

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION Fall 2014

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Description

At the conclusion of "Is America Falling Apart?" Anthony Burgess writes, "The guides, as always, lie among the writers and artists....they can at least clarify (the nature of contemporary America) and show how it relates to the human condition in general. Literature, that most directly human of the arts, often reacts magnificently to an ambiance of unease of apparent breakdown."

This course will present some of the most prominent American novelists today with the aim of charting some of the diverse fictional responses to a culture in a state of transition. Students will also examine pertinent secondary sources that deal with this period.

Syllabus

9/3--Introduction

9/10--Overview

9/17--Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* ("A Primer of Existentialism")

9/24--Paul West, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*

10/1--Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man*

10/8--Molly Gloss, *Wild Life*

10/15--Philip Roth, *The Counter-Life*

10/22--Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

10/29--*Lolita* II

11/5--Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

11/12--*The Crying of Lot 49* II **PRECIS DUE** **

11/19--Don DeLillo, *Whitenoise*

11/26--**HOLIDAY**

12/3--Percival Everett, *Erasure*

12/10--**FINAL DUE**

EXPECTATIONS

- *Complete all reading assignments by dates assigned
- *Participate in class discussions
- *Attend class regularly

Since this is not a correspondence course and since we meet only once a week, attendance is mandatory. A student will be allowed no more than one (1) unexcused absence (and no more than one excused absence). Those who have more than 1 unexcused absence will have a whole grade deducted from the final grade for each additional absence. Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. If a student arrives after attendance has been taken, it is his/her responsibility to see that s/he is recorded as being present. Excused absences will be granted only for extenuating circumstances (neither general malaise nor an assignment in another class will do) and must be cleared no later than the next class period. It is your responsibility to check your attendance; my records are final.

I recommend you date your class notes in order to demonstrate your attendance should there be a conflict in records. Be prepared to show those notes at the time that you inquire about your absences.

Attendance policy--Class begins on the half hour; students arriving consistently late by more than 5 minutes will be considered absent for any time missed. The time missed will be calculated as absences which will affect the final grade as explained above.

GRADING

The final course grade will be based on:

2 essays: 60% final grade

1 essay final exam (blue book required): 25% final grade

1 precis of a critical work: 15% final grade

class participation, improvement: swing factors

*To miss any of the assignments above will result in an automatic failure of the course.
NO EXCEPTIONS.

GRADING STANDARDS (as stated in CSUS. catalog under "Academic Regulations")

- A Exemplary achievement of the course objectives. In addition to being clearly and significantly above the requirements, the work exhibited is of an independent, creative, contributory nature.
- B Superior achievement of the course objectives. The performance is clearly and significantly above the satisfactory fulfillment of course requirements.
- C Satisfactory achievement of the course objectives. The student is now prepared for advanced work or study.
- D Unsatisfactory achievement toward the course objectives, yet achievement of a sufficient proportion of the objectives so that it is not necessary to repeat the course unless required to do so by the academic department.
- F Ineffective achievement toward the course objectives. The student has made no clearly significant progress.

NB: I do **not** negotiate grades. If you have questions about performance on an assignment (not about the grade on same), I will be glad to explain, but I will not barter a grade up or down.

GENERAL POLICIES

LATE PAPERS: In this class they do not exist; the date an assignment is due is the date the assignment is due. If there is some clear and compelling reason for a late paper (not great powder at one's favorite ski resort, general malaise, or an assignment in any other class), see or call me in advance of submission. All papers must be submitted in class the week before the essay is to be considered by the class. I strongly encourage each of you to purchase a thumb or memory drive and back up your work on it in case of a hard drive or printer failure.

FORMATTING: Mandatory for all papers. Papers should be neat and free of extreme typographical errors. Double space and use 1" margins and print on only one side of the paper. If you use a computer or word processor, use no less and no more than a 12 pt font. Number pages, beginning with second page, in upper right hand corner, and secure pages only with a staple in the upper left hand corner. On a cover page center the title and put in the lower right hand corner your name, the date the assignment is due, the title of the novel you are writing about, the course number (240S), and my name.

MISCELLANEOUS: Students must keep abreast of assignments; I will not accept the excuse that because someone misses a class s/he did not know there was a change in the syllabus or an assignment. If there are any changes in the syllabus, they will be

announced in class, and students are then responsible for these on dates announced.

MECHANICS OF THE COURSE

SEMINAR PAPERS: For each novel there will be a pair of essays (5-6 pages in length) submitted on the same topic. These essays will form the basis of class discussion. Writers must keep in mind that their assignment, in every case, is to present a reasoned, well-documented, analytical, argumentative response to the topic assigned. In other words, the essays are not simply plot summaries but may indeed include some limited summary in order to make their cases. Keep in mind that your audience is one that has read the novel but that needs persuading of your point of view. These assignments are not necessarily exercises in literary research, though a knowledge of extant scholarship on your subject will, of course, be helpful in articulating an individual point of view. If you do use the words or ideas of someone else, be sure to document accurately according to the recent MLA style of citation reference. As stated above, papers will be submitted a week before they will be discussed. Writers must submit the original and 14 photo copies (anonymous if one prefers), one for each student in the class.

SEMINAR RESPONDENTS: Just as there will be two essays under consideration for each meeting, there will be two volunteers to lead discussion for that meeting. The respondents should consider the essays submitted, respond to issues and ideas presented there, raise any pertinent questions, as well as discuss or pose questions regarding other relevant issues suggested by or even ignored by the essays. The essays offer a place to begin but they are by no means all that will be discussed.

CRITICAL PRECIS: On a first-come, first-served basis, students will select a critical text from a distributed list. Students must read the work and then summarize its main ideas, contents, critical position, bibliographic information, etc. in two pages only. The point of this assignment is to briefly describe the work for someone who is probably unfamiliar with it. Submit the original and copies for each member of the class. Thus each student will have a brief, carefully annotated bibliography of secondary sources for further reading or research.

BEHAVIOR---recently a professor in another department did a survey of standards of behavior, and the results suggested there is some confusion about what is (and is not) acceptable in university classes. She has advised that professors define their standards, so here are mine: certain fundamental standards of behavior must be observed in this class. Common courtesy and respect is demanded of all enrolled in this class. Therefore you are not to read the newspaper or a textbook for another

course once the class meeting has begun. **Turn off your cell phones**; no one is to take or make a call during class; the same goes for texting, don't send or view any during class. **Turn off the laptops**; no one may use a laptop during class. No digital pads are allowed either or ereaders with an internet connection. Likewise, no one is to work on assignments for another course in this class. Do not talk or otherwise interrupt me or another student who is speaking, and under no condition will anyone be permitted to sleep during class lectures or discussions. Those who cannot or will not follow these obvious rules of behavior will be counted as absent for that class period and may be subject to dismissal from the course.

ESSAY TOPICS: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

Fall 2014

Submission Date: Topics:

PERCY: Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* talks repeatedly about a search; what is this search, and is he successful in conducting it? Further analyze how movie-going fits with this search. **[Due 9/15 by noon]**

WEST: Analyze the narrative point of view in *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*. Explain not only who the narrator is but how this particular method of narration shapes other features of the novel--its characterization, organization, and central themes. In other words be sure to argue for its indispensability in shaping the fiction before us. **[Due 9/17]**

BERGER: Look closely at the "Foreword" and "Editor's Epilogue" to *Little Big Man*. What is the function of these sections, do they add anything to the narrative or affect in significant ways how one reads the novel. In framing your response, consider carefully who Ralph Fielding Snell is, what his role in this narrative may be, how he affects our reading of the work. In other words, look at him closely and determine his role in the narrative. **[Due 9/24]**

GLOSS: Mary Gloss's *Wild Life* might uncharitably be labeled a hodge podge, assembled as bits and pieces that never finally cohere. Analyze this fragmented (or seemingly fragmented) assemblage and account for such a structure. What significance might there be in such an arrangement; what might the novel be suggesting by calling such obvious attention to its own form? **[Due 10/1]**

ROTH: Explain the meaning of the novel's title, *The Counterlife*, and analyze this in relation to the novel's unique structural features. **[Due 10/8]**

NABOKOV: Repeatedly in *Lolita* Humbert Humbert addresses the audience directly.

Why does he do this; why is he so persistent about breaking the artifice of the narrative to offer these many direct addresses? **[Due 10/15]**

NABOKOV II: In his afterword, "On a Book Entitled Lolita," Nabokov states, "For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm." Explain what he means by this and how it relates to this novel. **[Due 10/22]**

PYNCHON: In *The Crying of Lot 49*, who is Pierce Inverarity and how and why is he important? What does he represent, if anything, and what is his legacy? **[Due 10/29]**

PYNCHON II: *The Crying of Lot 49* abounds in religious imagery, with references to "the Word," revelations, miracles, etc. What is the point of this imagery, how does it fit in the novel, and what does it suggest? **[Due 11/5]**

DELILLO: At the beginning of Chapter 40 of *White Noise*, little Wilder drives his tricycle across lanes of traffic and escapes injury. Jack, Babette, and Wilder begin visiting the freeway overpass, but the meaning of these events seems vague. What is significance of these incidents and how do they (and the rest of the last chapter) inform the novel and its major issues? **[Due 11/12]**

EVERETT: Analyze and explain the meaning and significance of this novel's title. **[Due 11/19]**

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