**Narrative Theory**
Engl 303
Spring 2015
T 1:10-4pm, 285 Court Street

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**Course Overview**
Narrative, one great critic suggests, may be the central function of the human mind. It is, as another once wrote, "simply there, like life itself." As these claims indicate, narrative gives form to our collective experience: from the shadow of history and the shape of the future to the very texture and meaning of time itself. This course provides an introduction to the tradition of narrative theory—the theory of how stories work and of how we make them work—through a sustained engagement with three core narrative-theoretical concepts: structure, text, and time. A single book will anchor and orient each of the course's units: for structure, Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*; for text, Roland Barthes' *S/Z*; for time, Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*. Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno* will supply our "control text": a narrative to which we will return as we study the theory and through which we will test the powers and the limits, both analytical and historical, of our theorists. In each of our units, we will begin with a careful reading of our main theorist, move on to consider work that elaborates on the theory, and then turn to robust approaches—Marxist, historicist, queer, psychoanalytic, sociological—that challenge or modify the theoretical terms with which we started.

**Requirements and Policies**

**Reading.** Read and reread. Then read again. Makes notes in the margins, underline and circle words and phrases, bescribble the page: in short, be an active reader. Our texts are challenging, and each week's reading assignments are substantial. Plan your time. Complete the reading before each session, give yourself time to think about the texts before class, and arrive with a handful of points for discussion. Bring your reading notes to class.

**Writing.** The writing for the course comprises three kinds of assignment:

**A) Weekly short summaries** (1-2pp.) that convey the central argument(s) or point(s) in the week's reading. These summaries serve two purposes: first, they require you to establish what our theorists are saying before you elaborate on (or argue against) their propositions. Second, they will ensure that you have the basic premises of the texts before you in class during our discussions. I will collect these at the end of every class session. You may write your short summaries in the form of notes—they need not be essays or properly polished response papers. (Note, however, that students with ample summaries often master the material more quickly than others.)

**B) Four short reading exercises** (3pp.) focused on close reading—usually of a theoretical text, but sometimes of another narrative text. These will sharpen your critical reading skills as the semester progresses, and they will give you the opportunity to put the theory to work (and to work out the theory).

**C) Two essays**, 5-7pp. and 12-15pp. In the first essay, you will apply theoretical concepts from our reading in a short analysis of *Benito Cereno*. Your second essay will give you the occasion to look outside the course: to apply the theory to a narrative (a novel, a film, etc.) of your choice, and perhaps to test the theory against a particularly interesting (or challenging) example of narrative representation.
In-class presentations. Each member of the seminar will pair up with another to give an in-class presentation on a question or problem from the reading and to direct our attention to particularly significant passages. We will schedule these presentations during the second week of class.

Participation. This course is a seminar: we succeed or fail collectively. Arrive at each of our sessions ready to talk and ready to listen with engagement and generosity to your fellow students. If a text excites you, talk about why. If something confuses you, ask questions. If you agree with comments someone makes, elaborate on your agreement with the class. If you disagree with someone, explain why. In short, contribute with gusto to our common enterprise in the seminar—which is to engage deeply with a rich and exciting collection of theoretical texts and, ultimately, to understand together how narratives work.

Attendance, deadlines. Attendance at every session is required; more than two absences will be grounds for failing the course. Assignment due dates are provided on the syllabus so that you can plan your work for the semester. All due dates are firm: extensions will be granted only in cases of serious illness or personal crisis. Don’t even ask.

Disabilities resources. Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible. If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Dean Patey in Disability Resources, located in North College, Room 021, or call 860-685-2332 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations.

Honor Code. Please write an abbreviated form of the Honor Code pledge ("No aid, no violation.") at the top of the first page of all assignments. All work must be done in compliance with the Honor Code, which prohibits the following: the attempt to give or obtain assistance in a formal academic exercise without due acknowledgment; plagiarism; the submission of the same work for academic credit more than once without permission; willful falsification of data, information, or citations in any formal academic exercise; deception concerning adherence to the conditions set by instructor for the formal academic exercise; failure to take constructive action in the event of committing or observing a violation or apparent violation; providing false information and/or deceptive use of documents during an Honor Board hearing. If you need help with proper citations or you have any questions at all on how to avoid plagiarism, please talk with me.

Grading
Your final grade breaks down like this:

10%: Participation (including weekly short summaries)
10%: In-class presentation
25%: Reading exercises
55%: Two essays (5-7pp., 20%; 12-15pp., 35%)

Texts (available at Broad Street Books):
Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale (U of Texas P)
Aristotle, Poetics (Hill and Wang)
M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (U of Texas P)
Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Hill and Wang)
Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Cornell UP)
Herman Melville, “Billy Budd” and *Other Stories* (Penguin)
Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (Routledge)

**Additional required readings**, marked with an asterisk (*) below, are included in the course reader, which you must order through your electronic portfolio.

**SCHEDULE**

1. **TUESDAY, 1/27 -- INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVE THEORY AND FORMAL ANALYSIS**
   Introduction to *Benito Cereno.*

2. **TUESDAY, 2/3 -- PROLOGUE: HERMAN MELVILLE, *BENITO CERENO* (1855)**
   Read the entire novella for this session.
   **First reading exercise due in class.**

**PART ONE: STRUCTURE**


4. **TUESDAY, 2/17 -- Aristotle, *Poetics* (pp. 45-118); E.M. Forster, from *Aspects of the Novel;* Viktor Shklovsky, "The Structure of Fiction."*  
   **Second reading exercise due in class.**

5. **TUESDAY, 2/24 -- Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives;"*  
   Tzvetan Todorov, "The Grammar of Narrative."*  
   **Second reading exercise due in class.**

6. **TUESDAY, 3/3 -- Pierre Macherey, from *A Theory of Literary Production;* Franco Moretti, "Network Theory, Plot Analysis."*  
   **5PM, THURSDAY, 3/5 -- FIRST ESSAY DUE IN BOX OUTSIDE MY OFFICE.**
   **Tuesday 3/10 and Tuesday 3/17-- Fall break. No class.**

**PART TWO: TEXT**


   **Third reading exercise due in class.**

9. **TUESDAY, 4/7 -- Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre;"*  
   Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?;"*  
   Alex Woloch, from *The One vs. the Many;* Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction,* Chapters 5-6, 8.

**PART THREE: TIME**


12. **TUESDAY, 4/28** -- Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 84-258)
   
   **Fourth reading exercise due in class.**

13. **TUESDAY, 5/5** -- Peter Brooks, from *Reading for the Plot*;* Guy Debord, from *The Society of the Spectacle*;* Moishe Postone, from *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*.*

   **5PM, FRIDAY, 5/15 -- SECOND ESSAY DUE IN BOX OUTSIDE MY OFFICE.**