WISE: The Challenge of *Ulysses*

**Course Description**

James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is widely hailed as a masterpiece of world literature—“the most important expression which the present age has found,” as T. S. Eliot put it—yet it is perhaps equally famous for its endless capacity to defeat and frustrate its readers. This course, which is built around a careful reading of *Ulysses* in its entirety, will tackle the problem of the novel’s difficulty head-on. What *specific* features constitute its difficulty, and what ends do they serve? How do the novel’s different modes of difficulty affect how we read and interpret it? And what is at stake, politically and ideologically, in the novel’s refusal to be easily “readable”? In addition to the primary text, we will devote critical attention to its various reading apparatuses (schemas, annotations, online summaries), along with secondary readings that foreground its interpretive challenges. In the process, we will seek to develop a more refined vocabulary for talking about difficult texts, while also thinking more broadly about the role of difficulty in modernist aesthetics.

**Texts**

1. **Primary Texts**

2. **Secondary Texts** [Available on Coursework]
   - Jennifer Levine, “*Ulysses*” (1990)
   - Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” (1964)
   - Frank Kermode, “The Man in the Macintosh, the Boy in the Shirt” (1979)
   - Derek Attridge, “Molly’s Flow: The Writing of ‘Penelope’ and the Question of Women’s Language” (1989)
   - Leo Bersani, “Against *Ulysses*” (1988)

3. **Other Course Materials** [Available on Coursework]
   - Linati Schema for *Ulysses* (1920)
   - Gilbert Schema for *Ulysses* (1921)
Assignments

1. Close Reading: Describing Difficulty (4-5 pages): Choose a moment in the reading so far that stood out to you as particularly difficult, confusing, or obscure from a formal standpoint. This might be an unusual style of narration, an ambiguity of narrative perspective (as in the example from S/Z), a confusing way of dispensing information, or something else of your choosing. With maximum specificity, illuminate and explain the source of this difficulty, then provide an argument about what you think the function or purpose of this difficulty is.

2. Personal Reflection: Reading Apparatuses (4-5 pages). Provide a detailed account of a moment when you used a supplementary text during your reading—whether the Linati/Gilbert schemas, the Gifford/Seidman annotations, a work of criticism, an internet resource like SparkNotes, or some other aid (be honest!). What interrupted your reading and caused you to use this resource? Did using it resolve the problem? More broadly, how does the use of supplementary resources affect the reading experience?

3. Final Critical Essay (12-15 pages): Develop a sustained argument about an aspect of Ulysses related to difficulty, reading, or interpretation (all broadly defined). You may build from your work in the previous writing assignments. The paper must engage with at least three secondary sources. The preparatory assignments for the paper will be as follows:
   b. In-depth summary of one secondary source (not on the syllabus), with an account of how it relates to your topic (1-2 pages). To be presented in class.
   c. Draft (5-10 pages). To be worked up in class.

In addition to the writing assignments, for each class in weeks 1-8, I will ask one student to give an informal 4-5 minute presentation that provides a historical explanation or context for something that happens in the story. The object of explanation can be major or minor, plot-based or setting-based. The purpose of this exercise is to reflect on historical specificity as one of the novel’s modes of difficulty.

Grading

1. Class attendance and participation (includes short presentations): 20%
2. Short paper 1: 25%
3. Short paper 2: 25%
4. Final paper: 30%
Learning Goals

1. Students will read *Ulysses* in its entirety and gain a familiarity with its themes, formal devices, and historical contexts.
2. Students will develop an analytical competence and vocabulary that will allow them to describe formal (narrative) complexity with subtlety and precision.
3. Students will practice attending to their own affective and interpretive responses as they read, and will gain experience articulating these responses in writing while also relating them to specific textual features.
4. Students will gain familiarity with the critical-theoretical trend of “anti-hermeneutics,” chiefly through a focus on the interpretive challenges of *Ulysses* (a novel of which it is sometimes said that it both demands interpretation and yet defeats all interpretations) alongside criticism that zeroes in on this aspect of the novel. A main theme of the course will be attempting to distinguish between “descriptive” and “interpretive” critical responses (if, indeed, such an action is possible).
5. Students will learn how to produce a sustained critical argument that incorporates close reading and relevant secondary sources.

Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: [http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae)).

Honor Code

The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading.
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as
practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.

4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

**Course Material Support**

Stanford University and its faculty are committed to ensuring that all courses are financially accessible to all students. If you are an undergraduate who needs assistance with the cost of course textbooks, supplies, materials and/or fees, you are welcome to ask the Diversity & First-Gen Office for assistance by completing their questionnaire on course textbooks & supplies: [http://tinyurl.com/jpqbarm](http://tinyurl.com/jpqbarm) or by contacting Joseph Brown, the Associate Director of the Diversity and First-Gen Office (jlbrown@stanford.edu; Old Union Room 207). Dr. Brown is available to connect you with resources and support while ensuring your privacy.

### Course Schedule

#### Week 1
- Jan. 9: Reading: None
- Jan. 11: Reading: *Ulysses* Ch. 1-3

#### Week 2
- Jan. 16: NO CLASS
- Jan. 18: Reading: *Ulysses* Ch. 4-6

#### Week 3
- Jan. 23: Reading: Secondary work TBD
- Jan. 25: Reading: *Ulysses* Ch. 7-8, Jennifer Levine “*Ulysses*”

#### Week 4
- Jan. 30: Reading: *Ulysses* Ch. 9
- *Paper 1 due in class*
- Feb. 1: Reading: *Ulysses* Ch. 10-11, Gifford/Seidman annotations [excerpt]

#### Week 5
- Feb. 6: Reading: *Ulysses* Ch. 12-13
- Feb. 8: Reading: Adams *Surface and Symbol* [excerpt], Kermode “The Man in the Macintosh, the Boy in the Shirt,” Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” Bechdel *Fun Home* [excerpt]
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<td><em>Ulysses</em> Ch. 14</td>
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<td>Feb. 15</td>
<td><em>Ulysses</em> Ch. 15, Herr “Difficulty: ‘Oxen of the Sun’ and “Circe’”</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Feb. 20</td>
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* Paper 2 due in class

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* Research Proposal due Friday 3/3 at 11:59pm

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* Critical summary due in class

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* Paper draft due in class

* Final Paper due on Wednesday 3/22 at 11:59pm