Senior Seminars (EN480) in English 2011-2012

Block 2: “A Narratological Problem: The Carnival vs. the Prison” (Butte)

This seminar will ask philosophical questions about narrative: why do we tell stories, to whom, and how? Why is the how important? We will discuss abstruse narratological questions about audience, closure, the fabula and the syuzhet, the politics of narrative, homodiegetic vs. heterodiegetic narrators, and free indirect discourse.

We will focus this inquiry around two dramatically divergent theories of narrative: Bakhtin’s carnivalesque (and his notion of heteroglossia) vs. Foucault’s narrative as prison. Our test cases in literature will include works such as Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel (excerpts!), Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” and Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49. There will be significant attention to film theory, with films like Hitchcock’s Vertigo, the Coen Brothers’ Raising Arizona, and Little Miss Sunshine.

Blocks 5 & 6: “Becoming Modern” (Garcia)

What came before post-modernism? “On or about December, 1910, human character changed,” wrote Virginia Woolf. This sentiment was echoed by a very different kind of writer on the other side of the Atlantic, Willa Cather, who claimed that “[s]ometime in the nineteen twenties, the world broke in two.” Literary modernisms were responses to a perception of profound changes to the human condition in Western societies. In the face of the savage losses of the Great War, the economic and cultural dominance of mass production and mass media, and the increasing influence of technology on ordinary people’s daily lives, writers and other artists explored how art could be relevant in the face of modernity. Standing in the debris left by the collapse of long-standing assumptions about the connections between truth, knowledge, and aesthetics, European and American modernist writers embraced the chaos, disorientation, and freedom that they saw as characteristic of human existence by exploring new forms and rhetorics. Informed as much by revolutionary theories such as psychoanalysis and Marxism as by fundamental social changes, modernist texts critiqued and reinvented race, gender, sexuality, and the possibilities for human relationships in what they perceived to be a radically altered world. Students in the course will explore works by Langston Hughes, James Joyce, André Breton, Djuna Barnes, T.S. Eliot, Jessie Fauset, Rebecca West, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein.