ENGL 270g: Studying Narrative
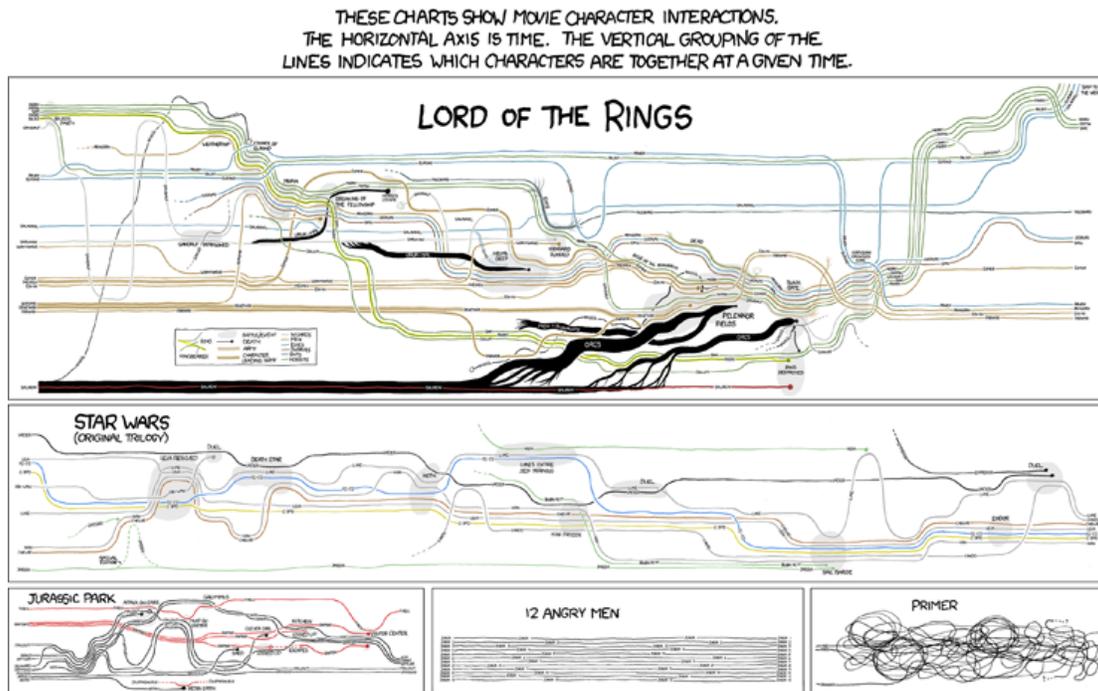
Tues / Thurs 12:30–1:50pm

Dr. Beatrice Sanford Russell
sanfordb@usc.edu
Office hours by appointment

Spring 2021

THESE CHARTS SHOW MOVIE CHARACTER INTERACTIONS.
THE HORIZONTAL AXIS IS TIME. THE VERTICAL GROUPING OF THE
LINES INDICATES WHICH CHARACTERS ARE TOGETHER AT A GIVEN TIME.

xkcd.com/657/

Course Description

People say that they "get lost" in a good story—as if a story were a maze, or a wilderness, or an unknown country. The metaphor of being lost suggests the strange magic that narratives perform in transporting us elsewhere: one minute we are sitting down with a novel or starting a movie, and the next we are suddenly penned up in a storm-exposed farmhouse on a Yorkshire moor in 1802 or haunting a small, "spiteful" building at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati in 1874. But just how does this narrative magic work? In this class we put together a basic guidebook for finding our way through narratives, analyzing major narrative features and techniques, and becoming familiar with some of the key theoretical approaches to narrative study.

We begin by examining the building blocks of narrative, including aspects of narration, characterization, and plot, ranging across different narrative platforms such as short stories, novels, narrative poems, essays, comic strips, films, and musical albums. We then follow what has been called the "ethical turn" in narrative studies in considering how narratives and our experiences of them are shaped by questions of identity, empathy, and trauma. Finally, we engage with recent experiments in narrative that challenge how we categorize and process stories, from Beyoncé's genre-bending visual album, *Lemonade*, to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's shattering of the fourth wall in *Fleabag*.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Define major narrative features and elements of narrative theory, and identify and analyze examples of these features in an unfamiliar narrative text.
- Compare how different narrative platforms use point of view, duration and pace, characterization, and other narrative elements.
- Analyze complex instances of narrative focalization and of the relationship between story and discourse.
- Evaluate narratives by describing their technical achievements.
- Draw on theoretical texts in order to reflect on how narratives explore identity, alterity, trauma, and sympathy.

Course Books

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847; Penguin, 2002)
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927; Harcourt, 1989)
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; Vintage, 2004)
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf, 2014)
H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008)

Assigned texts not in the course books will be posted to Blackboard. Last I checked, the Abbott text was available online through USC Libraries' website.

Description of Assignments and Grading Breakdown

This seminar is designed around weekly intensive work rather than building to cumulative, high-stakes assignments. As such, it depends on your curiosity, your willingness to take intellectual risks, and your lively engagement with the readings, with one another, with me, and with yourself.

Most class meetings will require pre-work (annotating course readings and/or responding to framing questions) and post-work (such as writing a paragraph digesting a topic discussed in class). This will count towards your **classwork** grade, along with other forms of participation including responding to classmates' writing, speaking/typing in the Zoom chat, and adding to the class Google doc.

You will complete **six short exercises**, which range from applying techniques for analyzing narrative to writing creative experiments.

You will maintain **narrative encyclopedia pages** for two narrative concepts explaining what they mean, what they do, and how they work in our various course texts.

You will sign up to serve as a **scribe** for one class in the semester, where you will post major topics, questions, and points made in class discussion to the class Google doc.

You will write a **500-word review** of a narrative that you like (not from the syllabus), evaluating it using at least three narrative terms from the class, and post it to the class Slack channel.

You will complete a **take-home final exam**, in which you apply narrative terms from the class to analyze familiar and unfamiliar texts, and discuss how certain ethical questions reshape your understanding of course readings.

Assignment	Points
Exercises (6 at 75 points each)	450
Narrative Encyclopedia	100
Classwork	125
Narrative Review	100
Scribe	25
Final Exam	200

Final Grade: A 930–1000; A- 895–929; B+ 870–894; B 830–869; B- 795–829; C+ 770–794; C 730–769

Expectations

You will:

- **participate in each class**. Participation in a remote semester will be more flexible and more creative than in person. It may include: annotating/commenting on course readings; writing responses to classmates' comments; speaking in class; listening actively; typing in Zoom chat; and contributing to the class Google doc. If at all possible, please keep your video on while in Zoom meetings so that we can feel more like humans and less like robots.
- **closely read assigned texts,** making notes while you read, and come to class prepared for discussion.
- **work to produce creative and intelligent writing.**
- **turn your work in on time.** Exercises and essays turned in after the due date will be penalized by ten points for each day that they are late. Contact me ahead of time if you will need an extension.

I will:

- **prepare for class time** while remaining flexible to respond to your interests, questions, and concerns.
- **approach each day with enthusiasm** and an openness to learning alongside you.
- **communicate clearly and in a timely manner** about assignments, deadlines, and grading criteria.
- **be available** over email and by appointment over video to discuss issues relating to the course, and to serve as a resource for your reading, thinking, and writing.
- **read your work carefully, provide thoughtful feedback, and evaluate it fairly** according to clear standards.

Schedule of Readings

	Topics	Readings	Tasks
Week 1 Jan 19	beginnings, middles, ends	Helen Oyeyemi, "books and roses" first paragraphs of *Wuthering Heights, To the Lighthouse, Beloved*, and *Citizen*	
Jan 21	**Narration** narrative levels; embedding	Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, chs. 1–7 Abbott, "Framing narratives," pp. 28–30	
Week 2 Jan 26	story v. discourse (order)	*Wuthering Heights*, chs. 8–12 Abbott, "Defining narrative," pp. 13–20	
Jan 28	story v. discourse (duration, frequency)	*Wuthering Heights*, chs. 13–21 Gerard Genette, fr. *Narrative Discourse*	
Week 3 Feb 2	narrator; narratee; focalization; distance	*Wuthering Heights*, chs. 22–27 Abbott, "Narration," pp. 67–78	Turn in Exercise 1
Feb 4	paratext; implied author	*Wuthering Heights*, chs. 28–34 Charlotte Brontë, Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights* J. Hillis Miller, fr. "*Wuthering Heights*: Repetition and the 'Uncanny'"	
Week 4 Feb 9	adaptation	Kate Beaton, "Wuthering Heights," parts 1–6 Kate Bush, "Wuthering Heights" William Wyler, *Wuthering Heights* Abbott, "Adaptation across media," pp. 112–127	Post drafts of encyclopedia entries
Feb 11	film narration	Alfred Hitchcock, *Vertigo* Seymour Chatman, "Point of View in Film," pp. 158–61	
Week 5 Feb 16	**Characterization** character systems	Honore de Balzac, "Facino Cane" Alex Woloch, fr. *The One and the Many*, pp. 13–14	Turn in Exercise 2
Feb 18	dramatic functions; character psychology; agency	Vladimir Propp, fr. "The Functions of Dramatis Personae" Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" Abbott, "Character and self in narrative," pp. 130–8	
Week 6 Feb 23	plot vs. character	Joel and Ethan Coen, *The Big Lebowski* Aristotle, fr. *Poetics*	
Feb 25		Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, "The Window," chs. 1–8	

	direct v. indirect v. free indirect style	Dorrit Cohn, fr. "Narrated Monologue," pp 104–7	
Week 7 Mar 2	**Plot** agon	*To the Lighthouse*, "The Window," chs. 9–14 Abbott, "Narrative negotiation," pp. 193–99	Turn in Exercise 3
Mar 4	causality	*To the Lighthouse*, "The Window," chs. 15–19 Abbott, "The rhetoric of narrative," pp. 40–46	
Week 8 Mar 9	gaps; acts vs. happenings	*To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes" Abbott, "Interpreting Narrative," pp. 90–97	
Mar 11	autobiographical elements; discovery, peripety	*To the Lighthouse*, "The Lighthouse" Maria DiBattista, fr. "To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale" Aristotle, fr. *Poetics*	
Week 9 Mar 16	suspense; surprise constituent vs. supplementary events; closure	Abbott, "Closure," pp. 57–64 Akira Kurosawa, *Rashomon* Abbott, "Defining Narrative," 22–24	Turn in Exercise 4
Mar 18	**Narrative Ethics**	Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies" Wolfgang Iser, fr. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach"	
Week 10 Mar 23		WELLNESS DAY – NO CLASS	
Mar 25		Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Part One, chs. 1–3 Susan S. Lanser, fr. "Toward a Feminist Narratology"	
Week 11 Mar 30		*Beloved*, Part One, chs. 4–8 Saidiya Hartman, fr. "Venus in Two Acts," pp. 1–4	Turn in Exercise 5
Apr 1		*Beloved*, Part One, chs. 9–14 Suzanne Keen, fr. "A Theory of Narrative Empathy"	
Week 12 Apr 6		*Beloved*, Part One, chs. 15–19 Cathy Caruth, fr. *The Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 1–4	
Apr 8		*Beloved*, Part Two, chs. 20–25 Homi Bhaba, fr. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation"	Turn in narrative review
Week 13 Apr 13		*Beloved*, Part Three, chs. 26–28 Kimberly Chabot Davis, fr. "Postmodern Blackness: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the End of History"	
Apr 15	**Narrative Experiments**	Beyoncé, *Lemonade*	
Week 14 Apr 20		Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*, Parts 1–5	Turn in Exercise 6

Apr 22		WELLNESS DAY – NO CLASS	
Week 15 Apr 25		*Citizen*, Parts 6–7	
Apr 29		Phoebe Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, Season 2, Eps 1–6	
Week 16			**Final Exam**

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:
Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems:
Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.
https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255
Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/

Sexual Assault Resource Center
For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: http://sarc.usc.edu/

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX compliance – (213) 740-5086
Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class.
https://equity.usc.edu/

Bias Assessment Response and Support
Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/

Student Support & Advocacy – (213) 821-4710
Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/

Diversity at USC – https://diversity.usc.edu/ Tabs for Events, Programs and Training, Task Force (including representatives for each school), Chronology, Participate, Resources for Students

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action. These strictures may extend to behaviors outside the classroom that are related to the course.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis
In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.

Definition of Excellence in Teaching – USC Department of English

All writing is creative, and all civic engagement requires a sophisticated understanding of discourse and interpretation. The USC Department of English is committed to the power of the story, the word, and the image. We analyze and organize complex ideas, evaluate qualitative information, anticipate how real audiences respond to language, and study behaviors of complex characters leading uncertain lives with competing values. We develop critical abilities for a successful life, but our stories tell us why life is worth living.

Excellence in teaching is an active engagement with these commitments, perspectives, and values. A student with a major in **English** should graduate with an appreciation for (1) the relations between representation and the human soul, and (2) the relations between words and ideas. Teachers will encourage this appreciation through their knowledge and conveyance of the subject, the appropriateness of instructional materials, and the quality of their students' responses. We expect our students to:
   o understand the major representations in English discourse from earliest beginnings to the current moment; all literatures exist in conversation with earlier literatures;
   o organize and interpret evidence;
   o feel the experiences of others, both by engaging in literatures and by their own efforts to create new literatures;
   o understand how periods, cultural intentions, and literary genres differ;
   o grasp the skills and theories of interpretation, and the history of our own discipline;
   o see how interpretive interests shift with time and place;
   o attend to linguistic details of semantics, phrasing, and structure;
   o assume there are reasonable alternative understandings of a text;
   o adjudicate differences through reasoned arguments that honestly engage counter-arguments.

Our students will have lives in very different arenas, but all calling for skills in discourse, empathy, civil argument, and civic engagement. We cannot and should not say what those careers will be; we train students for jobs that have not yet been invented.

English Department students with an interdisciplinary major in **Narrative Studies** should expect instruction that inculcates an appreciation for all of the above, and coordinates with definitions of teaching excellence in USC's corresponding departments.

The Department of English adheres to the modalities of instruction published in the "USC Definition of Excellence in Teaching."

Approved September 18, 2018
Undergraduate Studies
Committee
Department of English