

Introduction to English 251

What exactly is English 251 Fundamentals of Literary Interpretation? In this class you will be introduced to works of literature--specifically short stories, a short novel, poetry, and drama--by male and female, historic and contemporary, traditional and revisionist, European and multicultural authors, poets, and playwrights. You'll not only read this wide variety of works, but you'll also examine and share different literary approaches that can expand your conversations and insights about literature. These approaches will allow you to view and explain a text through multiple lenses such as a psychological lens, a multicultural lens, a gender lens, or an historical lens.

So what does that mean? It means you're going to read a little bit of everything, and it is our hope that you will become part of the discussion and learn the secret that educated people know about literature.

What can literature tell us about living in the twenty-first century, you ask? "Everything" is our answer. Perhaps the most important part of literature is how we use literature to help us define ourselves and what it means to be human. We want to know what makes people tick and why relationships do and don't work. As we read about people and their mistakes, we can often find sympathy, a course of action to take, or a course of action not to take. Hopefully, some of what we read in this class will help you discover significant aspects of yourself and your values. All of this will help you live in not just the twenty-first century, but in eternity.

We read literature for many reasons. We read to save time. Literature helps us decide what is true and what is not true. If we had to rethink every thought that has ever been thought, we would still be reinventing the wheel. Literature doesn't just transmit technological knowledge. It transmits from generation to generation who we are and what we think is important. It also helps us become human. It brings us closer to becoming perfect when we can read about the mistakes of others and not have to replicate those mistakes in order to learn valuable lessons. Literature can take us places we've never been and help us love people we might never meet. In order for us to live our lives well, we must have help from other people. One of the ways to get that help is to read literature.

English 251 Fundamentals of Literary Interpretation has three principal course objectives. These course objectives are designed to help you skillfully analyze and more deeply enjoy literature—fiction, poetry, and drama. As a result of this course you will

1. Develop the ability to analyze a literary text closely.
2. Develop the skill to read a literary text via a critical theory.
3. Arrive at and defend valid interpretations of literary texts.

You've already had significant experiences with literature in your life, and our hope is that this course will enhance your appreciation and expand your understanding.

Now something about us as your teachers. This course is a collaboration. First, these lessons are the conversations of three literature teachers, with a combined teaching experience of over seventy-five years at Ricks College and Brigham Young University-Idaho: Elaine Hawker, Kip Hartvigsen, and Rod Keller. In a very real and literal sense, we envision you as our student—we feel we're sitting with you discussing literary elements, critical theories, and literature. If you listen carefully, you'll hear our individual voices in these lessons. Added to this collaboration is your current online instructor who directly continues this conversation with you. And the final, perhaps most important, collaborator is you as you read the lessons, trust us with your hopes, and enter the conversation of literature seen through the eyes of individuals trying to make sense of their lives and become more human in an often difficult world. We can't do this course without you.

Knowledge is Sweet

It is now time to talk about the secret educated people know about literature. Patricia Polacco knows. Her book, *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, begins:

The grandpa held the jar of honey so that all the family could see, then dipped a ladle into it and drizzled honey on the cover of the small book.

The little girl had just turned five.

"Stand up, little one," he cooed. "I did this for your mother, your uncles, your older brother, and now you!"

Then he handed the book to her. "Taste!"

She dipped her finger into the honey and put it into her mouth.

"What is that taste?" the grandma asked.

The little girl answered, "Sweet!"

Then all of the family said in a single voice, "Yes, and so is knowledge, but knowledge is like the bee that made that sweet honey, you have to chase it through the pages of a book!"

The little girl knew that the promise to read was at last hers. Soon she was going to learn to read.

(Polacco, Patricia. *Thank You, Mr. Falker*. New York: Philomel, 1998. Print.)

The secret is that knowledge is sweet--and literature helps us gain that knowledge.

Cry, the Beloved Country

To start our journey in this class, we'll turn, not to a story, poem, or play, but to a film, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Let's start with this single shared experience.

Film, of course, is a fairly recent literary expression, and its artistry is not the subject of this course. However, a quality film can effectively demonstrate genres, literary principles, and critical approaches. For example, *Cry, the Beloved Country* is closely based on Alan Paton's 1948 novel by the same name representing the genre of fiction, and its screenplay is a contemporary version of the drama genre. Although the novel and film do not directly use poetry, yet its prose is poetic because it utilizes poetic devices. Here is a passage from the novel which is read as a voice-over in the film: notice its poetic feel as well as its lament:

Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply. Let him not laugh too gladly when the water runs through his fingers, nor stand too silent when the setting sun makes red the veld with fire. Let him not be too much moved when the birds of his land are singing, nor give too much of his heart to a mountain or a valley. For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much.
(Paton, 80)

My old, old paperback copy of *Cry, the Beloved Country* was given to me by Dorla Jenkins, a poet and poetry teacher at Ricks College. Years ago as she was clearing out her office after retiring, she slipped this book to me, saying she thought I should read it. Even then it was an old book that originally cost only \$1.65 and 10¢ written on the inside by someone selling the used book. I accepted the book, but didn't even open and read it until years later. As I opened the book, I found Dorla's insightful, beautiful, red-inked annotations commenting on passages meaningful to her. In the margins to the passage you just read above, Dorla has written, "poetically beautiful."

So this film version of the novel is pulling together all three genres of fiction, poetry, and drama. Now as you view the film, and in some ways, we hope this is a first viewing for you, pay particular attention to how you're feeling at different times. Notice how you get to know and understand the characters throughout the film, particularly the James Earl Jones character Stephen Kumalo and the Richard Harris character James Jarvis. You'll also begin to know their sons Absalom Kumalo and Arthur Jarvis. Notice the conflicts within the film: the conflicts within the characters individually and between different characters and the conflicts within society or with individual religious beliefs. Notice the time and location of the story: a small village in Ndotsheni and Johannesburg, South Africa in the late 1940s. Try to determine possible messages that come to you through this film experience.

You may also want to consider as you watch the film how others may view the film differently than you. For instance, consider how someone who is interested in psychology and human motivation would view the film, or someone looking at the film through the eyes of either gender, or through the eyes of different ethnicities and cultures, or through the eyes of an historian and anthropologists, or through the eyes of someone focusing on the film's literary

qualities. And don't forget to pay particular attention to what you're feeling, remembering, fearing, or hoping as you watch the film—what is your interaction with this film?

So with this shared experience of watching the film *Cry, the Beloved Country*, we are introducing fundamentals of literary interpretation. We're examining different literary genres: fiction, poetry, and drama. We're highlighting some literary elements: plot, conflict, character, setting, and theme. And we're suggesting different literary critical approaches: New Criticism, Feministic, Psychoanalytic, Multicultural, New Historicism, and Reader Response.

We'll discuss all of these in more detail throughout this course. And as we present the different literary critical theories, you'll be able to read the student Whit Laga's sample essays exemplifying each approach using the novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* as his base text. The film will better help you understand what Whit is accomplishing in his essays.

So, welcome to English 251 Fundamentals of Literary Interpretation. We're thrilled to have you with us—you make this class possible. Let's get started—READ!