



English 550: The Ethics of Fiction & the American Novel
Fall 2009

Instructor: Dr. Nancy Mayer
Tuesday/ Thursday 11:00-12:15

What do we mean by “serious” fiction, and why do we read it? What is its relation to life off the page? Can or should a novel provide guidance, inspiration, or even food for thought for a life well lived? If so, what are the ethical responsibilities of authors and of readers? What, if anything, can works of fiction add to a discussion of ethics in ordinary lives? This class starts with the assumption that serious novels do aspire to and succeed in speaking to the lives we lead (although that assumption too is open to challenge). The questions of the uses we make or must not make of fiction in examining our own lives seem to me crucial questions for all teachers, future teachers, students, and serious readers of serious fiction.

Assigned Texts:

Henry James: *What Maisie Knew*

Willa Cather: *My Mortal Enemy*

Toni Morrison: *Sula*

Marilynne Robinson: *Gilead & Home*

Edith Wharton: *House of Mirth*

Claire Messud: *The Emperor's Children*

Class Reader of Theory & Criticism