

American Fiction Since 1945

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:30-3pm & by appointment

Winter 2016
Rolfe 3115
TR 10-11:50am

This course has two parallel goals: to explore major aesthetic trends in American literature since 1945 and to consider the stories this literature tells about American identity. With these goals in mind, we will discuss the historical contexts, watershed events, and artistic movements that inform the novels and short stories we read. We will contemplate how these works locate themselves in a distinct tradition of American letters as well as how they interrogate and rewrite this inheritance. Among the key questions we will ask: what does it mean to “be American” in these different texts? How do these texts construct and participate in the enterprise of “American fiction”?

With these questions in mind, we will analyze the narratives these works fashion about individual, regional, and national identity and consider the texts’ embedded criticisms of such personal projects and social phenomena. We will trace evolving attitudes towards gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomics, and examine notions of mass media, technology, and political activity. Our study will thus contemplate the intertwined literary and cultural histories of twentieth-century America and participate in an ongoing dialogue about this past.

Reading list

Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945)
Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)
Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays* (1970)
Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)
Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1980)
Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

Short stories (distributed in class): Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1955) & “Everything That Rises Must Converge” (1965); Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman” (1975); Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (1981); Susan Sontag, “The Way We Live Now” (1986); Sherman Alexie, “Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven” (1993)

Assignments and grading

Paper #1 (3-4 pages) 15%
Paper #2 (4-5 pages) 25%
Presentation 15%

Final exam 25%
Participation 20% (includes quizzes)

Papers and presentation

Both papers will be analytical essays about one course novel. Topics are flexible (translation: if you have an exciting idea/question/hunch/puzzle, just ask!). Papers should include a well-formulated, argumentative, focused thesis and ample, pertinent textual support. They must also be typed, double-spaced, MLA-formatted with a proper heading, margins, and Works Cited.

The presentations will be done in small groups (3-5 students) and will focus on a single course novel, beginning with Pynchon. These 10 to 15 minute multimedia presentations will address a course theme not previously discussed in lectures on that novel—indeed, you might think of it as a “mini-lecture,” modeled on my class presentations (but hopefully breaking the mold in some creative fashion). Presentations will initiate class discussion on their assigned day and thus should aim to raise questions rather than provide answers about the given work.

Final exam

The final exam will feature passage identifications and an essay question. For complete credit on the passage identifications, you will need to provide the author’s name (correctly spelled), full title, and year of publication as well as write a brief (4-5 sentence) paragraph in which you discuss the significance of the passage to the work as a whole. The essay question will be more open-ended and will ask that you engage at least two course texts in your response.

Participation

Participation constitutes a large portion (20%) of the final grade for the course. I will calculate it as follows: I will not keep track of the number of times you raise your hand; I will attend to the evidence that you actively, regularly engage with the material, share your insights and questions with the class, and incorporate these thoughts as well as my feedback into the course assignments.

I have a no-small-screens policy in class. Laptops and iPads are acceptable for note-taking practices only. If I see you on your phone, email, or Facebook during class, it will drastically affect your participation grade. The same rubric applies to your physical classroom presence: arrive on time; stay for the entire session; do not take bathroom breaks on your own terms (I will pause lecture after roughly 50 minutes to allow a collective break, during which time you can use the restroom and catch up on all missed social media). The chance to attend to one subject for two hours, with a community of other people, is a rare opportunity; take advantage of it.

I will also give infrequent reading quizzes. Quizzes will be given at the beginning of class and will feature 3-4 straightforward questions (e.g., what is the name of the protagonist's mother?); so long as you do the reading, you will pass with flying colors. If you miss a quiz on a day when you have an excused absence, your grade will be calculated without it. There will be no make-up quizzes.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is unacceptable. I define plagiarism as presenting someone's words, ideas, or any other work that can be considered intellectual property as if they were your own. If you use someone else's work without quoting or citing completely, you have committed plagiarism and will fail the assignment and/or the course, be reported to the Dean of Students, and possibly be dismissed from UCLA. Do not rely on Cliff's Notes or Wikipedia; do not submit versions of the same paper more than once; do not paraphrase without citation—all of these are considered plagiarism.

Weekly schedule

Week 1

Tuesday: Introduction

Thursday: Himes, *If He Hollers*

Week 2

Tuesday: Himes, cont'd

Thursday: Himes, cont'd

Week 3

Tuesday: O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" & "Everything That Rises Must Converge"

Thursday: Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Week 4

Tuesday: Pynchon, cont'd

Thursday: Pynchon, cont'd

Week 5

Tuesday: Didion, *Play It As It Lays*

* Paper #1 due

Thursday: Didion, cont'd

Week 6

Tuesday: Didion, cont'd

Thursday: Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Week 7

Tuesday: Morrison, cont'd

Thursday: Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman” & Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”

Week 8

Tuesday: Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Thursday: Robinson, cont'd

Week 9

Tuesday: Sontag, “The Way We Live Now” & Alexie, “Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven”

* Paper #2 due

Thursday: McCarthy, *The Road*

Week 10

Tuesday: McCarthy, cont'd

Thursday: McCarthy & course summary

Week 11

Final Exam: Monday March 13, 3-6pm