

LIT/PHIL 3338 syllabus: Literary Theory and Aesthetic Philosophy

Fall 2025

Professor Erin E. Greer

She/her/hers

Erin.greer@utdallas.edu

Office hours: Mondays 11:30-1:00pm and by appointment

- ◇ in my office (JO 5.108) or via MS Teams, as you prefer
- ◇ If you need to meet outside my regular office hours, please email to schedule
- ◇ I suggest you email for an appointment within these hours, too, but you are also welcome to simply drop by.

Course Meetings:

Mondays and Wednesdays @ 10:00am - 11:15am

FN 2.302

Description:

This course examines major questions in aesthetic philosophy and literary theory, such as: What is beauty, and what's going on – psychologically, socially, politically – when we think we encounter it? What role does, or should, aesthetic experience (variously understood) play in a life well lived? What is the goal of criticism: to judge the quality of works, to interpret what their creators intended, to position art within its historical context, to expose latent ideologies, or something else? How do works of art and literature intersect with political conditions: capital circulation, labor, power relations premised on gender, race, class, etc.? ... With technologies and institutions of creative production and circulation (printing technologies; contexts of “consumption” such as museums, movie theaters, bathroom stalls with a cell phone in hand; the advent of photography, film, the internet, social media, artificial intelligence)? ...With ethical experience?

In addition to reading influential philosophical and theoretical works devoted to exploring such questions, we will read two literary works, Virginia Woolf's hybrid work of fiction, criticism, and aesthetic philosophy, *A Room of One's Own*, and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, a contemporary novel about university “culture wars,” largely centered on aesthetic questions (and their connections to class, gender, race, and much else). With these two literary works, we'll explore how literary / aesthetic style can itself undertake, mimic, complicate or provoke philosophical inquiries.

Primary texts:

- *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf
- *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith

The books are available at the campus bookstore, but feel free to obtain any paper edition you can find there or elsewhere. Additional texts will be made available on eLearning.

I discourage use of digital versions of all readings. One of the philosophical themes of this course is attention—how we cultivate it and direct it through varieties of sensible experience, especially aesthetic experience. To encourage you to practice focused, undistracted and deep attention while reading—and discourage temptations of your attention away from your classmates and our conversations during class—I ask that you **please print** the texts from eLearning, read them with a pen in hand, and bring the marked-up paper versions to class.

Printing on campus costs \$.06/page—visit <https://library.utdallas.edu/research-support/printing-scanning/> for information. If the expense of books or printing poses difficulty for you, please let me know and I'll arrange access to the texts in hard copy via some other affordable or free means.

Periodically, I will give **surprise extra credit** to students who bring marked-up hard copies to class.

Learning objectives:

Our work together this semester should strengthen your capacity to:

- Read and critically engage sophisticated works of aesthetic theory and philosophy
- Draw connections between different thinkers on the subject
- Articulate competing theories of art and language
- Analyze and make interpretive arguments about works of literature
- Express your ideas verbally and in writing with clarity and supporting evidence
- Contribute to your intellectual communities by articulating your own claims clearly, responding critically yet generously to others' ideas, and posing provocative questions.

Assignments:

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| • Reading journals | (20%) ongoing; 10 total |
| • Presentation, discussion prompting, & reflection | (15%) by sign-up |
| • Responses to classmates' presentations | (10%) ongoing; 10 total |
| • Quizzes | (15%) ongoing & unannounced |
| • Group project | (20%) Dec 8 |
| • Final paper | (15%) Dec 15 |
| • Participation & engagement | (5%) ongoing |

• Reading journals

Please post entries to your Reading Journal on eLearning each week by 11:59pm the night before we're scheduled to discuss the reading you've chosen to describe in your journal. You are required to post at least 10 entries over the course of the semester (according to your schedule and interests). You're welcome to post more than 10 for extra credit of up to 5 points on this assignment.

Each entry must include at least 2 direct citations of the text you're describing (a quote and a parenthetical citation).

Each entry should be comprised of 1-3-sentence summaries of the following: **1) The text's own main *question* (ventriloquize the text's animating question, which might be implicit); 2) Its central argument; 3) How it makes its case; 4) So What? or A Tension/Omission/Flaw. Feel free (but not obligated) to go over the 1-3 sentence guidelines, if you find you have a lot to say or work through via writing.**

More details and examples are included in a separate prompt, which you can find in the Assignments tab on eLearning.

- **Presentation & Discussion Prompting**

You will make a brief presentation (8-10 minutes long) on a date of your choosing this semester. **By 11:59pm the night before your presentation**, please start a thread on our eLearning Discussion Board, in which you **share your journal entry and two discussion questions** you will offer in class.

Your presentation should cover the 4 points articulated in your journal entry, and after outlining your key ideas about the reading, you'll pose two discussion questions. Your presentation can be creative—feel free to connect ideas about the reading to experiences and topics of interest to you outside the class, questions raised by other readings, favorite works of literary or other art, etc. Feel free, but not obligated, to incorporate visual or other aids. Feel free, but not obligated, to be playful, provocative, personal, etc., in your remarks or style of presentation.

In addition to the **eLearning posting** and in-class **presentation**, within **one week** of your presentation you will submit a **brief reflection and self-evaluation**. Your reflections might comment on any/all of the following: what, if anything, surprised you in the ideas you presented? What, if anything, surprised you about your response to the ideas—or about your experience developing and sharing the presentation? What, if anything, did you learn through your classmates' feedback and/or responses to your questions? What advice would you give yourself, based on this experience, regarding reading, analyzing, presenting, or drawing questions from material like this? What are your strengths, and what are your areas for improvement, in the relevant set of skills/tasks (reading, analyzing, presenting, developing questions, etc.)?

- **Responses to classmates' presentations**

Please post at least 10 responses to classmates' presentations on eLearning on the discussion thread they start.

Your responses include at least three of the following elements (all four, when relevant, would be great!):

1. One or more **strength(s)** of their synopsis or analysis of the reading. Try to **concretely describe** what you found effective, illuminating, insightful, etc., about their synopsis/analysis.
2. One or more **suggestion(s)**, a note of **disagreement** or doubt, or a **question** regarding their synopsis/analysis, and try to explain its source and/or implications.
3. **Your own most urgent question(s)** (about art, aesthetic experience, politics, ethics, or anything else) prompted by the presentation or the reading itself.
4. **Your own sense of the “stakes”** of the reading and/or your classmate’s analysis.

There is no minimum wordcount required for these responses. If you offer useful, concrete feedback or advice, especially by mentioning at least one example from the presentation or from the text, you’ll receive full credit. You’ll receive less than full credit if your responses are vague, unkind, so brief as to suggest you’ve barely thought about (or didn’t attend) the presentation (or read the reading), or otherwise unproductive.

You can earn extra credit if you go above and beyond: by providing tremendously engaged and challenging feedback to ten classmates; by providing solid feedback to more than ten classmates; or (extra extra) by providing tremendously engaged and challenging feedback to more than ten classmates.

- **Quizzes**

If you’re keeping up with the reading, you’ll do great on these periodic, surprise quizzes. They will often take the form of asking you to write, in class, a version of a reading journal entry (in whole or part). They might take the form of low-stakes freewriting on questions prompted by the day’s reading as a prelude to in-class discussion. They might be simple factual questions to ascertain if folks are doing the reading.

Please bring a pen and paper to class every day for note-taking, quizzes, and other in-class writing activities.

- **Group project: skits**

As a culmination to the semester—and to put your minds to creative, playful, and critical uses—you’ll work in small groups to draft a short play (~10-15 min) incorporating authors and/or characters and elements from different texts. What if Kant time-and-space-traveled to contemporary Boston or London and met the protagonists from *On Beauty*? What would they say to one another? What concerns do they share, where would they clash, or on what topics would they delight in conversing? What if Du Bois, Marx, Woolf, and Arendt were part of a political movement, debating ways and reasons to use art to serve their cause? What if Adorno dropped in?

Your small groups will script an imaginative scene or set of scenes developing your central premise, and you’ll perform these on our last day of class.

Before first meeting with your groups, each of you will submit as an assignment and post on our eLearning discussion board the following:

- **two possible scenarios** (1-3 sentence summaries are fine)
- **three passages from our readings** representing ideas you'd like to bounce off each other (partial quotes with ellipses and page numbers are fine).
- **a brief explanation** of how the ideas in the passages might resonate, conflict, reframe, or otherwise reverberate interestingly with each other.

In total, each of you will submit the following:

- The pre-project scenarios, passages, and explanation, as both an uploaded document and an eLearning discussion post
- The script your group is performing (each of you should upload a copy, as this helps me stay organized when grading)
- A short reflection about the group dynamics and collaborative experience: what you contributed, what went well or poorly within the group, tips or feedback you have for the professor regarding group assignments in general, etc.

- **Final paper**

During finals week, you'll submit an independent analytic essay interweaving analysis of at least two of the texts represented in your collaboratively written play. Your paper should make a clear case that juxtaposing these texts 1) alters how we should interpret one or more of the text(s), 2) reframes a theoretical or political concern shared by the text(s), **and/or** 3) reframes your own analysis of the dynamics and stakes of aesthetic experience.

The final paper should be 5-7 pages long, double spaced.

- **Participation & Engagement**

Please arrive on time, attentive and prepared to participate. Class will be structured mostly as discussion. You should bring to class 1) the text(s) we are discussing, so you can refer to specific passages; 2) a way to write, for taking notes and/or responding to in-class prompts and quizzes; 3) questions, observations, hunches, and an eagerness to share with and listen to your peers.

One of the objectives of the course is to build a true community of inquiry. Let me know asap if you have any concerns about your attendance and/or active participation (including shyness or nerves, or specific community agreements you'd like us to affirm). If something comes up in the middle of the semester that interferes with your ability to attend or participate, please communicate with me about it immediately.

Academic integrity

I am interested in your work, so don't plagiarize or cheat. If you feel at all tempted to cut corners, talk to me and we'll chart a way for you to get back on track.

There are three main forms of plagiarism: passing another person or bot's work off as your own, verbatim; passing another's ideas off as your own by paraphrasing them without giving the original source credit; and invoking another's metaphors, phrasing, or other literary device without giving the original source credit. The way to avoid accidental plagiarism is to cite your sources. If you have any questions about citations, speak to me, or check out this online reference guide: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/>. Any citation format is fine with me, as long as you are consistent.

AI policy: You are not permitted to make any use of LLM or other AI technology without explicit prior confirmation/discussion with me.

The labors of generating ideas and words, and structures for presenting them, are crucial to learning material and skills. I don't want you to miss out on this aspect of education.

However, I recognize that a) I'm still learning about AI and the world its creators are building around us; b) you have strong incentives, practical and otherwise, to develop your facility with these tools. (You should also have the incentive to resist them, if only to sample that experience within the season of your education)

So: you are welcome to make the case for specific, constricted and acknowledged uses of AI, but you must brief me on your reasons and receive my consent before proceeding. Without this step, usage of AI will count as academic dishonesty with the relevant repercussions.

Lastly: I invite you all into an ongoing conversation about how best to engage (or not) with AI.

Resources & Additional Policies

Accessibility. If you would benefit from additional support or accommodations, either formally or informally, please feel free to contact me and/or the AccessAbility Resource Center, <https://accessibility.utdallas.edu/student-accommodations/>. Formal academic accommodations can be arranged via that office, but again, I am here to work with you to ensure your success.

If you wish to share emergency contact information, might need assistance in the event of building evacuation, or foresee any possible hindrances to your performance in this class, please let me know.

Tech requirements & support. All course content can be accessed using your UT Dallas NetID account on the [eLearning](#) website. If you have questions regarding eLearning, check out the [Getting Started with eLearning](#) webpage or speak with the professor. Via the [eLearning Support Center](#), you can also access a live chat service, video tutorials, and contact info, including the toll-free telephone number (1-866-588-3192) and email address (elarning@utdallas.edu).

There are several computer labs, a laptop rental scheme, and a specific tech support team available for you as students of BAHT. Visit the service center in ATC 2.302, email techresources@utdallas.edu, or speak with the professor to get connected with resources.

Academic support. The Office of Student Success operates the Student Success Center, which is currently offering virtual and in-person writing and other services. Read more here:

<https://www.utdallas.edu/studentsuccess/writing-and-speaking/writing-center/>.

Other resources. The Comet Cupboard connects students with necessities such as food, toiletries, and clothing. It's located in MC 1.604, in the basement of the McDermott Library. **The**

Graduation Help Desk is a great office to contact for all-purpose advising and support, whether your main concerns are financial, personal, or academic. Learn more here:

<https://oue.utdallas.edu/special-programs/graduation-help-desk>. A full list of resources available to students is [here](#).

For additional policies and resources maintained by the university, visit

<http://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies>.

Schedule

Week 1 — Introductions

- Mon, Aug. 25
 - syllabus & greetings
- Weds, Aug. 27
 - Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts" from *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, 2nd ed.
 - Optional: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on "Aesthetics": <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept/>

Week 2 — Foundations of Modern Continental Aesthetics

- Mon, Sept. 1 – Labor Day, no class
- Weds, Sept. 3
 - Kant, selections from *Critique of Judgment*: §1-8; § 15; § 32-33; § 40-41
 - Chaouli, "Preface" from [*Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*](#)

Week 3 — Foundations, continued

- Mon, Sept. 8
 - Schiller, selections from letters published as *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*
- Weds, Sept. 10
 - Hegel, selections from *Lectures on Fine Art*

Week 4 — Politics & Aesthetics I: Historical Materialism -- art &/as/vs. commodities

- Mon, Sept. 15
 - Marx, excerpts from the *German Ideology*, *Grundrisse*, and *Capital* (on the commodity fetish)
- Weds, Sept. 17
 - Ngai, "Introduction" from *Theory of the Gimmick*: please read the first section through the middle of p. 9; "Verbal Performance" from pp. 17-21; "Gimmick vs. Theory" from pp. 34-mid37; "Conclusion" pp. 49-51
 - The rest of this intro is optional

Week 5 — Politics & Aesthetics II: Autonomy & Androgyny

- Mon, Sept. 22
 - Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, sections 1-3
- Weds, Sept. 24
 - Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, sections 4-6

Week 6 — Politics & Aesthetics III: Autonomy & Propaganda

- Mon, Sept. 29
 - Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art"
 - Locke, "Art or Propaganda"
 - Taylor, Chapter 3 sections 1; 5-10 from *Black is Beautiful: a philosophy of black aesthetics*
 - Optional: Taylor, Preface (excerpt) and Chapter 1
- Weds, Oct. 1
 - Adorno, "Commitment"

Week 7 — Politics & Aesthetics IV: Tastes & Judgments

- Mon, Oct. 6
 - Bourdieu, selections from *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*
- Weds, Oct. 8
 - Arendt, "Truth and Politics"

Week 8 —AII: Authorship, Intention, & Interpretation

- Mon, Oct. 13
 - Wimsatt & Beardsley, “Intentional Fallacy”
 - Barthes, “The Death of the Author”
- Weds, Oct. 15
 - Knapp and Michaels, “Against Theory”

Week 9 — AII&AI: Authorship, Intention, & Interpretation & AI

- Mon, Oct. 20
 - Cavell, “Music Discomposed”
- Weds, Oct. 22
 - Selections from *Critical Inquiry’s* “In the Moment” Forum, [Again Theory: A Forum on Language, Meaning, and Intent in the Time of Stochastic Parrots](#)
 - Matthew Kirschenbaum’s [introduction to the forum](#)
 - Lisa Siraganian’s [“On Accidental and Parasitic Language”](#)
 - Seth Perlow’s [“Intention and Text Machines](#)

Week 10—AI continued

- Mon, Oct. 27
 - More selections from *Critical Inquiry’s* “In the Moment” Forum
 - Knapp and Michaels’s [“Here Is a Wave Poem that I Wrote . . . I Hope You Like It!”](#)
 - N. Katherine Hayles’s [“Afterword: Learning to Read AI Texts”](#)
- Weds, Oct. 29
 - Vauhini Vara, Selections from *Searches* and “Confessions of a Viral AI Writer”

Week 11 — Art, Ethics, and (of) Attention

- Mon, Nov. 3
 - Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts”
- Weds, Nov. 5
 - Smith, *On Beauty* (book 1, ch 1-7)

Week 12 —

- Mon, Nov. 10
 - *On Beauty* (through the end of book 1)
- Weds, Nov. 12
 - *On Beauty* (bk 2, ch 1-5) - no student presentations – in-class final project group work

Week 13

- Mon, Nov. 17
 - *On Beauty* (through end of bk 2)
- Weds, Nov. 19
 - *No reading—Final project group workday*

Fall break – no class

Week 14

- Mon, Dec. 1
 - *On Beauty* (bk 3, ch 1-8)
- Weds, Dec. 3
 - *On Beauty* through the end

Week 15

- Mon, Dec. 8
 - Skits & celebration

Please submit your final paper on eLearning by 11:59pm on December 15th, unless we agree upon an alternative deadline.