

Twentieth-Century American Literature

Professor: Dr. Raymond

Prerequisite: Good standing in the Master's program.

Text: Baym, Nina, *et al.* *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, volumes D and E, seventh edition.

Gaines, Ernest. *A Lesson before Dying*.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Purpose and Objectives:

“The totality of the literary output produced during this period (1914-1945) is called American literary modernism. . . . Three issues stand out. . . all related to the accelerating transformations and conflicts of modernity. One conflict centered on the uses of literary tradition. . . . A related conflict involved the place of popular culture in serious literature. . . . Another issue was the question of how engaged in political and social struggle a work of literature ought to be.”

Mary Loeffelholz, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*

After 1945, American writers “anticipated and explored strains in American social relationships that issued in the open conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s and shaped American life for decades to come: public unrest about the uses of government and industrial power; the institutions of marriage and family; the rights and powers of racial minorities, women, and homosexuals; the use of drugs; alternative states of consciousness. . . . A parallel development in literary theory posed another great threat to conventional literature. Known as Deconstruction. . . this style of criticism questioned the underlying assumptions behind any statement, exposing how what was accepted as absolute truth usually depended on rhetoric rather than on fact.”

Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

“I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to . . . help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.”

William Faulkner, “The Stockholm Address”

“The special and immediate interest that takes us to fiction is always our interest in the story....A story is not merely an image of life, but life in motion—specifically, the presentation of individual characters moving through their particular experiences to some end that we may accept as meaningful. And the experience that is characteristically presented in a story is that of facing a problem, a conflict. To put it bluntly: no conflict, no story.”

Robert Penn Warren, “Why Do We Read Fiction?”

This course surveys major prose and poetry of American writers from 1900 to 2000 so that you will understand the ideas and genres that define the twentieth century and build a foundation for further study of American literature.

You will achieve this purpose by working with your peers and your instructor in completing these objectives:

- Read assigned poetry, drama, and fiction.
- Examine the aesthetic, historical, and philosophical concerns of the United States from 1900 to 2000.
- Examine the literary types through which those concerns are expressed.
- Express understanding of these ideas and genres through objective examination and through written work that is mechanically sound and rhetorically effective (unified, coherent, emphatic, amply developed).

Scope

- Naturally, a survey course requires heavy reading. You will find the assignments challenging but realistic. If you discipline yourself to read daily, you will do well, particularly if you follow your reading with thorough responses to the questions attending each reading assignment. You should enter your responses in your **journal**, a notebook that will keep your reading focused, prepare you for class discussion, and store material from which you will draw in writing your essays and in studying for exams. The journal will determine **10% of your grade in the course**.
- You will write a critical essay in response to Arthur Miller’s play, *Death of a Salesman*. This essay will determine **20% of your course grade**.
- You will write a critical **essay on Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson before Dying***. This essay will determine **20% of your course grade**.
- You will write a **critical essay on modernist and postmodernist American poetry and fiction**. This essay will give you a chance to relate works one to another, the essence of critical thinking; it will determine **20% of your grade in the course**.

- You will complete a two-part **final examination**. Part I will ask you to write a take-home essay focused **Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five***; Part II will ask you to take an in-class examination, which will test your ability to identify authors, define literary types, interpret passages, and relate works one to the other. The final exam will determine **20% of your grade in the course**.
- **Class participation will determine 10% of your grade in the course**. The following items will be factored into this grade in class participation: attendance, contributions to class discussion, scores on unannounced quizzes.

Evaluation

- All grades will be based on this scale:
90%=A- 80%=B- 70%=C- 60%=D-
- Written work will be evaluated by the standards described in the Guide to Evaluation distributed in class.
- At the end of the course, you and your peers will evaluate your instructor and the course.

Attendance and Participation

- In view of the grade in class participation (see above), you should attend every class, not just to hear background lectures but also to join in class discussions and peer group activities.
- Given this serious responsibility to your peers as well as to yourself, you cannot earn higher than a “B” in Class Participation (regardless of quiz scores) if you have **three unexcused absences**. In like manner, four unexcused absences will limit you to a C in Class Participation, five to a D, six to an F.

Office Hours: I will be happy to meet with you to discuss your work. Just see me to make an appointment.

Weekly Schedule

Theme: Marriage, Family, and the American Dream

Week 1

- *Critical Focus: Feminist Theory*
- Glaspell, “Trifles” (1916), 1411-1421
- Hurston, “Sweat” (1926) (copies distributed in class)
- Lahiri, “Sexy” (1999), 3248-3264

Weeks 2-3

- *Critical Focus: Marxist Theory*
- Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949), 2325-2392.
- Writing Groups meet to respond to rough drafts of *Salesman* essay
- **Submit revision of *Salesman* draft to Raymond**

Weeks 4-6

- *Critical Focus: Psychoanalytic Theory*
- Faulkner, "Barn Burning" (1938), 1955-1967.
- Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" (1939), 2066-2075
- **Submit final version of *Salesman* essay to Raymond.**
- Plath, "Daddy" (1965), 2704-2706
- Dove, "Adolescence" (1980), 3135-3138
- Lee, "The Gift" (1986), 3197-3199
- Gluck, "Appearances" (1990), 2999-3003
- Komunyakaa, "My Father's Love Letters" (1992), 3075-3078

Weeks 7-9

- *Critical Focuses: New Historicist Theory and Deconstruction*
- Faulkner, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech (1950) (distributed in class)
- King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) (distributed in class)
- Gaines, *A Lesson before Dying* (1993)
- Writing Groups meet to respond to rough drafts of *Lesson* essay
- **Submit revision of *Lesson* essay to Raymond**
- Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), 1193-1206
- Momaday, *The Road to Rainy Mountain* (1969), 2764-2775
- **Submit final revision of *Lesson* essay to Raymond**

Theme: Modernism

Weeks 10-12

- Pound, 1477-79; "In a Station of the Metro," 1482 (1913)
- Williams, 1462-64; "The Red Wheelbarrow," 1469 (1923); "This is just to Say," 1472 (1944); Manifesto, 1510-11 (1923)
- Eliot, 1574-76; "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 1577-80 (1917)
- Frost, 1388-89; "After Apple-Picking," 1398; "The Road Not Taken"; "Birches," 1400-1401 (1914)
- Hemingway 1980-82; "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," 1983-99 (1936)

Theme: Post-modernism

Weeks 13-14

- Bishop, 2166-67; “The Fish” 2167-69 (1946)
- Jarrell, 2266-2267; “The Death of a Ball Turret Gunner,” 2268 (1945)
- O’Connor, “Good Country People” (1955), 2529-2543
- Lowell, 2392-94; “Skunk Hour,” 2405-06 (1959)
- Snyder, 2672-74; “Milton by Firelight,” 2674-75 (1959); “Ripples on the Surface,” 2678-79 (1993)
- Anzaldua, 2935; “Towards a New Consciousness,” 2936-46 (1987)
- Levine, 2636-37; “Detroit Grease Shop Poem,” 2638 (1972); “The Simple Truth,” 2640-41 (1996)
- Collins, 2920-21; “Forgetfulness,” 2921 (1991)
- Graham, 3116-18; “The Dream of the Unified Field,” 3122-27 (1995)
- **Submit essay on modernist and post-modernist poetry and fiction to Raymond**

Weeks 15-16

- Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

June: Final Examinations