

Modern American Literature

ENGL 352
Spring 2007
MWF 12:40-1:40

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Course Description

The catalogue description of this course is as follows: “Study of twentieth-century American authors to the mid-twentieth century, with particular emphasis on modernism in literature. Includes fiction, plays, and poetry.” Barebones but accurate. This course seeks to understand the nature and social contexts of the powerful and still resonant literary movements that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Although literary jargon tends to collapse complexity into structural oppositions between modern and postmodernism (just as, for instance, many modernists collapsed the complexity of earlier periods by opposing modernism to medievalism or Victorianism or some other ism), the period associated with modernism is marked by diverse and even contradictory perceptions of what it means to be a modern human being, and to be a creative artist in the modern world. The only broadly held commonality is that somewhere around the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century things had changed. What had changed and how things had changed and how writers should respond to and reflect that change were all matters of heated debate. But all but a few writers agreed with a writer from the mid-19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson, when he said “Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this” (The American Scholar). Ezra Pound summed this up with his singular dictum “Make It New.” This course seeks to understand the various ways that writers of the first half of the twentieth century tried to fulfill that imperative.

Course Goals

- To introduce you to some of the most important writers, themes, and works of modern American literature.
- To encourage you to understand the complexity of modernist responses to their own period and to the literary tradition.
- To help you become more sophisticated thinkers and writers about literature and culture.
- To help you improve your skills as writers of persuasive/argumentative essays.

Course Objectives

Reading: We will be reading a great deal of what is often considered the most difficult literature ever written in the United States. One characteristic of some forms of modernism is a disregard for general audiences. Such writers expect art to be demanding and to reflect the complexity of its age. Thus they intend the reading experience to be difficult and to reflect the difficulty and complexity of the act of writing. Be prepared. This is not Stephen King or J.K. Rowling. It is not even Charles Dickens. You will often need to do some forms of research into literary reference, terminology, etcetera to gain a basic understanding of the literature at hand.

Writing: Because writing is a means of discovery and a pathway to understanding, it is the most important activity in the class next to reading. Indeed, you should think of your writing as a mode of reading that will help you begin understanding the varieties of modern American literature.

- **Quizzes**—Short reading quizzes will be given at my discretion. These will focus primarily on reading comprehension rather than on interpretation or analysis. If you read each assignment carefully you should be prepared for these.
- **Daily Questions**—Each day you should write a question related to the reading for the day and follow this question with a short paragraph detailing why you believe this question could be important for the class to consider. The question may deal with a specific poem or part of a work, or it could be broader to deal with themes and issues relevant to the work at hand. These daily assignments will be graded on a plus, check, minus system. Cumulative excellence will add five points to your class participation grade. Cumulative mediocrity will subtract five points from your participation grade.
- **Encyclopedia of Modernism and American Literature Entry**—Each of you will write an entry for an “encyclopedia” of modernism that we will develop over the course of the semester. You will be given a term that you will be expected to

research and about which you will write a short essay of 750-1250 words (excluding notes references and links) explaining the significant relationship of your term to modernism in general and, where feasible, to modern American literature in particular. Because I am experimenting with wiki technologies for the first time this semester, we are going to run things along two tracks to make sure things work out.

Wiki Track—You will have to post an early paragraph or two related to your chosen term by the third week of the semester to a wiki I am setting up for our class. Each of you must read through the other wikis and make a major or minor edits to three different entries over the next three weeks. These edits will contribute to your class participation grade. The original writer of an entry must post a full draft of an entry by the eighth week of class. All students must make major or minor edits to three entries over the course of the next three weeks. The original writer must post a final version of the entry during the last week of class. This final entry must reflect significant new writing and research, but may include edits and writing from others. Because wiki's can include writing that originates from others, each of you will hand in a two page reflection essay that explains how you've incorporated the work of others and which editors proved most helpful to you and why in producing your final encyclopedia entry.

All students will be required to identify terms in our Encyclopedia and explain their relevance to Modernism or modern American literature on the final exam.

Our class wiki is located at <http://engl352.pbwiki.com/ENGL-352-Modern-American-Literature>

Traditional Track—Each of you should keep hard copies and electronic copies of things we are trying to do through pbwiki. Similarly, keep a record of edits that you make to other entries. If we cannot get the wiki technology to work in quite the way I'm hoping we will, we will workshop your entries in a more traditional fashion throughout the semester.

Grading—The grade for the entry itself will be based on the final version of the wiki page that each of you will post in the last week of class. This will be the "final product" even though strictly speaking wiki texts are never finalized. This final product will be graded with the following things in mind: excellence of the writing in the main body of the entry in terms of both style and substance; usefulness of links and other page features that you choose to include; list of references, which will indicate to me you research for the project, but also will serve as a valuable resource for others who may access the page.

What students will be expected to know for the final exam will be based on the final version submitted. I will make any necessary edits to issues of fact that seem necessary. Earlier drafts of your encyclopedia entry and edits that you make to other entries can add or subtract points from your final participation grade (i.e. if you don't participate by making some kind of edits, or if you make edits that include junk or clearly erroneous information, you will lose points for participation. Similarly, if you add valuable information to an entry or make edits that clarify otherwise murky writing, you will gain points for participation). The final version of the encyclopedia entry is worth 100 points.

- **Mid-term essay**—You will each write a short critical essay based on any text assigned on the syllabus. This essay should take a clear interpretive position on a relevant question at issue and support your position with all the standard rhetorical equipment of a persuasive essay. At your discretion you may take up a question that you have already posed earlier in the semester. You may also take up an issue related to your encyclopedia entry so long as you can talk about one of the assigned texts in the class. This essay should be 1200-1500 words long. This essay is worth 100 points.
- **Final exam**—The final exam is cumulative. I will expect that you can demonstrate your understanding of the literature read during the course of the semester as well as your reading of the encyclopedia entries generated by your fellow students. The essay will include identification, definition, short answer, and short essay questions that will be formulated to evaluate the literary historical facts that you have learned and your ability to synthesize and interpret the knowledge you have gained. The final exam is worth 200 points

Participation: Beyond what is specifically listed above, participation includes the following: regular attendance, attentive concern for others' ideas or questions; consistent respect for others as expressed through demeanor, engagement of ideas whether you agree with them or oppose them, and the genuine effort to help others improve their writing and thinking; oral expression of your own ideas; preparation for class through careful and critical reading of assigned material; prompt completion of assignments. Participation in class is worth 100 points

Course Mechanics:

Necessary Study Skills: I am guided by the principles that a college education is a full-time occupation and that a typical spring semester load is or should be 13 credits. With this in mind, you should be able to complete the course successfully if you devote approximately 10 hours a week to classroom work and to the reading and writing requirements. Consistent reading is imperative since understanding early readings in the course is necessary for understanding later readings in the course and for successfully completing your final essay. Further, planning and working ahead will save you from desperate, anxiety-driven despair toward the end of the semester.

Format: All essays including your wiki entries should follow the MLA guidelines for writers of research papers. All essays, excluding daily assignments, should include a Works Cited page and provide page citations as appropriate. Copies of the MLA style manual are in the library in the reference section and are available on line. Let me caution you to be especially wary of plagiarism. Remember that plagiarism is the use of another person's words or ideas without giving proper credit to that person. Plagiarized essays will be failed. If you do not understand what plagiarism is or may be, please see me immediately.

Late papers: Late essays and encyclopedia entries will be penalized 10 points for each day late, lateness being construed as anytime after the beginning of class on the day they are due. I do offer extensions for documented medical problems and family crises. In exceptional circumstances I offer extensions for otherwise overwhelming curricular requirements (that is, if you have three major papers due on the same day I am amenable to adjustments in your schedule). However, in all cases, to receive an extension you must contact me at the first possible moment that you realize something will be late, preferably at least a day before the day something is due. I do not offer extensions because of student involvement in extracurricular activities.

Grading: At the end of the semester your grade will be based on a percentage of points earned I use the following scale to determine grades:

A ≥ 95; A- 91-94; B+ 88-90; B 85-87; B- 81-84; C+ 78-80; C 74-77; C- 71-73; D+ 68-70; D 64-67; D- 61-63; F ≤ 60

Texts:

Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1910-1945

Schedule: *Subject to change as necessary*

Date	Topics and Readings	Writing Assignments
Week of February 5 th	Topics: Class introduction; Modernism, Tradition and Innovation Anthology Introduction; T.S. Eliot "Tradition and the Individual Talent"; Ezra Pound "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" Frost letter to be handed out	Getting started with wikis. See assignments on wiki page.
Week of February 12 th	Topics: Modernism, Tradition and Innovation Readings: Robert Frost--introduction and all poems, especially "Mowing" "Mending Wall" "Death of the Hired Man" "Home Burial" "The Road Not Taken" "Birches" "Fire and Ice" "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" "The Figure a Poem Makes") Edna St. Vincent Millay (introduction and all poems) Countee Cullen (introduction and all poems, especially "Heritage")	Encyclopedia topic due. Create your wiki page
Week of February 19 th	Topics: Modernism, Tradition and Innovation Readings: Ezra Pound—(introduction and all poems, especially "To Whistler, American" "A Pact," "In a Station of the Metro" "The River Merchant's Wife" "The Cantos" T.S. Eliot—Introduction "The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "The Waste Land" "Burnt Norton"	Encyclopedia first paragraphs due by Friday
Week of February 26 th	Topics: Modernism, Tradition and Innovation Readings:	

	H.D. –Introduction and all poems Marianne Moore—Introduction and all poems	
Week of March 5th	Topics: Modernism, Tradition and Innovation Readings: Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes	
Week of March 12 th	Topics: Modernism and Place: The lure and loathing of the City Readings: Sandburg, Crane, Toomer	Edits to encyclopedia entries due by Friday
Week of March 26th	Topics: Modernism and Place: The promise and peril of town and country Readings: Anderson, Masters, Robinson, Hurston, Mencken	Critical Essay due by Monday
Week of April 2nd	Topics: Modernism and Place: The South as Modernist paradigm Readings: The Agrarians http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/White/anthology/agrarian.html ; Faulkner	Full draft of Encyclopedia entry due by Friday.
Week of April 9th	Topics: Modernism and Place: The South as Modernist paradigm Faulkner	
Week of April 16th	Topics: Modernism, Ethnicity, and (Im)migration Readings: Du Bois http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html ; Locke: http://etext.virginia.edu/harlem/LocEnteF.html ; Hughes http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm ; McKay, Hughes, Larsen	
Week of April 23rd	Topics: Modernism, Ethnicity, and (Im)migration Reading: Larsen	Second Edits to Encyclopedia Entries due By Monday Final Draft of Encyclopedia Entries due by Friday on our wiki page. Reflection essays due in class on Friday.
Week of April 30th	Topics: Modernism and Gender: Failed men and Wild Women Reading: O'Neill, Hemingway,	
May 7th	Topics: Modernism and Gender: Failed men and Wild Women Readings: Dorothy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter	
Final Exam Monday, May 14 th 1:30-3:30		