

IDH 2930: (Un)Common Read

Professor Jeanne Ewert

Fall 2020, Section 0192 (Detecting Texts)

Time: Tu, per. 3 (9:25–10:25)

Location: On-line; Zoom Invite

office hours: Tu, 10:30–11:30 (on Zoom); by appointment: virtually or on campus F2F

cell phone for emergency contact or illness: 352-213-8472

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e-Learning (Canvas) site for IDH 2930 (*registered students only*): <https://elearning.ufl.edu/>

Course Description



Set in an unnamed Northern European country, in a port city with canals, and where French is spoken, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* (*Les Gommages*, 1953), was among the first of the subgenre of detective fiction we now call "postmodern." Taking the themes and tropes of both the classic British mystery (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie) and the American hardboiled school (Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler), and systematically undoing them, Robbe-Grillet calls into question the central premises of the genre: Can we ever know what truth is? Can crimes be prevented if they are foreseen? Is the purpose of the detective to purge the community of guilt and restore it to a state of grace?

The plot of *The Erasers* is very simple: Wallas, an investigator from the country's central intelligence bureau, has been sent to investigate what is apparently one of a series of political murders designed to take out a cabal of leading politicians and industrialists in order to destabilize the country and instill fear in its "deep state." Robbe-Grillet noted in a "prière d'insérer" (forward) to the novel that "Il s'agit d'un événement précis, concret, essentiel : la mort d'un homme. C'est un événement à caractère policier –c'est-à-dire qu'il y a un assassin, un détective, une victime. En un sens, leurs rôles sont même respectés : l'assassin tire sur la victime, le détective *résout* la question, le victime meurt". In English: "It is about a precise event, one that is concrete, unarguable: the death of a man. The plot is typical of the

detective novel, that is to say, there is an assassin, a detective, and a victim. In one sense, their roles are traditional: the assassin fires on the victim, the detective solves the case, the victim dies.” What else it is, Robbe-Grillet leaves to the reader.

Before broaching *The Erasers*, we will read two short detective stories which will set up our class’s working assumptions about the detective genre. The first is Edgar Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which is the first story ever written involving a private consulting detective (a profession Poe invented), and also the first locked-room mystery, and the first story to systematically establish a set of rules for the genre. It was plagiarized by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” as indeed were all three of Poe’s detective stories. Along with Poe, we will read Ronald Knox’s ten commandments for detective and mystery writers and consider Anton Chekov’s necessary gun theory. The second story we will read is Jorge Luis Borges’s “Death and the Compass,” which gives us a detective who models himself quite consciously on Poe’s, and then has the rug pulled out from under him. That class discussion will focus on calculus, free will and determinism. Then we will launch into *The Erasers*, which subdivides easily into seven class sessions, since it is structured like a classical tragedy, with five chapters plus a prologue and an epilogue.

This is a one credit enrichment class and so graded assignments are not onerous. There will be three at-home reading quizzes (really, short reflections) that cover the two stories, and the end of the novel. And there will be a short (3-5 page) final paper on a set topic (you may choose among several) that will allow you to reflect on the broader philosophical aspects of the class. I will also maintain a running discussion on Canvas that will extend and enlarge on the class meetings. Reading and contributing to it will help to build class consensus on workable interpretations of the texts and also generate material for the final paper.

Required Text to Purchase or Download

The Erasers is available at the UF Bookstore and from online vendors. Used and electronic versions (for example, Kindle) are fine. I encourage you whenever possible to buy from independent booksellers. If you choose to buy online, I recommend sources such as Abebooks.com and Alibris.com that serve independent booksellers. I will supply all other readings for the class, either as pdfs or with links to the UF Libraries’ digital holdings or public domain materials. If you are fluent in French and would like to read *Les Gommages* in the original, go for it. If you would like to practice your French, you may certainly acquire both the French and the English in order to read side-by-side.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain. *The Erasers*. Translated by Richard Howard. Grove Press (Evergreen), 1994. ISBN 978-0802150868.

AND/OR

Robbe-Grillet, Alain. *Les Gommès*. Éditions Minuit. 978-2707302564.

Course Calendar

- Tu, Sept 1 *Course introduction*
- Tu, Sept 8 Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” Find it on Hathi Trust at:
<http://lp.hscl.ufl.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=edshtl&AN=uva.x000192321&site=eds-live>
- Tu, Sept 15 Ronald Knox, “The Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction.” In the
Wikipedia entry for “Golden Age of Detective Fiction”.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Age_of_Detective_Fiction. Also,
the discussion of Chekhov’s gun at NowNovel:
<https://www.nownovel.com/blog/use-chekhovs-gun/> . And, watch the
YouTube excerpt of The Antiques Roadshow episode in which Chekhov’s
gun comes to light: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqKAZGadmYo>

Before the end of the day on Friday, the 18th: Quiz One uploaded.

- Tu, Sept 22 Borges, “Death and the Compass.” Pdf file on Canvas.
- Tu, Sept 29 More Borges, because if you put a bullet into a gun...

Before the end of the day on Friday, Quiz Two uploaded.

- Tu, Oct 6 Robbe-Grillet, “Prologue”
- Tu, Oct 13 Robbe-Grillet, Chapter One
- Tu, Oct 20 Robbe-Grillet, Chapter Two
- Tu, Oct 27 Robbe-Grillet, Chapter Three
- Tu, Nov 3 Robbe-Grillet, Chapter Four
- Tu, Nov 10 Robbe-Grillet, Chapter Five

Tu, Nov 17 Pause to discuss: what the heck just happened?

Tu, Nov 24 Robbe-Grillet, Epilogue

Quiz Three due sometime before December 1

Tu, Dec 1 Synthesis

Tu, Dec 8 Synthesis

Final Paper due... when?

Evaluation of Performance, Attendance Requirements & Other Course Policies

Your final grade in this course will be determined by four assignments, each representing a portion of the grade:

Short reflective quizzes on assigned readings (× 3 @ 10%)	30%
Final paper	70%

Grading scheme and graded assignments. The evaluation method in this course is consistent with UF's policies on grading

(<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>).

Grades are calculated on a numeric scale, as below:

A	90–100	A–	87–89		
B+	84–86	B	80–83	B–	77–79
C+	74–76	C	70–73	C–	67–69
D+	64–66	D	60–63	D–	57–59

A grade of 56 or below is a failing grade (E).

In normal times, UF students may make up a missed assignment only if they have a written medical excuse from a doctor, a signed letter from a judge or law enforcement officer (if you are called for jury duty or to testify in court, for example), or if a death or serious illness or injury occurs in your family. Until there is a safe and effective vaccination for the novel

coronavirus, however, I expect that some of you may find yourselves ill and unable to attend class or complete work as scheduled. You should contact me as soon as possible when you anticipate a delay in the submission of graded work. There is also the possibility that there may be illness, perhaps serious illness, in your family. Again, please contact me as soon as you are able in the event that Covid-19 becomes an issue for you or for a family member. Please, I beg of you, do not just disappear from my classroom, leaving me to wonder what has become of you. In addition to my email I have provided my cell phone number above; you may always text or call. Because I am the parent of a teenager I would be grateful if you did not call after 10 PM. Late calls put fear into our hearts.

Attendance & lateness. This book is complex and challenging, more so than appears on the surface. Class discussions will often include ideas and information not in the assigned reading. For these reasons, your presence in class is essential and is required. **I take attendance.** It is your responsibility to keep track of your absences and to make sure that you complete all required work. As noted above, in the event of a prolonged illness or other emergency you should notify me as soon as possible so that we may make provisions to insure that you do not fall behind.

If you have special classroom needs because of disability, do not hesitate to bring those to my attention so that I may make appropriate accommodations. Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the UF Disability Resource Center (<https://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/>) and provide me with appropriate documentation. If you need accommodations due to neurodiversity issues, please notify me as soon as possible so that I can suggest alternative learning situations.

If you have access issues related to the course being on-line (reliable wi-fi, computing devices, etc.) please let me know as soon as possible. There may be solutions you are unaware of. This is a brave new world for all of us, so do not hesitate to tell me of your needs. I will be conducting class on-line, and I hope you can participate with both audio and video. It is very difficult to talk to a photograph or a black background. Please be appropriately dressed for video participation and not engaged in other activities (eating, casual WWW browsing, emailing, chatting, texting, etc.) during the class. Multitasking rarely makes for positive contributions to a discussion.

If you are unable to attend any part of a class meeting or work on a course assignment because these coincide with the timing of religious observances you must notify me of this conflict in advance, so that we may make appropriate adjustments to relevant assignment deadlines.

Course evaluation. I have never taught on-line before, and would be grateful for any suggestions you have for using the time efficiently and well during the course of the semester. In addition, all students are expected to provide professional and helpful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals.

Guidance on how to give feedback is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>. Lest you think no one reads these, I am required to submit them in my packet for tenure and promotion.

Policy on academic honesty. The University community's policies and methods regarding academic honesty, your obligations to me and mine to you with regard to academic honesty, are spelled out in the UF Student Honor Code, which is available online at <https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>.

Academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated in this course. Examples of academic dishonesty include but are not limited to:

- Possessing, using, or exchanging improperly acquired written or oral information in the preparation of graded assignments submitted for this course.
- Substitution of material that is wholly or substantially identical to that created or published by another individual or individuals.
- False claims of performance or work submitted by a student for requirements of this course.

I am obliged to act on any suspected act of academic misconduct. If you are found to have engaged in misconduct penalties may include a reduced or failing grade for the course or other disciplinary proceedings, as per the recommendation of the Dean of Students. If you have any concern that you may not have made appropriate use of the work of others in your research or writing for this course, please confer with me before you submit the assignment. You should retain all graded materials that you receive from me until you receive your final course grade.

Emergency services. **U Matter, We Care** serves as the umbrella program for UF's caring culture and provides students in distress with support and coordination of a wide variety of appropriate resources. Contact umatter@ufl.edu seven days a week for assistance if you are in distress. Call 352-392-1575 for a crisis counselor overnight and during weekends.

Note also these support services:

- The University Counseling Center – 301 Peabody Hall, 352-392-1575;
<http://www.counseling.ufl.edu>
- Student Health Care Center – 352-392-1171
- Career Resource Center, Reitz Union – 352-392-1601

- Center for Sexual Assault/Abuse Recovery and Education (CARE), Student Health Care Center – 352-392-1161
- University Police Department – 352-392-1111 (non-emergency); *call 9-1-1 for emergencies*

Policy on environmentally sustainable activity for this class. I will distribute all course materials outside of the novel itself via paper-sparing digital media. If you elect to print them out, and you may choose to do so with the Poe story which is quite lengthy, I encourage you to recycle the paper at the end of the class. I also encourage you to purchase e-book editions of the novel if you find that format workable, or used copies of the printed version, and to return those to circulation if you choose not to keep them at the end of the course. (Donating your unwanted books to the Alachua County [Friends of the Library](#) annual book sale is a good way to get them into other readers' hands and to help raise a bit of cash for our county's excellent but criminally underfunded public libraries.)