards points of tension. A good kick-off will incorporate specific examples to be examined in class, but also link these to the larger themes of the text.

Grading

Final grades for the course will be calculated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midterm Paper</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>35%</td>
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Note that class participation includes promptness, completion of in-class writing assignments, preparation for class (incl. having materials in class, having completed readings and prepared questions/comments), preparation and presentation of student’s “kick-off”, and engagement in class discussion.
Course Schedule

The Uncanny Explored

Week 1

M 09/21 Intro to course; overview – basic principles of Freudian psychoanalysis

The psychoanalytic approach to literature; the uncanny as genre

M 09/28 Hoffmann, “The Sandman” (“Der Sandmann”) pp. 85-118
Uncanny tropes in Hoffmann; the strengths and weaknesses of Freud’s interpretation; what does the psychoanalytic approach leave out?; overview of the linguistic turn in psychoanalysis

W 09/30 Todorov, from The Fantastic
Overview of structuralism; Todorov’s revision of Freud; the uncanny in relation to the problem of self and other

Violence and Chaos

Week 3

M 10/05 Maupassant, “The Horla” (“Le Horla”) pp. 169-195
Introduction to the problem of the body, and how it is addressed but not exhausted in Freud and Todorov; the body as site of confrontation with otherness, and violence as a mode of this confrontation

W 10/07 Hemingway, “A Natural History of the Dead” pp. 335-341
begin reading Sula

M 10/12 Morrison, Sula
Johnson, “Aesthetic and Rapport in Toni Morrison’s Sula” pp. 74-87
Johnson’s reinterpretation of Freud, the social uncanny, the gaze of the other, the extrinsic self and racial identity; the body as racial signifier; Sula: focus on Shadrack, Chicken Little, and Hannah

Sexuality and Power

Week 4

W 10/14 Morrison, Sula
Sula: focus on Eva, Plum; the convergence of sexuality and gendered violence

M 10/19 Hawthorne, “The Birthmark” pp. 118-131
Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” pp. 3-23
Johnson, “Is Female to Male as Ground is to Figure?” pp. 17-36
Feminist psychoanalysis; the gendered body and gender identity

W 10/21 Film
**The Body, the Text, and the Alienated Self**

**M 10/26**  
**MIDTERM DUE** – 12:35pm, in class  
Derrida, from “Signature, Event, Context” pp. 1-10, 19-21  
Blanchot, from *Thomas the Obscure (Thomas l’obscur)* pp.25-29  
Overview of deconstruction; expanding the question of the extrinsic self—language and the subject

**W 10/28**  
Derrida, from “Otobiographies”  
Derrida’s reinterpretation of Freud; the text as self, body; the text as a site of confrontation/communication; anxiety surrounding the lack of cohesion/integrity of the self, and the dependence on the other—the relation of this to the confrontation with the racial and/or gendered other

**M xx/02**  
Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*  
Focus on Lessons 6, 8

**The Deformed/Transformed Body I: Mutilation and Decomposition**

**W 11/04**  
Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*  
Focus on Postscript; the uncanniness of deformity; the convergence of anxieties over the cohesion of the self and the vulnerability of the body

**M 11/09**  
O’Connor, “Good Country People” pp. 271-291  
O’Connor, “Parker’s Back” pp. 510-530  
The gendered body as deformed/mutilated; the transvaluation of mutilation

**W 11/11**  
Todorov, from *The Fantastic* pp. 168-175  
Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” (“In der Strafkolonie”) pp. 191-229

**M 11/16**  
Film: *Eyes Without a Face* (“Les yeux sans visage”)  
begin reading *Aminadab*

**W 11/18**  
Blanchot, *Aminadab*

****THANKSGIVING BREAK****

**The Deformed/Transformed Body II: Animality**

**M 11/30**  
Blanchot, *Aminadab*  
Kafka, “The Burrow” (“Der Bau”) pp. 162-189  
Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People” (“Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Folk der Mäuse”) pp. 94-108  
The animal as embodied being (*res extensa* vs. *res cogitans*); the animal as other; the status of the human body

**W 12/02**  
Kafka, “A Report for an Academy” (“Ein Bericht für eine Akademie”) pp. 281-293  
Kafka, “A Hunger Artist” (“Ein Hungerkünstler”) pp. 503-516

****FINAL PAPER DUE WEDNESDAY, 12/09 AT 5PM****