

Wassim Rustom
 Department of Foreign Languages
 University of Bergen

Course Description

Today we take for granted that literature can be about ordinary people in their ordinary lives—not necessarily aristocratic, heroic, stereotypical or allegorical. Some critics, however, argue that the modern story of how ordinary life came to be a viable setting for literary works began sometime in the late eighteenth century. What changed at this moment? How did “serious” literature take up the lives of workers, poor people, housewives, all those that had been hidden between the lines before? Covering texts from the turn of the eighteenth century up to the present day, this course will explore the ways in which literary works take a serious interest in ordinary life, and how this interest has shaped literature as we know it.

What or who is “ordinary”, and what does it mean for literature to treat it “seriously”? We will consider these questions from different angles, all the while keeping a critical eye on the category of the “ordinary”, what it encompasses and against what it is to be understood. We will note how characters drawn from lower social orders escape the confines of comedy and specialized genres. We will consider the prominent places accorded in nineteenth-century literature to the lives of the laboring classes and to the domestic sphere then associated with women’s lives. We will also pay attention to increasing literary interest, through modernism and beyond, in capturing the sensible and temporal fabric of everyday life. Texts include poems, novels, novellas and nonfiction from a wide range of British and American authors.

This course thus introduces MA students to a variety of literary-critical fields and approaches, on which they can draw when thinking about prospective topics for their MA theses. These will include Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, everyday life studies, and temporality studies.

Exam format

Take-home exam (1 week) + oral exam.

Primary Texts

William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ and poems from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*. 9th Ed. Vol. 2 (NY: Norton, 2013).
 Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*. Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford UP, 2008). (450p).
 George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford UP, 2015). (335p)
 Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1346 lines) and selected poems, in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (NY: Norton, 2017).
 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*. Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford UP, 2008). (270p)
 Gertrude Stein, “Objects” from *Tender Buttons*, in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.
 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001). (420p)
 Tom Sleight, *House of Fact, House of Ruin: Poems* and “To Be Incarnational”* in *The Land Between Two Rivers: Writing in an Age of Refugees* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2018).

Theoretical and critical texts*

Ben Highmore, *The Everyday Life Reader* (Routledge, 2002). “Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life” (34p)

Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics* (Columbia UP, 2011 [1998]). “Introduction: From One Literature to Another” (10p) and “Chapter 1: From Representation to Expression” (10p)

Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso, 2013). “Prelude” (8p), “4. The Poet of the New World” (20p) and “14. The Cruel Radiance of What Is” (18p)

Laurie Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life* (Cornell UP, 1999). “Introduction” (46p)

Carolyn Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (Duke UP, 2007). “1. ‘How Deep Might Be the Romance’: Representing Work and the Working Class in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*” (34p)

Susan Fraiman, “The Domestic Novel” in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 3: The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820-1880* (Oxford UP, 2011).

Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Every Life* (Cambridge UP, 2007). “Re-creation, work and the everyday in Gertrude Stein” (32p)

Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford UP, 2009). “Virginia Woolf and the ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life’” (32p)

From Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3rd Edition (Oxford UP, 2014):

“Chapter 6: Feminism” (37p)

“Chapter 8: Marxism” (39p)

***NOTE:**

All of the “theoretical and critical texts” along with Tom Sleight’s essay “To Be Incarnational” will be made available digitally, either through Litteraturkiosken or through Oria. You are otherwise responsible for procuring the primary texts, as well as the book by Robert Dale Parker. These you may purchase (new/used, online/at Akademika...) or borrow, or some other solution. If you do not (wish to) own a copy of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, you may scan/copy the necessary sections.