

Tulane University
English 101/Russian 119
Czech Literature and Film

George Cummins, Slavic Department
Office Hours: MW 1:00-1:50 T 11:45-12:30
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Fall Semester, 2007
MW 3:00-4:50
room: tba

Course Description.

This is an intensive writing course centered on the relation of art and national identity in the Czech Republic. The student will use this intellectual core as a springboard to learn strategies of building academic papers, including topic organization, narration, marshalling of data, argumentation, and summation. You will receive guided instruction in the art of writing coherently and gracefully in the discourse of the university. You will learn techniques for developing your own individual style. You will learn how academics incorporate research materials and what conventions govern the citation and commentary of the ideas of scholars. You will become familiar with the range of resource materials in film and literature that are at your disposal at Tulane. You will practice the art of revision and analysis of your own work. You will learn to generate and arrange ideas, how to support claims, how to revise and edit a draft, and how to cultivate your own personal voice. Above all, you will learn how to read critically and analytically and how to use your reading to generate ideas for your own work.

Commentary on our work and late revisions to our work schedule may be found at my website, www.tulane.edu/~gcummins; click on Russ 119/Engl 101. Check this site as directed in class.

Course Introduction.

Post-Socialist Czechoslovakia has split into two small Central European states, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The ČR, known rather awkwardly as Czech, or Česko, is made up of the Bohemian and Moravian lands, formerly of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, north and northwest of Austria and Vienna. Bohemia is the westernmost Slavic region and the Czechs are the most western and democratic in history and outlook of all the Slavs. Their history has been one of domination and repression by their enormous and powerful neighbors, first Germany, then the Soviet Union. Legend tells that Grandfather Czech told his people to stop wandering and to plant their roots at the river Vltava on the heights of present-day Prague, but the Czechs, with their characteristic ironic, self-conscious resignation at the hands of their apparent fate, now say Grandfather ought to have gone on, as far away from the Huns and the Russians as he could get.

The Czechs have had to make the most of a bad situation, as their literary hero of the First World War, Josef Švejk put it: “Well, don’t say you are innocent. Nobody anytime anywhere was innocent. Jesus Christ was innocent and they crucified him. You had better fess up and you’ll feel better at once. And have another beer!”

The Czechs are masters of poetry, essays, journalism, linguistic theory, and prose fiction; they have always loved the theater and, in the last half century, film, an art they have made their own. This is a spectacular range of virtuosity for a “small nation”, as they call themselves, a nation of ten million people, not even as great in population as New York City. They love humor and are especially good at poking fun at each other. They can be very small-minded — they joke of themselves that a Czech, learning that a neighbor has a new barn, does not yearn to get a new barn himself, as an American might; rather, he wants to burn down his neighbor’s barn so they may be equally deprived together. There is even a Czech word for this: *nepřejícnost*, “not wishing something for someone else.”

Our course will introduce the American student to this remarkable people, asking you to ponder the following questions: what does Czech art tell us about how the Czechs understand the world and themselves? Does their art reveal their own self-image? Is there a national Czech character, as they themselves seem to believe, and if so, what is its nature? Can we or ought we expect the national art of a small and homogeneous country to speak to these national questions?

The tools of this course will be (1) Czech novels and stories available at the Tulane Bookstore:

The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk, Jaroslav Hašek
War with the Newts, Karel Čapek
Too Loud a Solitude, Bohumil Hrabal
I Served the King of England, Bohumil Hrabal
The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Milan Kundera

Available in scanned pdf files for emailing to you will be
Cutting it Short, Bohumil Hrabal
Bech in Czech, John Updike

(2) Czech films for viewing both in class and in the Language Learning Center, Newcomb Hall 408. (NB: students are not expected to have sophisticated film-viewing techniques or analytic tools .)

Films not derived from our books include:

Fireman’s Ball, Miloš Forman (region 1)
Loves of a Blonde, Miloš Forman (region 1)
Closely Watched Trains, Jiří Menzel (region 1)
Divided We Fall, Jan Hřebejk (region 1)

Festival of Snowdrops, Jiří Menzel (European)

Filmic versions of books we will read:

The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk, Karel Steklý (European)

Cutting it Short, Jiří Menzel (European)

Unbearable Lightness of Being, Philip Kaufman (region 1)

Assignments.

Five two-page responses, designed to help you develop ideas and topics for discussion. These short papers will also serve as source material for a longer paper. Please type, with double-spaced margins, and bring to class in hard copy. These texts, less formally developed than the papers to come, will contain your own first reactions and opinions. These will be graded, as will longer papers, for content, structure, and form (see below for more details).

Two five-page papers. A rough draft of each paper will be submitted at least one class session before the due dates (see work schedule below), and we will workshop these drafts together in class.

One research paper, eight to ten pages in length, due at the end of the semester. This paper will involve secondary research with bibliographical and citational conventions. The paper may incorporate ideas from either the two-page responses or one of your five-page papers. We will conduct in-depth workshops on your rough draft of this paper so that you have good direction toward the final text. You should also consult me individually on this work as well as your progress in the course.

All of your essays should be typed, double-spaced with the appropriate 1-inch margins, and a 12/point font. Do not use a cover sheet. Include your name and email address on the first page of each paper. Cultivate careful re-reading and revision, so that even drafts will look presentable and free of surface errors.

Grading.

Participation, attendance, workshops and quizzes: 20 points

Response papers: 20 points (four points each)

Paper One: 15 points

Paper Two: 15 points

Paper Three: 30 points

Grading will be based on *content* (originality, development of ideas and argumentation, *structure* (focus, cohesion, smoothness of transition, summation), *style* (grace, power and tone of your own personal voice, felicity of expression), and *grammar* (English usage).

Grading Scale.

93-100	A	72-76	C
89-92	A-	69-71	C-
86-88	B+	67-68	D+
82-85	B	62-66	D
79-81	B-	58-61	D-
77-78	C+	x-57	F

Aids.

I heartily recommend William Strunk's "little book" *The Elements of Style*, revised and expanded by E. B. White (the library has numerous copies). This is a concise classic of prescriptive English usage and it is fun to read. For the final paper, I recommend *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Any good style is first of all internally consistent and clear. All notes and bibliography must follow a single format. Tulane rhetorician T. R. Johnson has a useful fifteen-page handout on learning to develop your personal writing style which you may find at www.tulane.edu/~writing/strategies.htm. Click on Teaching Style.

Attendance.

Regular and punctual attendance is required. Attendance will be taken at the beginning of class. If you have more than four (4) unexcused absences over the course of the term, your grade will be lowered by one point (A to A-, A- to B+) for each additional class you miss. Excessive absence is grounds for failing the course. If you are absent from class with or without an excuse, you are nevertheless responsible for any material that was covered in class during your absence.

Honor Code.

All Tulane students are required to behave according to the Honor Code. It states, in part, "In all work submitted for academic credit, students are expected to represent themselves honestly. The presence of a student's name on any work submitted in completion of an academic assignment is considered to be an assurance that the work and ideas are the result of the student's own intellectual effort, stated in her or his own words, and produced independently, unless clear and explicit acknowledgment of the sources for the work and ideas is included. This principle applies to papers, tests, homework assignments, artistic productions, laboratory reports, computer programs, and other assignments. Students are expected to report to the instructor or associate dean any observed violations of the Honor Code." Proper citation methods will be discussed in class. For the complete text of the Honor Code, please visit <http://www.tulane.edu/~jruscher/dept/Honor.Code.html>.

“The Honor Code of Tulane University defines plagiarism as unacknowledged or falsely acknowledged presentation of another person's ideas, expressions, or original research as one's own work. Such use is defined as plagiarism regardless of the intent of the student.”

Disability.

Please contact me on the first day of class to discuss any disability you may have. Please bring documentation.

Schedule of Work

Reading and writing assignments are to be completed by the beginning of class. This schedule is subject to change! Check my website when so advised in class.

Week One

W 29 August

Introduction to the course. The Czech language and nation. Writing exercise.

Week Two

M 3 Sep

Labor Day Holiday.

W 5 Sep

Read *Bech in Czech*, sent to you in pdf files by email. Write a two-page response paper for today.

Henry Bech is a “quasi-famous” fictional American Jewish writer in Prague. He savors the sights and smells of old central Europe in the 1980's. He is taken to Kafka's grave in Strašnice cemetery, meets with dissident writers and establishment Communist party officials and is hosted by the American ambassador and his wife. Possible themes for response paper: Bech's personality as revealed in Prague; the tenor of the place and the people and the feel of history, seen by Bech; the Czech attitude toward literature and art. Write on a *single* topic; this essay is rich and complicated. Have fun, don't panic.

Week Three

M 10 Sep Introduction to *Good Soldier Švejk*. We will read Part I; for this week, read the preface and I chapters 1-11, The famous film with Hrušínský the elder in the part of Švejk, done in the 1950's, presents this iconic anti-hero with tremendous visual and verbal faithfulness to the original. We will view excerpts in class and the film will be on reserve in the Language Learning laboratory for multi-region viewing .

W 12 Sep In-class writing exercise on your impressions of the Hašek text: what is the essence of Hašek's comedy? What does the figure of Švejk represent? What is the Czech attitude toward the onset of World War I? Discussion and analysis.

Week Four

M 17 Sep Read Švejk I, chapters 12-Epilogue, and II, chapter 1. View the film – the first half hour to an hour is best – this film, like the book, need not be digested whole. After the first chapter of II, read further as much as you like.

W 19 Sep Second response paper due. Choose one of the following topics: (1) analyze in detail a single monologue by Švejk — his unique personal style of expression, his colloquialisms and distortion of bureaucratic language, his seemingly innocent irony, his amazing apparent optimism (2) analyze a single scene where Švejk interacts with others — what is the action, what is the outcome, and how is it organized? Quote selectively from the text.

Week Five

M 24 Sep Begin Čapek's *War with the Newts*. Read Book One. Čapek writes here in mock-journalistic style, but his concerns are ultimate ones about the fate of humanity in the period between the two world wars. The fictional race of newts, aquatic dam builders with rudimentary intelligence, begins to threaten human civilization; philosophers, poets, professors, and a host of seamen, travellers, adventurers, film-makers, and others, are presented in short parodic scenes. The book is complex and tense with intellectual irony.

W 26 Sep First Draft of Paper One due. You will probably wish to write on Švejk, which we will have studied closely, but if you are deep into *Newts* and like the book, that too is excellent. The first five-page paper need not be research-oriented, but it must have an argument and it must marshal pertinent data from the literary text (and film if appropriate). It has to be structured, with an introductory statement of your argument to come, presentation and analysis of data, conclusion supported with comparative analysis, and final summary. (Five pages, double-spaced, 12-point font.) Bring your drafts to class.

Week Six

M 1 Oct For this week, read *Newts*, Books Two and Three. Discussion of *Newts*. Note the expansive parodies of all organized socio-political structures of the time, from bourgeois capitalism to Nazism and Communism to other varieties of intellectual pretense. Does the finale of the book give an optimistic or an uncertain view of humanity's future? Also: note the exquisite microstructuring, with dramatic irony and comedy throughout. An analysis of a single narrative skein would be another possible paper topic, or a brief study of Book Three as finale. (Notice the chapter Earthquake in Louisiana, teeming with real place-names and a mini-parody of Louisiana politics!)

W 3 Oct Workshop on Paper One. Bring drafts to class.

Week Seven

M 8 Oct Paper One due. Read email pdf file of *Cutting it Short*, Bohumil Hrabal, pp. 3-52. Hrabal is a prose poet with a lyrical vision into the lives and psychologies of ordinary Czechs. This novelette is written from the point of view of Hrabal's mother (*paní Bovaryová jsem já*, he writes, "I am Madam Bovary.")

W 10 Oct Finish reading *Cutting it Short*. pp. 52-123. Submit response paper number three on the personality and self-image of Maryška, Francin's wife and the narrator of *Cutting it Short*. In-class viewing of Menzel's film *Cutting it Short*.

Week Eight

M 15 Oct. No class; conferences during class time with instructor to discuss progress in class. View film *Cutting it Short* (European) in Language Learning Center.

W 17 Oct Mid-term grades due for freshmen. Discussion and writing exercise on the filmic treatment vs. Hrabal's text. Is this film anti-feminist? Is the book?

Week Nine

M 22 Oct Read *I Served the King of England*, chapters 1-3. This is Hrabal's only full-length novel, and it is a Czech *Bildungsroman*, tracing the life story of a naive waiter, Dítě, from rags to riches, into World War II and the communist era. It is humorous and touching, a story of how the unbelievable came true. Discussion.

W 24 In-class viewing of another Menzel film (Menzel was Hrabal's best filmic collaborator), the prize-winning adaptation of Hrabal's *Closely Watched Trains*. I will place the film in the Learning Center.

Week Ten

M 29 Oct . Read the final chapter of *I Served the King*. Discussion of the book. Response paper number four due on *I Served the King*,

W 31 Oct First-idea rough draft of paper number two. In-class workshop.

Week Eleven

M 5 Nov In-class viewing of another Hrabal-Menzel collaboration, *Festival of Snowdrops* (European). Workshop.

W 7 Nov Read Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*.

Week Twelve

M 12 Nov Discussion of *Too Loud a Solitude*. Paper number two due.

W 14 Nov In-class viewing of Miloš Forman's *Loves of a Blonde*.

Week Thirteen

M 19 Begin Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Please read Parts I-III (pp. 1-128).

Kundera is a post-modernist, philosophical novelist with an ironic turn of mind. He is perhaps the best-known contemporary Czech writer in the west, and has resided in Paris as an émigré for more than twenty years. This book intertwines the personal fates of two men and two women in the fateful 1960's of Czechoslovakia. A central theme is the development of personal relations in the mirror of society and history.

The film from this book was directed by an American, Philip Kaufman, and was shot in France and Switzerland. It is an interesting adaptation with an emphasis on the erotic.

W 21 Nov Thanksgiving holiday begins.

Week Fourteen

M 26 Nov Read *Lightness* to conclusion. Response paper number five due.

W 28 Nov Discussion of *Lightness*. Preparation for final paper. Bring an outline of a first draft and your ideas.

Week Fifteen

M 3 Dec Viewing of *Lightness*. Outline of final paper due.

For this paper, you will choose a topic you have already explored in either a response paper or a five-page paper and expand this topic by doing further library-based research involving secondary critical literature. You may read another work by an author you like for comparison with our in-class reading; you may also write on any comparative film and literary text topic (remember that you need not be a film specialist!).

W 5 Dec Final day of class. Workshop. Bring a working draft of your paper.

Monday, December 10: Final Paper due.