

ENGLISH 200: LITERARY STUDIES--LANGUAGE, FORM, INSPIRATION

Professor Sponberg, fall 2009, section B, MWF 8:00-8:50 a.m. I'm interested in the reasons people choose to become writers and in the ways writers try to analyze and control their creative processes. This course explores the relationship between the evolution of the English language, the major forms of literary expression (drama, poetry, fiction), and the dynamics of the human imagination. For the last 150 years, Western societies have regarded the autonomous writer as the most inspiring (or dangerous) example of our highest values. Especially in Europe and America writers are often seen as profound social critics embodying democratic principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This course asks: Is this sort of adulation warranted? When we examine the last 1000 years, though, the evolution of the writer's place in society seems more complicated. Two long-term dynamics "set the menu" for writers: the evolution of the language they choose to write in and the birth and death of forms of story-telling. Writers have very little control over either. At the same time, the individual human imagination seems to function most creatively when "boxed in" by limits on its freedom. Can we give a rational explanation of this paradoxical relation between freedom and loss of control? To help us find answers to these questions, we'll begin with a glance back to Aristotle's "theory" of Tragedy as an early Western example of trying to analyze the creative process. Then, we'll pick up the story of the English language and, throughout the term, follow its evolution up to our own time. Finally we'll focus on writers who are often credited with "changing" the art of writing but who also inherited much that they could not change. Our main texts will be provided by Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, the King James Bible, Fanny Burney, William Wordsworth, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Frederick Douglas, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Miller, and Louise Erdrich. Quizzes, mid-term and final exams, two short essays, and a 3,000-word paper form the work of the course.

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