

Periodisk emnerapport

LIT2300 Litteraturteoretisk emne: The Theory and History of Reading (Autumn 2016)

LIT2300, as a course in literary theory building on the general introduction in LIT2000, offers students an in-depth engagement with a particular approach or topic in literary theory that changes every year. In autumn 2016, I taught the course under the title “The Theory and History of Reading”. We looked at the different ways in which reading, an everyday activity students are very familiar with, is conceptualised in different ways across different strands and traditions of literary theory and how such theories change across history. Students responded very positively to the choice of topic as a way into their independent engagement with literary theory.

Readings. The assigned reading encompasses about 500 pages of literary theory, as well as a novel. The theoretical texts addressed (1) the reader figure as it is embedded in novels such as *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Madame Bovary*; (2) model readers emergent from theoretical approaches such as structuralism, deconstructivism and reader response studies; (3) cultural practices and cultural capital around reading literature; (4) the historical development of reading, in light of media and cultural changes; (5) cognitive arguments about literary reading and (6) debates about the changing role of literature and reading in the digital world. The pensum covers texts from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century and gives a truly interdisciplinary perspective on how literary reading can be and has been theorised, which invites to students to compare these approaches with each other as well as with their own practice and experience in reading.

The theoretical texts were all article-length and usually presented in pairs in an individual session. For example, we read Stanley Fish’s critique of Iser’s *Der Akt des Lesens*, as well as Wolfgang Iser’s response, taking a step further from students’ reading Iser in LIT2000, in order to understand different ways of doing reader response criticism and to get a sense of the dynamics of scholarly exchanges between theorists. Other pairings included Socrates’ indictment of writing and reading as a cultural activity that undermines critical thinking and Maryanne Wolf’s discussion of how literary modes of reading might maintain critical thinking in the digital age, or Pierre Bourdieu’s statements on reading as an elite practice and Ann Radway’s investigation of reading the popular romance.

The assigned novel was Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, which engages with reading the novel, the materiality of the medium of the book, cultural anxieties around new texts and different types of reading in its character constellations.

Teaching. Because we started relatively late into the semester, we had twelve meetings with ten two-hour sessions and two four-hour sessions. In preparation for class (and to serve as a reading guide), students were given small tasks, such as tweet-length summaries of the articles, identifying key words or tracing the moves of argument in the margins of the articles. In the classroom, we compared what they found in order to establish a common ground for understanding the articles, to discuss how to approach unfamiliar critical texts and finally how to take a stance of their own in relation to the claims and arguments of these articles. It was important to establish such common ground, since several students from beyond Comparative Literature had signed on to LIT2300.

Students wrote a kvalifiseringsoppgave, building on the techniques of analysis and argumentation which we practiced through these tasks and our classroom discussions. They were all given individual, personal feedback from the lecturer in short face-to-face meetings. In addition to teaching in seminar sessions, students visited the old collection of the University Library and were given a tour by librarian Signe Brandsæter, where they could see

original editions of some of the books we had discussed in the course and learn more about libraries and their facilitation of reading. Supported by faglig-sosiale midler, LIT2300 was also visited by Dr Mette Steenberg, giving students the opportunity to prepare their own critical questions to an expert in bibliotherapy.

Resources and infrastructure at the disposal of LIT2300 were excellent.

Examination. Students wrote a home exam, where they were asked to both demonstrate their mastery of different theoretical approaches to reading and to develop their own perspectives. For deeper engagement with literary theory, the exam form is ideal, and, as detailed earlier, students' preparation for class and our discussion in class have been designed to feed into this form of final examination.

Learning outcomes and module description. As evidenced by the exam, which all students passed and for which B was the average grade, the learning outcomes of (1) "solid knowledge of the problem and critical approaches to it" and (3) "presenting scholarly arguments in a clear and reasoned fashion" were easily achieved. Most students also drew on the discussion of literary works in the articles we had read or brought their own literary examples to bear in their essays, so that they attained outcome (2) "applying this knowledge in literary analysis", too. My co-sensor, Prof. Tone Selboe, also observed the overall excellent quality of the work submitted in the final exam.

From sixteen students who attended the first session, eleven took the kvalifiseringsoppgave and ten took the exam. The feedback I received from the official questionnaires, personal responses from the students and the notes of those who cited external circumstances for withdrawing from the course was generally very positive.

LIT2300 seems to be well placed in the programme, building on the general introduction to literary theory in LIT2000 and developing an in-depth treatment of a particular topic next to the specialist courses on a literary period (LIT2320) and a literary genre (LIT2340).

Changes to previous LIT2300 courses. Most previous incarnations of LIT2300 pursued a particular direction within literary theory, such as hermeneutics, phenomenology or structuralism/poststructuralism. Two reports on LIT2300, from 2010 and 2013, indicate that this format has worked well in the past. My own approach was to change focus from a particular theoretical approach to theorising about a particular object, namely, reading. This comes with the challenge that different frames of reference have to be established for each article which students read, but it gives students practice in identifying how different frames of reference inform an argument and to keep different perspectives at play when discussing an issue. LIT2300 as a subject offers many possibilities to develop students' critical understanding of theory and to take them a step along the way in becoming critics of literature themselves.

A further change to previous LIT2300 was English as a language of teaching and examination. Students responded well to this and showed themselves very capable of discussing and writing in English. All exams were submitted in English, even though the possibility to write in Norwegian was given.

Suggestions for improvements. No immediate suggestions.

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