

Syllabus for English 343: American Fiction after World War Two (Fall 2015)

Instructor: Dr. Andrew Crooke

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Class: Tuesday/Thursday 8:55-10:05 in 233 PPHAC

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Office Hours: Tuesday/Thursday 10:30-11:30, or by appointment

Course Description

This upper-level course explores the genre of fiction in the United States after World War Two. In addition to discussing celebrated individual stories from the past seventy years, we will focus on six books (two short-story collections and four novels) published during the second half of the twentieth century. By turns grotesque and comic, violent and poignant, shocking and subtle, our readings all revolve around the troubled search for personal, communal, and national identities. As well as accounting for the social and historical contexts from which these works emerged, we will examine how their form relates to their content by analyzing key elements of fiction such as plot, character, setting, point of view, and voice. Moreover, we will consider the contributions of this diverse group of authors to American literary movements and evolutions in language. While works from this postwar period tend to get subsumed under the category of postmodernism—or, more recently, multiculturalism—we will strive to recognize both continuity with earlier eras of fiction (regionalism, realism, modernism) and more experimental departures. Hence we will aim to balance, as most creative writers do, a respect for tradition with an eye toward innovation.

Course Goals

Students should complete English 343 with the following objectives either learned or reinforced:

- an appreciation for the esthetic value and ethical grounding of all literary creations, as well as an enhanced grasp of fictional tools, devices, styles, and structures;
- an awareness of the full breadth of American fiction from the end of World War Two through the present, along with specific knowledge of certain works and writers;
- an understanding of international events, domestic affairs, and cultural developments that have provided material and morals for successive generations of fiction writers;
- the ability (both spoken and written) to ask incisive interpretive questions, formulate arguable claims, and react to others' ideas about fictional techniques and narratives;
- the skills to research critical responses, synthesize them with one's own, and write persuasively about works of postmodern and contemporary American fiction.

Required Books (available at the Moravian College Bookstore)

Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 9780374515362

N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, Harper Perennial, 9780061859977

Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, Dial Press, 9780385334143

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, Vintage, 9780679738909

Michael Chabon, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, Harper Perennial, 9780060790592

Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Mariner, 9780395927205

Note: You must acquire these books and bring them to class on the days they are assigned or else you will be marked absent. Please obtain these editions (see the publishers and ISBNs above) so that we will all be on the same page during our discussions. Additional stories will be distributed

as handouts. For your consultation, the anthology *Postmodern American Fiction* is on reserve for our course at the library. Our schedule may be revised; all changes will be announced in class. If classes are canceled for any reason, I may notify you by email of alternative assignments.

Attendance and Participation

Regular attendance is essential to participation in this or any other course that revolves around group discussion. If you must miss a session, please let me know in advance and arrange to pick up any supplemental materials. More than two absences will adversely affect your overall grade, and more than four will result in failure of the course. Arriving late or leaving early can be very disruptive, so two such incidents will equal one absence. Mere attendance, however, is only the beginning of useful participation. In short, you must be in class mentally as well as physically. Always bring the day's assigned reading, a writing implement, and sufficient paper. Stay alert for the entire class period. Please come prepared to listen attentively, to contribute your opinions thoughtfully, to engage in activities with enthusiasm, and to treat your classmates with respect. In order to keep distractions to a minimum, the use of cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices is not permitted for any purpose, unless I specify an exception. Furtive texting, emailing, calling, chatting, browsing, etc., will drastically lower your participation score, since such acts are as disrespectful to your peers as to your instructor. I appreciate your cooperation in helping me to establish a hospitable learning environment for everyone involved in the course.

Course Work

Essay One: This paper should address at least two of the stories read during the first three weeks of the semester and incorporate at least one additional source. Relate your chosen stories in terms of their stylistic techniques, thematic correspondence, or any other fictional elements that interest you. Outside sources may include critical perspectives, authorial commentaries, and/or historical assessments. 2,000 words minimum, plus works cited page.

Essay Two: This paper should address one of the novels and incorporate at least two additional sources. Consider your chosen book in terms of (a) its structure and style; (b) its sense of place; (c) relationships among its characters; (d) its overarching themes; (e) its literary influences and critical reception; or (f) its imaginative engagement with a particular cultural scene or reframing of actual events that helped to shape it. 2,000 words minimum, plus works cited page.

Responses: As we finish discussing the six books on our syllabus, you will submit an informal response to each one. Start by picking a short passage (prose, dialogue, or combination thereof) and copying it out as a quotation. Be sure to indicate the page number(s). Write about why this passage moves you or how it crystallizes some essential aspect of the author's vision. Focus on how language (imagery, rhythm, diction, syntax) generates meaning. Why does this passage—and, by extension, the work as a whole—resonate emotionally or philosophically for you? Each response should be at least 300 words (after the quotation). We will share our responses in class on the last day of discussing each book.

Discussion Questions: Three times throughout the semester, you will help to lead a discussion by contributing at least four interpretive questions about the day's assigned reading. Pose questions that cannot be answered factually but rather that acknowledge a certain degree of ambiguity and complexity in the work(s) at hand. Type up your questions and bring copies for everyone. I will model discussion questions for you during our first few class meetings.

Final Exam: This cumulative exam will build on your earlier essays, responses, and discussion questions by asking you to identify passages and to draw connections among texts we have read together. For passage identification, you will supply the authors, titles, context, and significance. I will also pair identified excerpts from several works on the syllabus. You will choose one such pair and construct a concise comparative analysis of their similarities and differences, explicating how they reveal shared or divergent concerns in the study of postwar American fiction.

Paper Preparation

Essays (double-spaced) and responses (single-spaced) should be typed in twelve-point font with one-inch margins. Use MLA format to cite any sources. Number your pages and insert a header with both your name and my name. For each essay, try coming up with a distinctive title, which can often help you to gain direction and maintain focus. Be sure to proofread before printing out a clean copy. You do not need cover pages, but please staple your papers.

Late Work

Essays and responses are due at the start of class on the dates specified in the syllabus. Papers handed in after these times will be deemed late, which will result in a grade reduction for each day beyond the due date. Except in emergencies, I will not accept essays or responses via email.

Assessment

Essay One: 20%

Essay Two: 20%

Informal Responses: 18%

Discussion Questions: 12%

In-Class Participation: 15%

Final Exam: 15%

Resources and Plagiarism

Visit me during my office hours or send me an email to discuss your writing and any concerns you may have over grading or other aspects of the course. Please allow at least 24 hours for an electronic response. For assistance from tutors while revising your papers, contact the Writing Center, 610-861-1592, located on the second floor of Zinzendorf Hall. All writing done for this course should be yours alone, not that of friends, family members, or unacknowledged critics. Be aware that any plagiarized passages or essays will be punished severely. If you need clarification, consult the College's academic honesty policy, available in the Student Handbook.

Note to English Majors

In preparation for creating an English Major Portfolio in your senior capstone seminar, please save both digital and hard copies of your work for this class, including any drafts with peer or instructor comments.

Disabilities

Moravian encourages persons with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities. If you have any type of disability that may affect your performance in this course, please inform me as early in the semester as possible, so that we can arrange for reasonable accommodations. Contact Elaine Mara, Assistant Director of Academic and Disability Support, located on the lower level of Monocacy Hall, or call 610-861-1401, to request the required authorization.

Class Schedule (readings should be done before class on the dates indicated below)*Week One*

T 9/1: introductions; expectations; Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery” & “Biography of a Story”
 R 9/3: Robert Penn Warren, “Blackberry Winter”; Eudora Welty, “Shower of Gold”; Ralph Ellison, “Battle Royal”; Hisaye Yamamoto, “Seventeen Syllables”

Week Two

T 9/8: Saul Bellow, “Looking for Mr. Green”; James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”; Bernard Malamud, “The Magic Barrel”; Philip Roth, “The Conversion of the Jews”
 R 9/10: Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, pp. 3-14, 117-156

Week Three

T 9/15: Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, pp. 249-291, 311-356
 R 9/17: Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*, pp. 405-420, 488-550; **response 1 due**

Week Four

T 9/22: N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, pp. 1-76
 R 9/24: N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, pp. 77-120

Week Five

T 9/29: N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, pp. 121-185; **response 2 due**
 R 10/1: Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, pp. v-69

Week Six

T 10/6: Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, pp. 70-195
 R 10/8: Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*, pp. 196-268; **response 3 due**

Week Seven

T 10/13: No Class, Fall Break
 R 10/15: Thomas Pynchon, “Entropy”; John Barth, “Lost in the Funhouse”; William H. Gass, “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country”; Donald Barthelme, “At the End of the Mechanical Age”

Week Eight

T 10/20: Alice Walker, “Everyday Use”; James Alan McPherson, “Elbow Room”; Grace Paley, “A Conversation with My Father”; Walter Abish, “Ardor/Awe/Atrocity”
 R 10/22: Raymond Carver, “Cathedral”; Bobbie Ann Mason, “Shiloh”; Leslie Marmon Silko, “Lullaby”; Toni Morrison, “Recitatif”; **essay 1 due**

Week Nine

T 10/27: Ernest J. Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, pp. 3-110
 R 10/29: Ernest J. Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, pp. 111-167

Week Ten

T 11/3: Ernest J. Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men*, pp. 168-214; **response 4 due**
 R 11/5: Lorrie Moore, “How to Become a Writer”; Helena María Viramontes, “The Cariboo Café”; Tim O’Brien, “How to Tell a True War Story”; Robert Olen Butler, “Mr. Green”

Week Eleven

T 11/10: Michael Chabon, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, pp. 9-119

R 11/12: Michael Chabon, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, pp. 120-216

Week Twelve

T 11/17: Michael Chabon, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, pp. 217-297; **response 5 due**

R 11/19: Sandra Cisneros, "Never Marry a Mexican"; Amy Tan, "Two Kinds"; Junot Díaz, "Drown"; Sherman Alexie, "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona"

Week Thirteen

T 11/24: Edwidge Danticat, "Seven"; ZZ Packer, "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere"; Emily Ishem Raboteau, "Kavita Through Glass"; Percival Everett, "The Appropriation of Cultures"

R 11/26: No Class, Thanksgiving

Week Fourteen

T 12/1: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, pp. 1-69; **essay 2 due**

R 12/3: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, pp. 70-135

Week Fifteen

T 12/8: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, pp. 136-198; **response 6 due**

R 12/10: Karen Russell, "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves"; Kevin Brockmeier, "The Year of Silence"; Jess Walter, "Anything Helps"

Final Exam: Tuesday 12/15, 8:30 am