HU 3553: Romantic & Victorian Literature

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Randy Freisinger
Office: 305 Walker
Office Phone: 7-3229
Home Phone: 482-8046
E-mail: rfreisi @mtu.edu

TEXTS:


*The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age, 8th Ed. (Norton, 2006)*

CONTENT:

This course will focus on British literature of the Nineteenth Century, which is typically divided into the Romantic and the Victorian periods. The Romantic Movement itself—in all of the arts—was a broad one, dramatically affecting most of Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the English Romantic poets in particular reacted against what they regarded to be an excessive reliance on human reason. Their values and attitudes determined to a great extent the specific directions of American poetry to this day, as well as the direction of American literature in general. Much of what has come to be called the Counter Culture in contemporary America traces its lineage to the Romantics. American music, most certainly Rock n' Roll, reveals this influence, especially in the works of major figures like Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison.

The Victorian movement was in some key ways a reaction against Romantic assumptions, and in other ways an extension of it. Some of the major shifts that occurred in Victorian times set the stage for the Modern Age—the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, the conflict between faith and science, to cite just a few. Most of the great Victorian poets were, in certain essential respects, failures at divesting themselves of the Romantic spirit. Our main focus will be on the central themes and concerns of the Romantics and Victorians. Through representative poems you will become familiar with most of the two periods' major poets: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Keats for the Romantics; Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, and Hopkins for the Victorians. In addition, as time allows we will read some selected prose that reflects major values and assumptions representative of the two periods. Collectively, the two periods we will study have left a legacy that strongly affects our own contemporary values, a legacy with which at times we continue to struggle.
APPROACH:

Three pedagogical values shape almost all of my classes: Inquiry, collaboration (i.e., small group work and a discussion format), and writing for learning. My goal is to create a sense of community in the classroom, one in which active learning takes place. Typically, I try to lecture as little as possible, preferring to hear your voices as a necessary and healthy counter-balance to my own. Such an approach requires that I try to find a balance between course content and the process one goes through when encountering new and often complex ideas. I also take what some people call a reader-response approach to the class, or at least something approaching that kind of pedagogy. Basically, that means that I prefer to begin with your questions about assigned readings, your responses and personal connections, and then let class discussion build outward from the concerns and insights that you collectively express toward more "official" or established perspectives. A few of you might be uncomfortable with this kind of approach, but I encourage you to give it—and me—a chance before you consider dropping the class.

COURSE GOALS:

One primary goal this term will be, through the reading, writing, and class activities, to become familiar with major intellectual and artistic issues of the Romantic and Victorian periods, to develop some basic broader context of literary history, and to see how our own times continue to wrestle with themes and ideas that dominated 19th century literary and cultural thought. But a second goal is of equal or possibly greater importance to me: I want to help you become self-sufficient readers of difficult literary texts, and I want you to see that such work mirrors your own deepest concerns, that is, in other words, relevant to you even if it at times the language seems quite different from your own. I have lived for a long time with most of the work we will read, and I will share my thoughts and interpretations with you as well as those of major literary critics. But I will not expect you to simply accept those versions as "gospel." Instead, I want you to understand that literary criticism is necessarily marked by debate and differing, sometimes contradictory conclusions and that you are entitled to your own negotiated meanings whether they square with "official" positions or not. Ultimately, I hope you will leave the course with confidence in your own critical ability and a desire to keep reading challenging works of literature.

READING ASSIGNMENTS:

I am providing no specific calendar of reading assignments; instead, I will make assignments in class as we go from day to day. We will devote roughly equal class time to the two periods we are studying. It’s essential that you complete assigned reading prior to class, and with some degree of aesthetic attention. That means slowing down and re-reading when necessary. It will help with class discussion if you mark passages that puzzle you so we can identify and address them. It will also help if you use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words. If you miss a class session, you are responsible for finding out what we did in class and what the next day's reading assignment is. Get to know others in the class who can give you a reliable summary of what went on in class during the day you missed. I have set up a class
list serve to facilitate communications among all of you and between you and me. You will get to know others in the class soon and should have no trouble making up missed work.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS:

1) **Personal Response Journal** (See separate handout) — 400 Points
2) **In-Class Journal Entries**: Frequently I will ask you to do some brief in-class writing about what we have read or what we have been discussing. I will use these in-class writings to initiate group or large-class discussion or to help us refocus our thoughts. I will collect these each time at the end of class and return quickly without comment. Bring some extra 8 1/2 x 11 paper to class for these in-class journal writes. When I hand them back, save them and submit them as a separate section of your Personal Response Journal — 100 Points
3) **A collaborative take-home final exam** — 200 Points

FINAL GRADE: You have 700 points as the main basis for your final grade. Other factors (attendance and participation in class and group discussions) may move you up or down the scale. Typically, you would need a minimum of 90% of the points for an A, 80% for a B, and so on, but I may make adjustments to that rule once I am in a position to see the class performance as a whole.

ATTENDANCE: I expect you to be in class with your personal copy of the texts and well-prepared for all class sessions. I value your attendance as members off a learning community and will keep close track of who is in class and who is not. **Anything beyond three absences (unless they are officially University-excused) will cost you half of a grade for each additional miss.** If you have some clear reason for being late to class, please let me know. Otherwise, be on time.

NOTE: MTU’s Affirmative Action Officer has asked that all faculty include the following statement on each course syllabus:

*MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA). If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Dean of Students, (487-2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head, or the Affirmative Action Office (487-3310).*
Emily Bronte, Wuthering Heights (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1992)

CONTENT: This course will focus on British prose and poetry of the Nineteenth Century, which for our purposes can be divided into two major periods—the Romantic and the Victorian. The Romantic Movement itself—in all of the arts—was a broad one, dramatically affecting most of Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the English Romantic poets in particular reacted against what they regarded to be an excessive reliance on human reason. Their values and attitudes determined to a great extent the specific directions of American poetry to this day, as well as the direction of American literature in general. Much of what has come to be called the Counter Culture in contemporary America traces its lineage to the Romantics. American music, most certainly Rock n' Roll, reveals this influence, especially in the works of major figures like Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison. The Victorian movement was in some key ways a reaction against Romantics assumptions, and in other ways an extension of it. Most of the great Victorian poets were, in certain essential respects, failures at divesting themselves of the Romantic spirit. Our main focus will be on the central themes and concerns of the Romantics and Victorians. Through representative poems you will become familiar with most of the two periods' major poets: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Keats for the Romantics; Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, and Hopkins for the Victorians. In addition, we will read selected prose, including two relatively short but famous novels, Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights and Charles Dickens' Hard Times.

APPROACH: This class will combine informal lecture, discussion, and group work. I like to do collaborative work in my classes and will put you into one or more discussion groups soon. I also take what some people call a reader-response approach to the class, or at least something approaching that kind of pedagogy. Basically, that means that I stress your personal connections to the reading and discussion rather than some so-called "Objective" way of treating a literary text. We will talk more about this soon.

COURSE GOALS: Our primary goal this term will be, through the reading, writing, and class activities, to become demonstrably familiar with the intellectual and artistic issues of the Romantic and Victorian periods, to develop some basic broader context of literary history, and to develop your own ability to make sense of literary texts.

READING ASSIGNMENTS: I am providing no specific calendar of reading assignments; instead, I will make assignments in class as we go from day to day. You need to complete this reading prior to class, and with some degree of aesthetic attention. Wuthering Heights should be completed by about the 5th week; Hard Times by the end of the 9th. Start on them now if at all possible. If you miss a class session, you are responsible for finding out what the next day's reading assignment is. Get to know others in the class who can give you a reliable summary of what went on in class during the day you missed.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS: 1) Required of everyone is a class journal (see below), the final entry of which will be a short retrospective review of your experience in the class (300 points); 2) Option (100 points): either a formal essay of about 5-6 typed pages on Bronte and/or Dickens (due somewhere around Week 11, or a small group presentation during the last few weeks of the semester. You will have to decide which option you want to take by end of the 6th week. We'll talk more about each option later.

JOURNAL: See Separate Handout
FINAL GRADE: Pretty standard. 400 points—90% or higher=A, 87-89%=AB, 80-86%=B, etc. I may raise or lower this scale once I have looked at the overall class performance. I will also add or subtract points for those whose attendance and participation merit it.

ATTENDANCE: I expect you to be in class with your personal copy of the texts and well-prepared all of the time. This looks as if it will be a very small class, so your presence or absence (as well as your silence) will be easy enough to keep track of. Anything beyond two absences (unless they are officially University-excused) will cost you half of a grade for each additional miss. You are always responsible for missed work and assignments.

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