

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 20th anniversary of the RWU English Department's **Senior Thesis Colloquium**. This Colloquium represents the sparkling tip of the iceberg of TWO semesters worth of reading, discussion, research, and revision.

Each paper focuses in some way on this year's Colloquium theme -- **Cultural Studies**, a theory that may or may not be familiar to everyone in our audience. So a brief word of introduction might be helpful.

Cultural Studies is in many senses our modern day Romantic movement. For one thing it represents a tremendously powerful – if initially upsetting -- paradigm **shift** in not only the way we study literature, but in the way we define it in the first place.

That might explain why Kristen Wajsgras's father was so confused when she told him that she was working on her senior thesis and then he came downstairs to find her watching *Weeds* on t.v.

"I thought you were working on your senior essay," he asked, confused.

"I am," answered Kristyn (wondering how to explain).

We don't typically associate popular television shows with academic study; nor do we associate movies or advertisements or graffiti with high literature.

Matthew Arnold, the great Victorian educator and poet, summed up our culture's distrust of popular culture in a work entitled "**Civilization and Anarchy**." Arnold believed that Civilization can be achieved only by the study of high culture. Anarchy, he thought, is what results when we spend too much time with **popular culture**.

Arnold believed in the cultivation of an appreciation for high culture:

William Shakespeare's plays

Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant

Poetry, especially the epic

He felt that spending time engaged with high culture would open up the human mind to perfection – by encouraging the capacity to “tremble with awe” at aesthetic beauty.

In my opinion he's right about that. However, what Matthew Arnold overlooked is the fact that human beings are storytelling animals. Constantly dreaming up new genres -- new ways of telling stories -- and encoding values. But when these new genres emerge, they are almost always heralded as the end of culture as we know it.

For example, when the novel emerged as a form of popular culture in the 18th-century, people wondered what the world was coming to. Samuel Johnson, who compiled the first etymological English dictionary, objected strenuously –

His prejudice against novels was so great that he threw out the baby with the bathwater and panned what is now considered one of the greatest of early novels: Tom Jones, by Henry Fielding. Samuel Johnson thought the genre of the novel was inherently dangerous. The power of appealing to the popular masses through the new medium was sure to “take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will.” These same accusations and concerns motivated the reaction against the British Romantic movement. Once again, a movement was afoot to broaden a definition of culture to include works enjoyed by the great unwashed masses.

Romantic poetry featured the simple words of children, which shocked audiences of the day. One did not have to be educated to enjoy the words of children! Worse the Romantics celebrated the beauty of the imagination during a time when imagination was considered a dirty word.

It might seem hard to believe it now, but William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were as terrifying to the universities of the early nineteenth century as Snookie and the Paulie D are to the early 21st century.

We are today – living though another similarly exciting and controversial revolutionary period in the understanding of culture. Cultural Studies is shifting our understanding of how to study texts – and our definition of cultural value. We are redefining HOW TO STUDY the stories that human beings tell to one another. We can no longer assume that simply because stories are produced for profit, or that they are highly entertaining, or that they are beneath our notice.

Cultural studies insist with a relentless egalitarianism that ALL CULTURE IS CULTURE. When we ignore it, we ignore it at our own peril. And when we study it – and I mean really study it as our presenters today have been doing for the past year – we learn to think even harder about the meaning of culture itself.

Each paper you will hear today is the result of bright minds engaged in the process of close reading. Every one has taught me to see more deeply into my own culture. It has been more than my privilege to work with the scholars assembled here today. Reading their work has opened my mind to even more ways to tremble with awe.

-Margaret Case