

ALONE IN THE CROWD

Alienation in Modern Short Fiction

"Ce grand malheur, de ne pouvoir être seul."

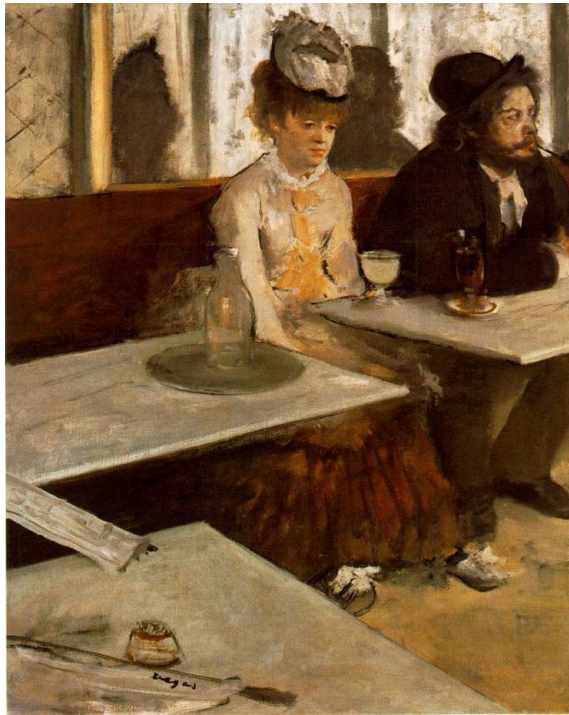
Jean de la Bruyère

Fall Quarter 2009, University of Washington

Course instructor: William C. Mitchell

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Office Hours: 9:30-10:30 M/W. Lewis Annex 210.



Degas, Edgar. *L'Absinthe*. 1876. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Being alone was an impossible luxury for a seventeenth century courtier in the position of Jean de la Bruyère. For the protagonist of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," solitude is at once impossible and yet strangely unavoidable. Both an anonymous face amid the masses and an individual searching for something always just beyond his grasp, Poe's character underlines one of the enduring ambiguities of modernity: being alone in the crowd and the profound empowerment and alienation that this feeling occasions.

This class will examine a broad range of texts from multiple national literatures that all speak to an abiding and pervasive sense of alienation in the modern world. From mental illness and the dehumanization of bureaucracy to the ostracism of the abnormal and the specter of religious and ethnic discrimination, the forms of that alienation are multiple and diverse. To better understand them, we

will ask what brought about the changes in the social, political and economic landscape of Europe and North America that so profoundly altered the meaning of la Bruyère's words in only one hundred fifty years. Further, what were the implications of those changes on the relationship of individuals to their societies? What role does an increasingly urban population play? How do ever expanding bureaucracies effect the individuals they govern? More broadly, what exactly is modernity? How do we define it and how does it differ from its predecessors? To answer these questions we will turn to the texts themselves and examine how they reflect the climate of their time and how they approach the problems of a world of rapid and radical change.

Objectives

I believe teaching should challenge students while demonstrating the significance, the pertinence, and even the joy to be had in ideas. I will work to provide an environment that is conducive to achieving the goals of the class by being prepared, attentive to your needs within reason, timely in providing feedback, and generally open to the ideas you bring to our discussions. I hope you will leave this class with both the ability to think and speak in an informed manner about the course material and its broader intellectual context, and also with a renewed enthusiasm for learning.

With this in mind, by the end of the quarter students should . . .

- Improve their close reading and analytic skills for approaching a diverse range of sources.
- Advance in their writing and rhetorical skills.
- Come to an understanding of the concept of Modernity and its principle elements.
- Progress in their communication skills.
- Build writing competence that will serve as a foundation for future academic and professional work.

Grades

A successful final grade in this course will be the result of an ongoing commitment to the material, ideas and people with whom you work. It will require that you complete readings on time, participate in class, and work diligently on papers. Grades will be determined according to the following breakdown:

Participation

The success of this course will depend largely on your active participation in both class discussions and your work in preparing written responses to the class texts. Attendance is crucial but is only the beginning of creating a participatory environment; it is also incumbent that each student contributes his or her utmost. Participation will account for 20% of your grade.

In-Class Free Writing

Each week, students will be asked to write on the major themes of the week. Papers that address the material and demonstrate that students have carefully considered the topic will receive a “+.” Papers that show knowledge of the material will receive a “✓.” Papers that address the topic but that do not demonstrate any knowledge of the material will receive the low grade of “-.” Free writes will account for 20% of your grade. Peer review participation is part of this grade.

Papers

Coherent, well-crafted writing is the cornerstone of this class and your grade will be largely determined on your ability to express yourself in two analytic papers. In three to four pages, these papers will address the central themes of the course as they appear in two or more texts. Active participation in peer editing will be factored into your paper grade. Analytic papers will account for 40% of your grade.

Final

The final will be composed of a meeting with the instructor during the last week of class and a four to five page paper due on the Monday of exam week. At the meeting you will be asked to indicate the elements of the class that most piqued your interest, offer an evaluation of both the class as a whole and your work therein, and present a working topic for your final paper. Topics will be largely open but must be approved by me during our meeting. The final paper will account for 20% of your grade.

Conduct

I expect the tenor and tone of the class will be respectful and safe for everyone. If, however, a problem arises at any point in the quarter, please bring it to my attention and I will do my best to offer a resolution. In the eventuality I am unable to do so, you may contact my coordinator, Marshall Brown at mbrown@u.washington.edu.

Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic honesty and will not be tolerated. When in doubt, err on the side of caution or contact me directly for guidance on appropriate usage of outside sources. For more information on the University of Washington's policy on academic honesty please refer to the following site: <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/issue1/honesty.htm>

Texts

In addition to the three novels listed below, which are available at the bookstore, a reading packet will also be required. This packet is available for purchase at The Ave Copy Center.

- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Vintage: New York, 1994.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Translated by Breon Mitchell. Schocken: New York, 1999.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. Scribner: New York, 2006.
- Course Packet
 - Charles Baudelaire, "The Crowds," "To a Passerby," "Parisian Dreams," and "The Seven Old Men" from *Les Fleurs du Mal*.
 - Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," from *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*.
 - Nikolai Gogol, "The Overcoat," from *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*.
 - Nikolai Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman," from *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*.
 - T.S. Eliot, "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and "The Waste Land."
 - Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro."
 - James Joyce, "The Dead," from *Dubliners*.
 - Franz Kafka, "The Hunger Artist," and "In the Penal Colony."

The UW has several writing centers available to students. I encourage you to take advantage of their services to help you throughout the writing process. You can find information at the following link: <http://faculty.washington.edu/jwholmes/uwwrite.html>

Course Schedule

Week One (September 30 – October 2)

What is modernity? What exactly do we mean by the idea and what makes it a useful analytic concept when approaching the literature and culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth century? During this abbreviated week I will give a brief introduction to the course and some of the key concepts we will address throughout the quarter.

Readings

- Charles Baudelaire, “The Crowds,” “To a Passerby,” “Parisian Dreams,” and “The Seven Old Men” from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Poet and art critic Baudelaire’s work had a profound impact on the literature and arts of his age. One of the central figures of his seminal work was the image of the *flâneur*, the idle observer of city life. With these four poems we are introduced to this figure and some of the central themes of the class.

Week Two (October 5 – 9)

Crowds: How are they differentiated from other forms of social gathering? What liberties do they allow? What limitations do they impose? Modern cities brought with them new forms of social organization along with new anxieties to go with them. This week we take a look at crowds and their correlative solitude.

Readings

- Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd,” from the *Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. A detective story without a crime? What drives the Man of the Crowd on his circuit through the city? Why is he a dangerous and yet attractive figure for the narrator? An intriguing story that trades in many of the tensions of the modern crowd. **Finish by Monday.**
- Nikolai Gogol, “The Overcoat,” from *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*. What separates the crowd from the individual? What are the markers of difference and inclusion? Gogol’s story raises, in a humorous fashion, the absurdity of conformity and the pressure it exerts. **Finish by Wednesday.**

Important Dates

- Friday: Free write

Week Three

This week we slide into madness. The nineteenth century was preoccupied with madness and the literature of the age reflects this abundantly. What is normal and what are the ways in which it is defined? What happens when we are isolated and left to our own devices? What is the result when new ideas run into old forms of thinking?

Readings

- Nikolai Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman" from *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*. The lines that divide the sane from the insane may be difficult to define, but they are easy to discern. Gogol shows us just how quickly the difference can come into focus. **Finish by Monday.**
- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*. From the far side of sanity back to the edge, the first novel of the course introduces us to one of the classic figures of modern literature—the alienated writer. Who are the gentlemen the narrator is addressing? Where is the conflict? What kind of hero does Dostoevsky present us? **Read through page 41 by Wednesday.**

Important Dates

- Wednesday: Writing Workshop on Developing a Topic
- Friday: Free write

Week Four (October 19 – 23)

We continue our discussion of Dostoevsky's novel by delving into the interpersonal relationships of the narrator. Has his alienation become a means of self-preservation, a way of masking a crushing solitude? We also look forward to our first analytic paper and peer editing session.

Readings

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (continued). **Please read pages 42-82 by Monday and pages 82-130 by Tuesday.**

Important Dates

- Wednesday: Writing Workshop on Thinking About Structure
- Friday: Peer editing activity. Please bring three printed copies of your rough draft to class.

Week Five (October 26 – 30)

We move into the twentieth century with two of the most important and controversial voices of early modernism. The crowds dissipate and the questions turn inward: how do we live our lives in an age without precedent? How do we understand ourselves in relationship to history and tradition, to others? What are the limits and limitations of language?

Readings

- T.S. Eliot, “The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and “The Waste Land.” These two poems, among the most celebrated English poems of the twentieth century, cemented Eliot’s place within the pantheon of modernism. They are as difficult as they are intriguing and we will surely only scratch the surface—but what a surface! **Please read “The Love Song” by Monday and “The Waste Land” by Wednesday.**
- Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro.” The quintessential imagist poem from “the better maker.” Pound’s brief description of a metro station reduces the hustle and bustle of the underground into two short lines but somehow manages capture something essential in the process.

Important Dates

- Monday: Paper One due at the beginning of class.
- Friday: Free write

Week Six (November 2 – 6)

Amid the comfortable trappings of family and friends, what do we really know about those that are closest to us? What binds us together? What keeps us forever at arm’s length? What are the limits of intimacy?

Readings

- James Joyce, “The Dead,” from *Dubliners*. Best known for his ground-breaking novel *Ulysses*, Joyce was also an accomplished short story writer. Mundane and yet powerful, “The Dead” is a masterpiece of the genre and shows the writer at the top of his game. **Finish by Monday**

Important Dates

- Wednesday: Writing Workshop on sentences.
- Friday: Free write

Week Seven (November 9 – 13)

We turn the tables of observation this week, the anonymity of the crowd replaced by the piercing gaze of that same crowd. The spectacle takes center stage and we ask what judgments can be made concerning individuals and what moral system allows them? Who gets to determine that system at all? How far are we willing to push the system and what lives on its fringe?

Readings

- Franz Kafka, “The Hunger Artist,” and “In the Penal Colony.” The observed and the observer, the judge and the judged—these short works make us consider the distinctions from the exploded rubble of a moral world that no longer holds. **Please finish “The Hunger Artist” by Monday and “In the Penal Colony” by Thursday.**

Important Dates

- Wednesday: Veteran’s Day Holiday – no class
- Friday: Free write

Week Eight (November 16 – 20)

Few writers have captured the opacity of the modern condition with the gut-wrenching absurdity (and honesty) of Kafka. Everything we have known disappears, and we are confronted with the faceless, pitiless impossibility of comprehending a world that imposes its irrational power over us.

Readings

- Franz Kafka, *The Trial*. Joseph K. awakes one morning to find himself arrested for an unnamed crime he is sure he didn’t commit. The novel traces K.’s struggle against an impenetrable bureaucracy. **Read to page 87 by Monday, page 165 by Wednesday, and finish the novel for Friday**

Important Dates

- Wednesday: Writing Workshop on punctuation.
- Friday: Peer editing activity. Please bring three printed copies of your rough draft to class.

Week Nine (November 23 – 27)

The impotence of K. finds a new, more concrete resonance in Hemingway’s seminal novel. The interwar years seem awash with the search for meaning but short on results. What has the Great War done to the psyche of an entire generation? What are the possibilities of making meaning?

Readings

- Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*. Behind the debauchery of Paris in the jazz age, the fishing and the bullfighting lurks the despair of a disillusioned generation.). Please read through. **Please read through page 71 by Monday..**

Important Dates

- Wednesday: Free write
- Thursday and Friday: Thanksgiving Break – no class

Week Ten (November 30 – December 4)

We continue our examination of Hemingway, looking more closely at the relationships at the heart of the novel. How do we make meaning for ourselves when the future seems alien and untenable? Is there hope?—Isn't it pretty to think so?

Readings

- Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*. **Read through page 173 for Monday and finish the novel by Wednesday..**

Important Dates

- Wednesday: Writing Workshop on revision.
- Friday: Free write

Week Eleven (December 7 – 11)

This week will be spent in interviews. You will present your final paper topics to me for approval and discussion and have the opportunity to evaluate your progress in the class.

Important Dates

- December 14: Final paper due by 5:00 p.m. at my office.