

Postwar U.S. Fiction and the Birth of Postmodernism

Contact information

Instructor	Matthew Wilkens
Course	English 40763: Postwar U.S. Fiction and the Birth of Postmodernism
Meetings	TR 12:30–1:45
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Synopsis

An advanced-undergraduate-level study of the literature and culture of the United States in the generation after the Second World War (c. 1945–70).

Description

This is a course on the large-scale changes in literary form and production in the generation after the Second World War. The period in question—from roughly 1945 to 1970—has come to be called the Late Modern, but this is a deceptively simple label. True, many of the features of high modernism endure after the war, but the era's defining problem is the increasing lack of fit between modernist forms and the new American socioeconomic situation of material abundance, civil rights struggles, and Cold War politics.

The texts we'll read this semester respond to this lack of fit with varying degrees of innovation and success, eventually producing the bifurcated structure of postmodern fiction and memoir-like personal reflection that continues to dominate contemporary literature. The course is thus in part a study of the origins of our own cultural moment. But it's also an attempt to understand the dynamics of rapid cultural change in general, or what we might call a theorization of the event. To this end, we'll read both a wide range of fiction from the period and a number of critical and philosophical reflections on its associated problems: Fredric Jameson on modernism, Andrew Hoberek on literature and class, Alain Badiou on the event proper, and others on more specific issues.

Two notes. (1) There are no formal prerequisites, but it will help to know something about the history of twentieth-century fiction (modernism, postmodernism, the various realisms and naturalisms, etc.) and to have read as widely as possible in the primary literature of the periods before and after the target dates (i.e., high modernism and postmodernism). (2) The reading load will be moderately heavy. You have been warned. (See the list of texts and page counts below).

Objectives

This course has three primary objectives, which can be arranged in order of increasing generality. First, it aims to provide a specific body of knowledge about postwar novelistic writing in the United States. Students who complete this course will be prepared to un-

dertake more advanced work in contemporary literary studies and to begin making their own contributions to it. Second, it provides a basis for further work in the literary humanities, cultural studies, and social sciences generally. It introduces students to methods and critical vocabularies employed in these fields and familiarizes them with the resources used in conducting independent literary research. Third, it seeks to build students' skills in critical and metacritical analysis, including their ability to evaluate competing forms of argument, evidence, and justification.

Written work and grading

Two papers of ten pages each will be required, one due mid-semester and the other taking the place of a final exam. Alternatively, advanced students may write a single twenty-page term paper or equivalent project. Relatively brief, informal responses will be assigned for each primary text. In addition, one group presentation on each work of fiction will be required over the course of the semester (procedural details to follow). Overall grades will be based on the long papers or projects (35% each, or 70% for a single term paper/project), presentations (10%), responses (10% in sum), and class participation (10%). *You must satisfactorily complete all assignments to pass the course.*

Readings

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952, 581 pp.)
 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (2002, 250 pp., theory)
 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957, 310 pp.)
 Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962, 623 pp.)
 Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962, 315 pp.)
 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963, 284 pp.)
 Thomas Pynchon *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966, 183 pp.)

In addition, relevant essays from the scholarly literature will be assigned and available.

Policy statements

Attendance

Two absences (one week of meetings), no questions asked. Additional absences will lower your grade.

Late work

Late work is generally not accepted. If you find yourself in exceptional circumstances, talk to me well in advance of the deadline and we may be able to find an accommodation.

Collaboration and plagiarism

Talking to other students—especially those in the course—about your ideas is a good thing. Taking other people's words or ideas without attribution is plagiarism and will result in honor-code-related unpleasantness. When in doubt, cite. And feel free to ask me about specific cases or problems and about the mechanics of research documentation. For

references and guidelines, see the library's [plagiarism](#) and [documentation](#) sites and the university's [academic code of honor](#).

Disabilities

Students with documented disabilities who need accommodations or have questions should speak with me directly and contact the [Office of Disability Services](#).

Email

Email is a useful tool, but it is not (generally) secure. I will discuss grades and other confidential information over email only if you use encryption software (typically PGP/GPG).

Sakai

Many course materials and functions are on Sakai (<https://sakailogin.nd.edu>). These include the syllabus (and any updated versions issued later), paper assignments, response forums, discussion boards, supplemental readings, etc.

Schedule

NB. All dates and assignments subject to change.

WEEK 1 (8/27)	Welcome and introduction, Jameson
WEEK 2 (9/3)	Jameson, Beckett
WEEK 3 (9/10)	Beckett, Ellison
WEEK 4 (9/17)	Ellison. Class on 9/19 to meet at Snite Museum of Art.
WEEK 5 (9/24)	Ellison, Hoberek
WEEK 6 (10/1)	Kerouac
WEEK 7 (10/8)	Kerouac, Plath
WEEK 8 (10/15)	Plath
WEEK 9 (10/22)	Fall break, no class meetings
WEEK 10 (10/29)	Badiou, Lessing. Paper I due Tuesday, 10/29
WEEK 11 (11/5)	Lessing
WEEK 12 (11/12)	Lessing, Nabokov
WEEK 13 (11/19)	Nabokov
WEEK 14 (11/26)	Nabokov. Thanksgiving break, no class meeting 11/28.
WEEK 15 (12/3)	Pynchon
WEEK 16 (12/10)	Pynchon, Conclusions and review
FINALS WEEK	Final paper due in lieu of exam (Monday, 12/16 by 12:30 pm)