

Introduction to Fiction: Stories and Selves



About This Class

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Joan Didion tells us. What does this mean? Is storytelling and fiction a part of who we are as humans? Does fiction make us better people? What role has fiction played in our understanding of ourselves as humans, individuals, citizens?

These are some of the questions that we will ask as we begin our journey into the way fiction works, why we read it, and how it shapes our understanding of human selves. We will investigate the art of the short story, explore the personal and critical ways in which we can respond to fiction, and evaluate the role of the novel in telling stories about identity. We will also spend part of the semester considering how fiction can examine the relationship between what we consider human and non-human identity. Our reading journey will take us from short stories (by Poe, Gilman, Baldwin, Kafka, Butler, Chiang) and children’s books, to two novels (Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*) and a film. Assignments will include in-class quizzes and written responses, two exams, a written reflection, and a final group project.

Important Information

English 201: Introduction to Fiction
Spring 2017
Tues & Thurs, 1:40-2:55PM
Location: Fisher Hall 713
Professor: Dr. Anna Gibson

Office: College Hall 626
Phone: (412) 396-6431
Email: gibsona@duq.edu
Office Hours: TTh 12:45-1:15; W 1-3

Course Objectives

What will I learn and how will I demonstrate it?

- **Elements of Fiction:** You will learn to identify elements of fiction and narrative conventions and understand how they work together. In free writes, exams, written work, and discussions, you will learn to use appropriate terminology and explain the functions of fictional conventions using examples.
- **Critical Reading:** You will learn to critically read and analyze a variety of literary works (including stories, novels, and films), demonstrating through writing and discussion an ability to

closely and carefully read and interpret texts. You will read actively by annotating your texts, demonstrate an ability to identify and summarize significant details of a text, and draw connections between texts within and across literary periods.

- **Cultural Context:** You will learn to recognize and question the relationship between literary works and the cultural contexts in which they are written and read. You will research the historical contexts of your reading assignments and apply this knowledge in your discussions.
- **Critical Thinking:** You will frame insightful critical questions that generate class discussions about texts and contexts. Learning to ask critical questions is the foundation of interpretation. Your reading responses and free writes will often ask you to formulate questions for discussion in class.
- **Taking a Position:** You will formulate specific and debatable arguments (theses) about meaning in a text. Exam essay questions will ask you to take a position (construct a thesis) and support that position with evidence from the text(s).
- **Collaborative Learning:** You will work together in groups and as a class. This means participating actively in group work so that your contribution to the project is clear and constructive. This also means engaging with your peers' thoughts and participating in class discussion by facilitating and enhancing the conversation with questions and insights.

Texts

You will need hard copies of the following two texts. Please buy the specified editions so that we can stay on the same page:

- Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818 Text), Oxford University Press, ISBN: 9780199537150
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, Vintage, ISBN: 9781400078776

Optional: Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Oxford, ISBN: 9780199238552 (this is available as a PDF on Blackboard via Gumberg's ebook version, but if you want to buy the book you can do so online).

The rest of our reading for the semester is on Blackboard. Remember to print, annotate/take notes on each text as you read, and bring it with you to the required class.

Assignments

Midterm Exam and Final Exam (20% each for 40%)

These exams are meant to offer you opportunities to synthesize your thoughts and learning across the semester. They are not meant to catch you out. They will offer a mixture of short answer, fill-in-the-blank, and essay questions about the texts and topics we have covered in class. If you do the reading, come to class, take thorough notes, and review those notes, you can expect to do well on these exams. The final exam will be cumulative only in that it will ask you questions about multiple texts, including those we read during the first half of the semester.

Group Project (15%)

In the second half of the semester you will work in groups of 5 on a project that will involve selecting, close reading, and analyzing a visual fictional text (television show, film, graphic novel, etc.) that is concerned with the relationship between human and non-human identity and therefore

fits within the thematic arc of our Kafka, Shelley, Ishiguro, and Chiang readings. I will give you a list of texts from which to choose, or you may choose your own as a group within specified parameters. Each group will work on a different text. You will receive more information about this project in a detailed assignment sheet later in the semester, but in short it will involve 1) producing a written or creative project that analyzes the text in relation to the elements of fiction and other texts we have discussed during the semester, 2) crafting a presentation in which you will teach the class about your chosen text and how it considers the relationship between human and non-human. The project and presentation will receive a group grade, worth 15% of your overall grade. The whole group will receive the same grade for the project unless it becomes obvious that certain members are not participating. If you have any problems working together in your group, please come to talk to me *as soon as possible* so that I can help.

In-Class Quizzes and Written Responses (15%)

In this class you will have frequent quizzes and written responses at the beginning of class that will give you an opportunity to demonstrate that you are doing the reading carefully and help you to organize your thoughts at the beginning of class. These will vary in format. Sometimes they will include multiple choice or short answer questions. Sometimes you will respond in writing to a prompt I give you with details from the text we have read for that class. These will each be graded on a 5-point scale. These will be given at the beginning of class, so please try to be on time. There will be no make-up quizzes offered, but I will drop the lowest grade in order to accommodate an absence.

Participation and Blog Posts (15%)

I expect you to participate actively in class discussions. This is a big class, and I know it can be difficult to talk every time, but I expect you to make every effort to do so. I am not measuring your participation on the complexity or profundity of your comments; I'm merely looking for you to respond to the topic or text that we are discussing honestly and thoughtfully. Please review course policies for attendance and technology use for more information about the participation grade.

As part of your participation grade you will each write four blog posts on assigned days across the course of the semester on the text we are discussing for the following class. Your blog post should be published no later than 7AM on the morning of the class day. See separate assignment sheet for more information and assigned posting dates. Remember to write these dates on your calendar!

Final Reflection and Analysis Essay (15%)

At the end of the semester you will write a 1000- to 1500-word essay that reflects upon how 2-3 of the texts you have read/watched this semester shaped and/or helped to develop your understanding of a particular topic or concept. You will receive an assignment sheet for this.

Assessment

- Grades are not negotiable.
- You must turn in all work to pass this class.
- I do not discuss grades via email. This is both for privacy reasons and because it is much more productive to discuss these matters in person. I am happy to talk to you about any aspect of your learning experience in the class, including concerns about assessment, in person. Just make an appointment with me or come to my office hours.

- I will make every effort to post all grades for assignments that are turned in on time within one week of turn in. If you do not see your grade for an assignment posted on Blackboard within two weeks of completion/turn in, feel free to email me to ask about this.
- All grades will be posted to Blackboard and are calculated using the grading scale below (with the exception of blog posts, which are part of the participation grade, and free writes/quizzes, which are graded on a 5-point scale). Please check Blackboard regularly.
- If you are concerned about your performance in the class or with any of the assignments, please do come talk to me as early as possible. There is not much I can do to help you if you come to me the week before the final paper is done to ask me how to get an A if you have a B- average. If you have particular concerns about writing or presentations, talk to me about these things early in the semester so that I can help you develop strategies and direct you to useful resources.

Grading Scale:

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|----|----------|--|
| A | 93-100 % | Consistently excellent; demonstrates mastery of material |
| A- | 90-93 % | Very good to excellent |
| B+ | 87-90 % | Very good |
| B | 83-87 % | Consistently good |
| B- | 80-83 % | Fair to good |
| C+ | 77-80 % | Acceptable |
| C | 73-77 % | Falls short of expectations, but acceptable |
| C- | 70-73 % | Falls short of expectations |
| D | 60-70 % | Poor |
| F | 0-60 % | Failing |

Course Policies

Expectations Overview:

I expect you to come to class prepared and having read and thought about the assigned material. You cannot learn and do well in this class unless you do all the reading. Please arrive on time, remain in the room during class (e.g. if possible, please try to use the bathroom before class), and remain attentive during the class. I also expect you to participate in class discussions so that we are all engaged in the learning process (this is part of your participation grade). However, please refrain from side-conversations with your neighbors.

To make this class a positive environment, I ask that you all adhere to a social contract of mutual respect. We need to respect one another's opinions, abilities, differences, and backgrounds to make this classroom a safe space. This applies to me too: as your professor, I expect your respect, and you can also expect me to treat you with respect. This policy extends beyond the classroom to email correspondence.

Accommodations:

Students who feel they may have a disability that requires special accommodation should contact me privately by the second week of the class so that we can make arrangements. If the disability is not yet officially documented, contact the Office of Freshman Development and Special Student Services, 309 Student Union, 412-396-6658.

Attendance:

You are expected to attend all class meetings, to complete all reading and written assignments and exams, and to participate in class discussions. Attendance involves being on time and attentive in class; you can be marked as absent if you are excessively tardy, asleep, or using electronic devices for reasons unrelated to the course material. I do understand that certain emergencies and life events might mean you need to miss class (e.g. illness, personal emergencies, active military duty). Because of this, you have up to but no more than 3 absences without attendance negatively affecting your grade. For each absence after three, your final grade will be dropped by ONE partial grade level (e.g. from B to B-). Six absences will result in automatic failure of this class.

Please note that this absence policy is meant to accommodate emergencies and illnesses; it is not an excuse to skip class. I suggest you save up all of these allowed absences in case of emergency towards the end of the semester, since there will be no exceptions to this policy. Also note that if you miss a class it is your responsibility to find out from another student what you missed in class. Please do not email me to see if you missed anything; assume that you have, and contact a classmate. If work is due on a day you miss class, you must still turn in that work by the due date.

Meetings/Contacting Me:

I am very happy to discuss any aspect of this class with you during my office hours. I'm here to talk to you! My office is College Hall 626, and my office hours this semester are 12:45-1:15PM Tuesdays and Thursdays and 1-3PM on Wednesdays. If these times do not work for you, just send me an email with your availability and we can set up an appointment at a different time. It is my policy not to discuss grades via email. If you have any question about your progress in the class you need to set up a meeting to discuss this with me in person.

Email:

Please check your Duquesne email account daily for any announcements or messages from me (and from your other professors). I am happy to receive emails from you. I check email regularly and can often respond to brief questions within an hour, but can often take me a bit longer than that to respond. Please give me 24 hours to respond on weekdays (48 hours on weekends and holidays). I haven't responded in that amount of time, feel free to politely email again. I get a lot of emails every day, and sometimes things get lost in the shuffle, so a reminder is just fine. In emails to me or any professor, please be courteous and professional. This means including a subject line, beginning with a salutation (e.g. Dear Dr. Gibson, Hello Professor), using full sentences and proper grammar and capitalization, refraining from text shorthand, and including a closing remark (e.g. Best/Regards) with your full name. Impolite or unprofessional emails forfeit the right to a response. Please check the syllabus before emailing with a question. If the answer to your question is on the syllabus, I will refer to you to the syllabus in my reply. Please note that I do not accept assignments via email unless I have agreed to do so in advance.

Late work:

Please contact me as far in advance as possible if you need more time for an assignment because of a crisis, illness, or family emergency. I will only grant an extension if it is requested at least 48 hours in advance of a due date (since you should have already started working on the assignment before them) and if you offer a valid reason. Exams are except from this allowance. If you know that you will be unable to attend an exam, you must make prior arrangements with me well in advance to take the exam *before* the scheduled exam date. You need to be especially sure that you are able to make it to class to participate in your group project.

Format for Written Assignments:

Standard 1-inch margins, 12-point standard font (e.g. Times New Roman), single-spaced header (no longer than 2 lines), double-spaced text, pages numbered. Please use MLA in-text parenthetical citations and works cited. Blackboard blog/journal posts should be typed directly into the text box.

Electronics:

While I understand that laptops can be useful for note taking, the downsides of having screens in the classroom usually outweigh the benefits. It's just too tempting to text, browse social media, shop for shoes, check the scores, etc. Your screen doesn't just distract you; it can be a distraction to those sitting behind you. Furthermore, research shows that taking notes by hand can better help you retain the information.¹ For these reasons, as well as to encourage a discussion-based classroom in which we avoid hiding behind screens, I will ask you to put away electronic devices in our classroom most of the time unless I let you know that you can use them for a specific activity (or if you have an accommodation letter that requires laptop use). I would *strongly* prefer you to print the PDFs of our reading to read, annotate, and bring to class with you. It can be very tempting to "skim" read on a screen; reading on paper can slow you down and help you focus, and it can avoid distractions from text messages and other notifications. All of the reading is up on Blackboard, so you can print these pieces at the beginning of the semester. Think of this as a cheaper version of a textbook! However, there are two exceptions to this policy. For the longer short stories by Kafka and Chiang you may read these on a laptop/tablet/ereader and bring them to class electronically (to avoid killing too many trees with printouts and overburdening your print allocation). With these exceptions, please put away electronic devices. For every class, please silence and put away your cell phone before class starts. Texting, chatting, or using electronics in class will result in one of the following: a zero for attendance, a zero for the day's participation grade, or an embarrassing (for both of us) request for you to leave the room.

Blackboard:

You will be using Blackboard frequently in this class, as in many other classes at Duquesne. You need to learn to use Blackboard efficiently. In this class we will use Blackboard for readings, blog posts/journals, announcements, grades, and group discussion. Please familiarize yourself with our Blackboard page. Failure to successfully upload an assignment to Blackboard is not an excuse. If you have any problems, contact Blackboard Student Help.

Academic Integrity:

The Student Handbook defines plagiarism as follows: "Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, the use, whether by summary, paraphrase, or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work or specific ideas of a person without full and clear acknowledgment. It also includes the use of material prepared by another person or agency engaged in selling of term papers or other academic materials." Come see me or visit the Writing Center if you're using outside sources and are not sure whether or not your incorporation of the material is fair use. Start your written work well in advance and consult with me if you are having trouble interpreting an assignment. I take plagiarism *very* seriously. *You will fail the course if you plagiarize.*

Please take down the name and contact details for two classmates so that you have someone to contact in case you miss class

¹ Mueller, Pam A. and Daniel M. Oppenheimer. "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking." *Psychological Science* 25.6 (2014): 1159-68.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE*

UNIT 1: ELEMENTS OF FICTION

THU. JAN. 12: INTRODUCTION

TUE. JAN. 17: CHILDREN'S STORIES
Brothers Grimm tales "Snow White" and
"Cinderella" (trans. Philip Pullman)

THU. JAN. 19: CLOSE READING
Margaret Atwood, "Happy Endings" and Edgar
Allan Poe, "The Oval Portrait" (Note: Please read
the Poe story twice and annotate carefully.)

TUE. JAN. 24: SETTING & POINT OF VIEW
Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of
Usher."

THU. JAN. 26: CHARACTER & POINT OF VIEW
James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues."

TUE. JAN 31: IDENTITY & RELIABILITY
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow
Wallpaper."

THU. FEB. 2: SYMBOL, ALLEGORY, THEME
Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery."

UNIT 2: FICTION & HUMAN IDENTITY

TUE. FEB. 7: FRANKENSTEIN Vol. 1

THU. FEB. 9: FRANKENSTEIN Vol. 2

TUE. FEB. 14: FRANKENSTEIN Vol. 3

THU. FEB. 16: FRANKENSTEIN/CATCH-UP

TUE. FEB. 21: METAMORPHOSES
Ovid's "Metamorphosis" excerpts and Franz
Kafka, "The Metamorphosis"

THU. FEB. 23: METAMORPHOSES
Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis"

TUE. FEB. 28: MIDTERM REVIEW SESSION

THU. MARCH 2: **MIDTERM EXAM**

MIDTERM BREAK

TUE. MARCH 14: NEVER LET ME GO (p. 60)

THU. MARCH 16: NEVER LET ME GO (p. 111)

TUE. MARCH 21: NEVER LET ME GO (p. 203)

THU. MARCH 23: NEVER LET ME GO (to end)

TUE. MARCH 28: SCIENCE FICTION
Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild."

THU. MARCH 30: FICTION AND FILM
Reading TBD

TUE. APRIL 4: FICTION AND FILM
Ted Chiang, "Story of Your Life."

WEDS. APRIL 5, 6PM: Arrival Screening (or
watch it at home), College Hall 105

THU. APRIL 6: FICTION AND FILM
Film: "The Arrival" (note screening above)

TUE. APRIL 11: GROUP PROJECT WORK
SESSION

EASTER BREAK

(note that there is no class on April 18 because
classes meet according to Monday schedule)

THU. APRIL 20: PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

TUE. APRIL 25: PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

THU. APRIL 27: PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

TUE. MAY 2: PROJECT PRESENTATION AND
EXAM REVIEW

**Final Due Date: Final Essay (hard copy in
class) and Group Project**

THU. MAY 4, **11AM-1PM: FINAL EXAM**

* Syllabus subject to change. I will announce any changes in class and on Blackboard.