Victorian Studies: the culture of the review

English 40
Monday 1:15-4

taught by Professor Rachel Buurma
This course offers a wide-ranging introduction to Victorian literature and culture through a focus on the review, a genre the Victorian both raised to an art form and used as a weapon in fighting the pettiest of personal battles. Often vilified as vampires who sucked their living out of other writers’ works, reviewers nonetheless occupied – perhaps to us surprisingly - a central and defining role in Victorian culture. First locating ourselves by taking a quick look at our current 21st-century ideas about book, music, and movie reviewing, we will move on to examine some of the most important – and most reviewed – works of Victorian literature in their cultural contexts. We will spend time looking closely at the discourses which surrounded literary criticism and reviewing in the nineteenth century, discussing questions of puffing (the practice of “artificially inflating” a book through influencing its reviews), the anonymity of reviewers, and self-reviewing in order to explore larger questions about race and empire, gender and sexuality, ideas of investment and objectivity, genre, narrative voice, critical distance and engagement, authorship and intentionality, individuality, questions of personality and character, and theories of reading, writing, and reception. We will read as many American as British reviews of these texts, using them on one hand to help ourselves imagine a nineteenth-century literary culture that was truly transatlantic and to think, on the other hand, about ways in which American and British writers defined and distinguished themselves in specifically national terms. At the same time, we will read some representative literary critical essays written in the last forty years in order to briefly familiarize ourselves with new historicist, psychoanalytic, feminst, marxist, and other more mixed recent critical approaches to these texts. Comparing these current literary critical approaches to Victorian literature to the ways the Victorians themselves approached the interpretation and judgment of literature, we will ask what has changed what has remained the same about approaches to literature since the nineteenth century.

Week I  
Reviewing from *Fraser’s Monthly Magazine* to *Television without Pity*

**January 19**
Welcome and Introduction
Season 2, episode 14 of “Gossip Girls”
Three reviews of GG from *The New Yorker, The New York Times, and Television without Pity*
*Jane Eyre*, p. 5-32
blog post #1: review of a review (your choice) due by Saturday midnight

Week II

**Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)**

**January 26**
*Jane Eyre*, through page 226 (chapter 18)
Gilbert and Gubar, from *The Madwoman in the Attic*
blog post #2: close reading of a JA passage due as usual by Saturday midnight

Week III

**Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)**

**February 2**
*Jane Eyre*, finish
Elaine Freedgood, from *The Ideas in Things*
blog post #3: brief summary of Gilbert and Gubar OR Freedgood article
paper assigned
Week IV  
Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott* (1832) and *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850)
February 9
The Lady of Shalott (br)
from John Stuart Mill’s review of Tennyson’s Poems
In Memoriam A.H.H. (br)

Week V  
Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857)
February 16
*Aurora Leigh*, first, second, and fifth books (br)
Gilbert and Gubar, from *The Madwoman in the Attic*
Helen Vendler, "Feminism and Literature"
Responses by Gilbert and Gubar
blog post #4: tba

Week VI  
Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859)
February 26
from *On the Origin of Species*
Thomas Henry Huxley’s reviews of *Origin* (Broadview edition appendix B.6.), four other reviews of your choice (bring copies to class)
Gillian Beer, from *Darwin’s Plots*
blog post #5: tba

Week VII  
March 2
*The Mill on the Floss*, 53-270
Dorrit Cohn, from *Transparent Minds*
Nina Baym, from *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*
Paper due

Week VIII  
Spring Break (finish reading *The Mill on the Floss*, 273-657)
March 9
Spring Break

Week IX  
*The Mill on the Floss* (1860)
March 16
*The Mill on the Floss*, 273-657
George Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists"
Mary Poovey, “Writing about Finance in Victorian England”
blog post #6: tba

Week X  
John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty" (1859)
March 23
"On Liberty"
blog post #7: tba

Week XI  
Rossetti, "Goblin Market" (1862) and Meredith, "Modern Love" (1862)
March 30
"Goblin Market" (br) and reviews
"Modern Love" (br) and reviews
Tucker, “Rosetti’s Goblin Marketing”
blog post #8: tba

Week XII  Arnold, poetry and criticism
April 6  "Dover Beach" (1867) (br) and "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) (br) from *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)
“Dover Bitch”
Amanda Anderson, from *The Powers of Distance*

Week XIII  Browning, poems (1836-1864)
April 13  "My Last Duchess," "Porphyria’s Lover," “The Laboratory," "How it Strikes a Contemporary," “Caliban Upon Setebos” (br)
Walter Bagehot, "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning" and other reviews
Yopie Prins, "Voice Inverse"
blog post #9: tba

Week XIV  Pater, from *The Renaissance* (1873)
April 20  Pater, "Preface" to *The Renaissance* (br)
James, "The Figure in the Carpet," "The Death of the Lion"

Week XV  Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-1891)
April 27  *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* all
conclusions

Final exam date TBA

Assignments

Blog and reviewing  http://swarthmorevictorianstudiesblog.blogspot.com/

We will write several short blog posts over the course of the semester; about half of them will respond to the course readings (in the form of close readings, article summaries, etc), and the other half will constitute our own experiments in reviewing. While some of these reviews will not be on Victorian topics, nevertheless the reviews are designed to give you an opportunity put to use the insights about reviewing and writing which we will arrive at via our study of Victorian literature and review culture. Your reviews need not be long (400-500 words is fine), but they must display a strong, focused perspective on the work under review and a distinctive “voice” or “tone.” They must, in addition, be clearly distinguishable from the kind of literary analysis you usually do in an English class (and will be doing in the paper for this class). In order to complete these assignments, you need to look back at the reviews we have read, both contemporary and Victorian, and ask yourself the following questions: How would I describe this reviewer’s “voice”? What is her attitude towards her subject? How much description does he engage in, as opposed to judgment or analysis? How does analysis in a review look? How does aesthetic or moral judgment look, and how is it communicated? Is the reviewer’s attitude (positive, negative, or neutral) toward her subject communicated implicitly or explicitly? Through direct address of the reader, through word choice and sentence structure, or through pointed omissions? Once you have considered these kinds of questions (and any of your own you would like to add), you will be able to make conscious choices about your own reviewerly approach.
Please post your review to our class blog by **midnight Saturday** the week assigned. (For example, blog post #1, a review of a review, appears on January 19th on the syllabus and is thus due by midnight on January 24th.)

**Class Format**

Format will vary, but in general we’ll begin class with me giving you some background on the week’s materials and highlighting key issues that we may wish to discuss further. We’ll then move into a close reading mode – sometimes as a class, sometimes in workshop groups – until our break. After break we’ll return via reviews we’ve read and will try to piece broader conclusions.

**Short paper**

This is a 5-6 page paper, due to Blackboard by midnight of February 23rd. We will discuss specifics further in class.

**Final exam**

This is a cumulative exam covering the entire semester’s worth of reading; we will discuss specifics further in class.

**Policies and Advice**

**Grading**

- 20% class participation (includes quizzes)
- 25% percent 5-6 page paper
- 25% blog
- 30% final exam

**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is a very serious offence. It includes both the direct copying of the words of another person without crediting him or her and paraphrasing the ideas of another person without giving credit. If you have any questions about how to properly cite another person’s work, please do not hesitate to ask me.

**Attendance and due dates**

Because this is a discussion-oriented class, attendance is essential. Missing more than one class session will result in a lowered grade unless you have a valid excuse processed through the advising system. Late papers will not be accepted without a similarly valid excuse UNLESS you have contacted me 48 hours before the paper’s due date and received an extension.

**Books**

The main books you will need to buy are:

- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Broadview Press. 1551111268
- Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*. Penguin. 0142437204
- Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* Broadview Press. 1551113376

All other texts available on Blackboard.

The books are available at the bookstore. You are also welcome to buy the books online or at a different store. Be aware that you need to have your own copy of the **specific edition** of each of the books listed above. All other texts will be available on Blackboard. Please print out, read, mark up, and bring to class ALL of the texts assigned for each week.