

English 553A: 20th Century U.S. Fiction

Interrogating American Identity
MW 1:30-3:18, Denney Hall 238
Winter 2009

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Course Description

This course investigates a diversity of celebrated U.S. fiction from across the 20th century through a specific lens: their interrogation of “American” identity. We will read works that grapple with tremendous changes in American life, whether in terms of sexuality, race relations, shifts in gender norms, expanding class divisions, migration and immigration, war, and urbanization. We will pay due attention, furthermore, to the ways in which each writer employs a range of aesthetic strategies in order to meet the challenges of representing Americanness. Throughout the class, finally, we will examine how the concerns of these 20th century writers also apply to 21st century notions of American identity. Through the series of blogs we will develop for the class, we will aim to make these fictional representations of American identity relevant to our own worlds.

Required Texts – available at SBX bookstore (1806 N. High Street)

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*
Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Interpreter of Maladies*
Nella Larsen, *Passing*
Toni Morrison, *Sula*
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Other course materials will be posted on Carmen. Log on at www.carmen.osu.edu for

- Syllabus
- Articles marked “C” on the syllabus
- Supplemental Articles
- Dropbox for turning in papers

Each student cluster (see below) will set up a blog for the class via Blogger.

Note: Important and personal messages requiring a response from me should be sent to jani.4@osu.edu. Please keep the discussion on Carmen focused on themes and questions of general interest to the class.

Course Requirements

Class Participation	20%
Cluster Blogs	5%
Paper #1 (3-4 pages)	20%
Midterm (short essays)	25%
Paper #2 (5-6 pages)	30%

Grading

- **Class Participation:** Engaged, active participation in the class will be crucial to your grade. This includes, but is not limited to: arriving to class on time, bringing in the texts we're reading that day, being alert during lecture and discussion, raising questions and comments in the discussion period. Multiple absences, as described below, can detract from your participation grade.
- **Blogs and Student Clusters:** You will be grouped into several clusters, each of which will focus on one aspect of American identity (race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, region, etc.). Each cluster will set up and maintain a weblog (or "blog"), where you can post entries, link to articles and websites, upload videos, etc. The cluster blogs will be linked up through a central blog that I will maintain. I am hoping that this project will allow us to enhance the classroom experience by opening it up to your input and expertise.
- **Short Paper:** The short paper will focus on your ability to closely analyze and compare the representations of American identity in two particular texts. Specific suggestions will be made available through Carmen, but you are encouraged to construct your own topic.
- **Midterm Exam:** The midterm will be a take-home exam, featuring a series of essay questions that measure your reading comprehension and your grasp of the main themes and theoretical paradigms of the course.
- **Final Paper:** The final paper will be a comparative, in-depth study of two or three texts that develops an interpretation of them with attention to critical, historical, and/or theoretical works. You are encouraged to meet with me to discuss the final paper and to submit a proposal outlining your ideas and overall direction.
- If you have questions about any of this, please ask for help: come by to my office hours, use the writing center (see http://cstw.osu.edu/writing_center/) for individual discussion of your ideas and projects.

Course Policies

- **Absences:** More than 2 absences from class will harm your participation grade, with a loss of 1/3 of a grade for each day lost. Emergencies should be reported to me as soon as possible, and may require documentation from the University.
- **Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is the representation of another's works or ideas as one's own: it includes the unacknowledged word for word use and/or paraphrasing of another person's work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person's ideas. All cases of

suspected plagiarism, in accordance with university rules, will be reported to the Committee on Academic Misconduct.

- Help with Disabilities: Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss your specific needs. We will coordinate something with the Office for Disability Services, located in 150 Pomerene Hall. Contact the ODS at 292-3307 and see their website at www.ods.osu.edu.

Course Outline

Introduction: America and Americas

M Jan 5 In class:
John Edwards, presidential campaign ad on “Two Americas” (2007)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRNJISxOHLE>
Martin Luther King, Jr. on “Two Americas” (March 10, 1968)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBodqhUGoq0>
Black Panther Party, Ten Point Plan (October 1966):
<http://www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm>
Ho Chi Minh, “Declaration of Independence” (September 2, 1945)
http://coombs.anu.edu.au/~vern/van_kien/declar.html

Negotiating American Identity

W Jan 7 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
D.W. Griffiths, *Birth of a Nation* (excerpts in class)

M Jan 12 Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
W Jan 14 Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Su Jan 18 **Blog Post #1 Due, by 9pm**
M Jan 19 **MLK Day—NO CLASS:** Take notes on MLK Day and Obama inauguration
W Jan 21 Deborah E. McDowell, Introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*
Optional Reading: Larsen, *Quicksand*
F Jan 23 **Short Paper Due:** MS Word document in Carmen dropbox by 5pm

America and the Exotic

M Jan 26 Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*
Guest Speaker: Dr. Debra Moddlemog
W Jan 28 Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*
Optional Reading: Jeremy Kaye, “The ‘Whine’ of Jewish Manhood: Rereading Hemingway’s Anti-Semitism, Reimagining Robert Cohn” (C)

Truth and Perspective

M Feb 2 William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
W Feb 4 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

Labor in America

- Su Feb 8 **Blog Post #2 Due, by 9pm**
 M Feb 9 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
 W Feb 11 Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
- M Feb 16 Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
 W Feb 18 Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times* (excerpts, in class)
 America Today: The Economic Crisis and the American Dream
 F Feb 20 Midterm Essays Due: **MS Word document in Carmen dropbox by 5pm**

Rewriting Black Spaces and Selves

- M Feb 23 Toni Morrison, *Sula*
 W Feb 25 Morrison, *Sula*
 Optional Reading: Chuck Jackson, “A ‘Headless Display’: *Sula*, Soldiers, and
 Lynching” (C)

Immigrant Identities

- Su Mar 1 **Blog Post #3 Due, by 9pm**
 M Mar 2 Lahiri, *The Interpreter of Maladies*
 W Mar 4 Lahiri, *The Interpreter of Maladies*
 Judith Caesar, “American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri” (C)

Towards a New America

- M Mar 9 Valarie Kaur, *Divided We Fall* (in class)
 W Mar 11 Conclusion
- W Mar 18 **Final Paper Due**: MS Word document in Carmen dropbox by 2pm