Telling Stories: Studying Narrative in Fiction and Film

What do we do when we tell stories? How do we make sense of the stories we hear? How do the stories we have heard determine the stories we tell? This course will pose and explore these questions through three bodies of texts: literary narratives; popular films; and narrative theory from the French, Russian, and American traditions.

Our particular focus for this term will be on how stories end, and—more importantly—how endings determine the shape, pace, and meaning of their stories. Literary examples will be drawn from classics of world literature (Oedipus Rex, Arabian Nights) and modernist literary experiments (Borges, Nabokov, and Ford’s The Good Soldier); films will be popular works of Hollywood entertainment (Clueless, Memento, Back to the Future). Secondary readings will give students a broad introduction to the scholarly field of narrative theory and will provide the class with a precise technical vocabulary for analyzing and discussing the primary texts.

**WEEK 1: STORY & PLOT**

June 27
*Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000)
“On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1873)
Short poetry & fiction handout [in-class handout]

June 29
“The Adventure of the Speckled Band” (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1892)
“Light Breathing” (Ivan Bunin, 1916)

“Art as Technique” and excerpt from “The Novel as Parody” (Viktor Shklovsky, 1917)
“Bunin’s ‘Gentle Breath’” from *Psychology of Art* (Lev Vygotsky, c.1920)
Selections from *Story and Discourse* (Seymour Chatman, 1978)

**WEEK 2: BEYOND STORY & PLOT**

July 4
*Oedipous the King* (Sophocles, 429 BCE)

“Narrative” (J. Hillis Miller, 1995)
“Fabula and Syuzhet in the Analysis of Narrative” (Jonathan Culler, 1980)
“Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories” (Barbara Herrnstein Smith, 1980)
July 6
“The Turn of the Screw” (Henry James, 1898)
“The Vane Sisters” and “Signs and Symbols” (Vladimir Nabokov, 1958-9)

“Cracking the Code” (Alexander Dolinin, 2012)
“Consulting the Oracle” (Michael Wood, 2012)

**WEEK 3: TIME**

July 11
*Back to the Future*, Parts 1-3 (Robert Zemeckis, 1985-1990)
Chapters 1-3 from *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method* (Gerard Genette, 1970)

July 13
*Empire Star* (Samuel Delany, 1966)
Selection from *Time Travel* (David Wittenberg, 2013)

**WEEK 4: VOICE**

July 18
*Clueless* (dir. Amy Heckering, 1995)
“Frame Tale” and “Night-Sea Journey” (John Barth, 1963)

Selections from *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Wayne Booth, 1961)
Chapters 4-5 from *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method*

July 20
*Dora* [“Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria”] (Sigmund Freud, 1905)
*The Good Soldier* (Ford Madox Ford, 1915)

**WEEK 5: DESIRE**

July 25
*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Sigmund Freud, 1920)
“Narrative Desire,” “Freud’s Master Plot” (Peter Brooks, 1984)

July 27
“The Garden of Forking Paths” (Jorge Luis Borges, 1941)
“Lost in the Funhouse” (John Barth, 1963)
Selections from *Arabian Nights*
“Narrative Closure” (Noël Carroll, 2007)
Review Papers (500-750 words; due at the end of each week)
These are similar in form and function to response papers. Use these to retrace and clarify the important ideas covered in the week’s readings and discussions. Suggested topics are given below, but feel free to use these papers to explore in detail some question or idea that came to you while you were reading or was raised in class but not discussed exhaustively.

Week 1: Due Saturday, July 1
Detective stories like *Memento* and “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” are built around certain conventions involving beginning-middle-end structures and the relationship between story and plot. Briefly explain the most important of those conventions. Make reference either to a range of detective narratives that obey these conventions or to a single (perhaps literary?) work that subverts or plays with them.

Week 2: Due Saturday, July 8
The immediacy of the visual medium presents certain challenges to filmmakers who want to complicate the relation of story and plot—challenges that sometimes differ from or exceed those faced by literary authors. Discuss the narrative challenges of films that employ surprise endings that radically revise our sense of what happened in the preceding film (e.g. *The Usual Suspects*, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Prestige*), or open endings that leave us unsure of what happened (e.g. *Inception*, *eXistenZ*, *American Psycho*).

Week 3: Due Saturday, July 15
Use Wittenberg’s theory of time travel in popular narratives to discuss *Looper* (Rian Johnson, 2012); or, use Genette’s framework of narrative order to explain the structure of *Memento*.

Week 4: Due Saturday, July 22
*The Good Soldier* is a classic example of unreliable narration. Drawing on whatever texts you know that make use of unreliable narrators and on Genette’s vocabulary of voice and mood, explain what you consider to be the important categories or types of unreliable narrator. Use examples from literature, film, television, popular music, etc.

Week 5: Due Saturday, July 29
Think of one narrative that struck you as particularly satisfying in its conclusion and one that struck you as particularly unsatisfying. (Final episodes of popular television series offer some notorious examples of the latter, and perhaps some examples of the former.) Building on our discussions this week & throughout the course, try to explain clearly and precisely what made the one so satisfying and the other so unsatisfying.

Final paper (c. 3,000 – 3,500 words; due Wednesday, August 10)
This paper should engage in depth with both the theoretical texts we have read in this course and with specific narratives (literary, film, or other) of the student’s choosing. Additional scholarly research is permitted and encouraged, but not required.

Students having trouble coming up with a topic and interested in exploring complicated literary narratives are encouraged to read and potentially to write on: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*; Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*; or Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*. 
Note on texts & on reading ahead

The following texts will soon be available at the Wesleyan bookstore. Please use these editions; class discussion goes much more smoothly when we are literally on the same page.

*The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford - ISBN: 9780199585946  

All other readings will soon be available as PDFs through the course Moodle site and as a printed course reader through Cardinal Print & Copy in Usdan.

The films should be easy to obtain. *Clueless* is currently on Netflix and the *Back to the Future* trilogy has been on television constantly of late (last year was its 30th anniversary). *Memento* is ever-so-slightly less mainstream, but should still be easy to get; please contact me if you have any difficulties. You won’t be expected to discuss the *Back to the Future* films in minute detail, so watch those ahead of time. For *Clueless* and *Memento*, you should try to watch them less than a week before the session in which we’ll be discussing them if possible.

The Freud texts (“Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria” and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) are a bit of a slog, though they’re not excessively technical. It would be good to read these in advance, since they’ll be useful more as reference points than as objects of close analysis. Feel free to use any editions handy to you if you want to get started before the course pack is available; we’ll be using the texts from the Standard Edition, edited by James Strachey.

Our major primary texts will be Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw,” Samuel Delany’s *Empire Star*, and Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*. Read the Sophocles and Delany ahead of time if you’d like. You’ll want to have the James and Ford fresher in your mind, but both texts are very much worth re-reading (and will be easier to make sense of a second time ‘round!); plan on starting them over the weekend at the very least (both are for Wednesday sessions), and if possible, read them in advance and then spend some time with your notes on them before class.

The secondary readings are generally shorter & denser. They build on each other & develop difficult concepts, so you’ll struggle if you try to do too many of them before classes begin. If you manage to get through a significant portion of the primary texts, the movies, and the Freud before the first day of class, the reading load through the rest of the summer will be very moderate.

Finally, we won’t have time to devote much attention to it in class, but if you haven’t read Jane Austen’s *Emma*, doing so would help you appreciate *Clueless*, which is based on it. I’ll bring some passages to class as handouts, but excerpts can’t really do justice to Austen’s prose.
BOOKS TO BUY:

Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method
Gerard Genette
Cornell University Press (1983)
ISBN-10: 0801492599

The Good Soldier
Ford Madox Ford
ISBN: 9780199585946

Babel-17 / Empire Star
Samuel Delany
ISBN-10: 0375706690

The Theban Plays: Antigone, King Oidipous and Oidipous at Colonus
Sophocles; trans. Ruby Blondell
Focus; Focus Classical Library edition (December 1, 2001)
ISBN-10: 1585100374