

5. *Literature as intertextual or self-reflexive construct*

Intertextuality

Discuss ways in which your understanding of “The Library of Babel” is dependent on your having read other texts. Consider both literary texts and non-literary texts, and try to be specific. If you feel stuck, pick a specific passage, theme, or image from “Babel” and discuss with your group *how you know what it means*.

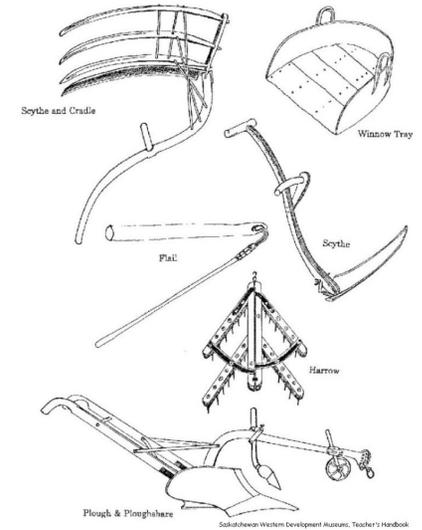
Self-reflexivity

As a group, discuss what “self-reflexivity” means. Come up with examples of self-reflexivity in other media.

In what ways is “The Library of Babel” self-reflexive in relation to literature and meaning-making?

**WRITING
& LITERATURE
WORKSHOP**

week one
“The Library of Babel”
“Cybernetics & Ghosts”
Literary Theory, 1 & 2
Seminar Paper 1
+
Meghan & Tyler



The content of workshops will vary greatly over the course of the quarter. This morning, I want you to discuss a variety of things through the lens of Literary Theory. You’ll also have a chance to begin working with Meghan and Tyler on analytical reading and creative writing.

Your work with Meghan and Tyler will happen on schedule: Your Project Group (and one other) will meet with

Meghan at _____ and with Tyler at _____ .

As a group, you’ll need to manage your time wisely in order to get through the workshop. Look at the time you have before, between, and after your meetings with Meghan & Tyler. Strive to get a section or sections of the workshop completed in those chunks of class time. If you get stuck or confused, please ask for help.

Each student should keep their own set of notes, responses, and answers to workshop questions. These responses should be explicit and neatly presented. Some questions are designed to produce conversation, which does not have to be recorded, but you should take notes as in any other program discussion.

THE LITERATURE QUESTIONNAIRE

This is the companion to the Mathematics Questionnaire you turned in on Monday. Answer these questions individually and record your answers on a separate sheet.

Some of the questions echo subjects covered in the Literary Theory text. I am not asking you to repeat ideas from that text. I want your answers, influenced by the text or not, in your own words.

Write your answers on a separate sheet from the rest of your workshop so that you can turn it in.

Questions:

What is Literature?

How does the genre of a work affect its meaning?

What is a symbol in literature?

What is the difference between literary language and non-literary language?

What is the difference between prose and poetry?

Discussion:

When everyone in your group has finished, share your answers and discuss.

In your discussion, attend to whether and how a question leads to answers that can/can't adequately be defended or justified. That is, when are your answers beliefs that seem to slip away from critical reasoning and when do they seem to have the power of general rules or definitions?

If there is consensus on a question, can you imagine a reasonable way of answering the question that might go against that consensus?

3. *Literature as fiction*

A key phrase comes at the end: "The fictionality of literature...leaves the work's relation to the world open to interpretation."

This is an wonderful fact about literature, but one you may not be used to dealing with. Often it seems as though any novel or poem we study has once-and-for-all been understood by some scholar somewhere and there's nothing more to say about it. In fact, though, scholarship tends to be invested most thoroughly in those works which resist such final interpretations, works which prompt our continual return and seem to offer or allow something else to be said.

As a group, come up with at least 5 good approaches to interpreting "The Library of Babel."

4. *Literature as Aesthetic Object*

For many of you, Borges's story may rely profoundly on its existence as an aesthetic object. That is, after the first reading, you may wonder, "What, after all, is the point?"

Kant's phrase, "purposiveness without purpose," does not annul this question, "What's the point?", but it does clarify its force in an important way. Too often we use the idea of a work of literature having a point as a way to register our disapproval of it, our distaste for it, and really our discomfort with not having "gotten it."

In what ways does this story resist conventional satisfactions in the reading experience?

In what ways does it avoid serving some purpose exterior to its own aesthetic and conceptual concerns?

Is it a good story? Consider ways to support a yes and a no answer to this question. Then, consider how this question, and the whole issue of an aesthetic object relates to Culler's preface, the tension between Literature as a set of properties or the object of special kinds of attention.

1. *Literature as the 'foregrounding' of language*

A key concept in this bit is “linguistic patterning.”

Find examples of linguistic patterning in “The Library of Babel.” How do these patterns signal the type (or genre) of fiction that this is? Is it possible to take note of the presence of these linguistic patterns and still be in doubt as to what it is you’re reading and what you might expect of it? Why or Why not?

Do you consider these patterns to be present in the text (with, perhaps, a subconscious effect) or as aspects of the text that you only see when regarding the text carefully as literature?

2. *Literature as the integration of language*

Here, a key phrase might be “relations between form and meaning.”

As a group, come up with various ways of describing the form of “The Library of Babel.”

Consider general and specific aspects of form: the genre, the point of view, the fictional time and space, the direction of time, the style or voice of the speaker, the vocabulary, the sound and feel of the language (linguistic patterning). Consider any story structures you see: plot dynamics, conflicts and tensions, dialectics, character development, journeys, transformations.

Once you’ve come up with a variety of formal observations, discuss how aspects of form relate to the meaning of the text.

CYBERNETICS & GHOSTS

We want you to spend some time digging into Calvino’s lecture using a few different strategies.

You should all have already read the essay carefully at least once and written about it, but it’s likely you have some very different ideas about what the essay is really about.

One way to approach a reading is to look carefully at the beginning and ending, roughly the first and last page.

Read

In your group, choose someone to read aloud the first page or so.

Discuss

Respond to the following questions about the introduction

1. Who do you think he might be addressing and why?
2. What careful choices is he making about his vocabulary?
3. To what does the introduction seem to be leading?

Read

In your group, choose someone else to read the last page or so.

Discuss

Respond to the following questions about the introduction

1. Does the conclusion seem to relate logically to the introduction?
2. Does the conclusion make sense by itself or does it seem highly dependent on an argument made within the body of the essay?
3. What are the key words or phrases in the conclusion?

Next, each person in your group should look through the body of the essay and choose what they think is the most important passage in the text.

Read your passage aloud to the group and explain:

- why you think it is important;
- how it relates to the other ideas in the essay.

Now, as a group, craft a meaningful and precise title for each section.

Literary Theory

This section of the workshop takes you through some of the key points in the Literary Theory text and asks you to discuss them with your group and at times produce answers to specific questions.

Page 4.5 (*I'll use decimals in a page reference to indicate approximate distance down the height of the page*)

“The main effect of theory..”

Culler gives three examples of ways that theory questions “common sense views.”

Questions 1, 2, and 3 below are in reference to the first, second, and third examples, respectively:

1. In the case of the Borges story, how could presuming the meaning of the text to be what Borges “had in mind” lead to a less adequate or less interesting reading of the text?

2. In the Borges story, where does its truth lie, if not in the story’s relation to some real circumstances or experiences?

3. In what ways does the Borges story take as its subject the *problematization* of reality?

Page 5.0

“What is Meaning?

What is an author?

What is it to read?

What is the ‘I’ or subject who writes, reads, or acts?

How do texts relate to the circumstances in which they are produced?”

For each of these 5 basic theoretical questions, find a passage in either the Calvino or the Borges that you think relates strongly to the question (or, somehow, to its answer). Do this collectively or work independently and discuss your results.

Pages 5.4-7.5

“Foucault on sex”

Culler gives an account of an act of theory by Michel Foucault. In particular, Foucault points out the constructedness of a particular conception of “sex.”

As a group, choose an important word—or several, if you like—from the Calvino essay that you think must have a similarly dramatic history. Discuss why and how you think the word/s, and the ideas behind the word/s, would change over time.

The Nature of Literature & “The Library of Babel”

Pages 28-34

Note how Culler has used the term *nature*, already suspect, to frame this section. The categories he describes here are not unassailable and are not always clearly distinct from one another. Nonetheless, they indicate some of the variety of perspectives scholars regularly take in their analysis of literature and some of the constructs that have, as unquestioned beliefs, been foundations of literary study in the past.

As a group, I want you to talk through each of the 5 “natures” in reference to “The Library of Babel.” Consider carefully the dynamic that Culler prefaces this section with, the confusing interplay and tension between perceiving literature as something with “particular properties” and as an object of a “special kind of attention.”

Each question following will attempt to guide your discussion as you work to understand Culler’s categories.