



Jasper Johns, *Three Flags* (1958)

ENGL 1201W | SPRING 2018
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE
T/TH 1:00-2:15 Anderson Hall 350
Site: moodle.umn.edu
Instructor: Dr. John Pistelli
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Office Hours: M/W 4:30-5:30 Lind Hall 254

Teaching Assistants

Description

[T]he American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.

—Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction" (1961)

From the Cold War and the social movements of the 1960s to the rise of digital culture and the political instability of today, the last half century of American life has been a time of tumult and upheaval, for better and for worse. How has creative writing responded to the vast social and political challenges of this chaotic period? How have creative writers handled the emergence of rivals to literature's cultural primacy in the form of new media such as cinema, television, and the Internet? To answer these questions, our course will provide a historical survey of American literature from the mid-twentieth century to the present. We will situate literary works in their social and political contexts even as we analyze their artistic qualities to learn how literature remains relevant to our ever-changing society. Finally, as this is a writing-intensive course, we will focus on responding to literature in written argument.

Required Books¹

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (Harper Perennial, ISBN: 978-0062334411)

Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* (Norton, ISBN: 978-0393346015)

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (Vintage, ISBN: 978-1400033430)

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Viking, ISBN: 978-0140274981)

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (DC, ISBN: 978-1401245252)

Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (Vintage, ISBN: 978-0679744399)

Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves* (Harper Perennial, ISBN: 978-0060515133)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (Mariner, ISBN: 978-0618871711)

Tracy K. Smith, *Life on Mars* (Graywolf, ISBN: 978-1555975845)

Eugene Lim, *Dear Cyborgs* (FSG, ISBN: 978-0374537111)



¹ Books are available at the University Bookstore in Coffman Union; please purchase the specified editions. The texts should almost all be available in used copies at discounted prices in the store. If you are shopping online for deeper discounts, please search by the ISBN number so you can buy the correct edition. You may use ebooks in lieu of print books, but again make sure you get the correct text—generally, the cover should be the same as that of the print book—and be sure to bring your ebook to lecture and discussion just as you would any other textbook.

ENGL 1201W satisfies the Literature Core requirement.

ENGL 1201W focuses on analysis of written works of literature, chiefly fiction and drama, and it consistently and specifically addresses issues of language and meaning in the works studied. Moreover, the design provides for the continuing study of the formal dimensions of literature, with recurring attention to genre, style, characterization, vocabulary, and symbolism and their capacity to evoke a powerful response from readers. Furthermore, at every turn the course examines the social and historical contexts of the literary works as well as their content.

ENGL 1201W satisfies the General Core guidelines.

ENGL 1201W involves reading, study, analysis, and critical interpretation of several literary texts written by American authors. Through a systematic arrangement of lectures, small-group discussions, writing assignments, and oral discussion, this course improves the ability of students to read, write, think, and speak as liberally educated adults. Furthermore, ENGL 1201W supplies a dimension to liberal education best provided by the arts: it teaches students to discriminate, with precision and nuance, among shades of emotion while likewise sharpening the critical judgment they need to recognize appeals to fraudulent as well as genuine, excessive as well as appropriate, shallow as well as deep emotion and feelings.

ENGL 1201W fulfills Student Learning Outcomes.

Students in this course will master a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry. The central question of this course is how the contemporary American novel has responded to the influence of new and mass media in popular culture. We will look at the ways in which novelists formulate the problem of mass media, how they re-articulate the role and function of the novel in response to it, and whether or not their novels succeed in establishing a new aesthetic for twenty-first century fiction.

ENGL 1201W is a Writing Intensive course.

This course meets the Council on Liberal Education guidelines for a Writing Intensive course. This means that the course:

- integrates writing into course content, through writing assignments that work toward specific course objectives and writing activities that take place throughout the semester
- provides explicit instruction in writing
- requires a cumulative minimum of 2,500 words of formal writing apart from any informal writing activities and assignments
- includes at least one formal assignment that requires students to revise and resubmit drafts after receiving feedback from the course instructor
- requires that at least one-third of each student's final course grade must be tied to the written work done in the course and that a student cannot pass the course and fail the writing component

Assignments

Grade breakdown.

Participation	10%
Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam	20%
Essay 1	20%
Essay 2	30%

Participation. I do not directly give an attendance grade but roll will be taken both in lecture and in discussion sections. Be advised that there will be in-class exercises, assignments, and activities in this course that you will miss if you are absent. If you cannot be in class for any reason, please ask a classmate rather than the instructor for notes or a summary. If illness or other problems require you to miss more than a small amount of class (1 or 2 meetings), please let me or your section leader know. If you miss more than 2 meetings (including both lecture and discussion) without a documented reason, your course grade may be affected. If you miss more than 4 meetings, you may be in danger of failing the course. Participation includes speaking up in class at least once a week in discussion section, contributing to in-class activities, and/or attending office hours or otherwise getting in touch with your instructors.

Exams. A midterm and final exam will be held in lecture. These exams will treat all course materials from the beginning to the half and from the half to the end of the course. Both exams will be divided into two parts: a fact-based first section in which you will answer fill-in-the-blank, true/false, or multiple-choice questions, and a second section in which you will have to identify passages from your reading by author, title, and date, and write a brief explanation of their significance. I will provide more detail as the date of the midterm approaches. The exams cannot be made up.

Essays. You will write two essays for the course. The first will be a 1000-word argumentative essay that will require you to provide a close reading of a passage in a text from the first third of the course and devise a thesis about its significance. The second essay will be a 1500-word argumentative essay that asks you to devise a thesis about the similarities or differences between two texts from the course. For the first essay, you will submit a draft that will be graded as well as a graded final submission. For the final essay, you will submit a proposal before turning in the final draft. I will provide more detail as the due dates approach. Late submissions will be lowered by a letter grade for every day not submitted.

Grades

Grading Policy. A (90-100): Outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements B (80-90): Significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements C (70-80): Meets the course requirements in every respect D (60-70): Worthy of credit, even though it fails to meet course requirements fully F (0-60): Work was not completed

Incompletes. A grade of incomplete ("I") is given only in a genuine and documented emergency, and *only* for work which is due during the last weeks of the course. You must make arrangements for an incomplete before the last day of class.

Disability Accommodations

Any student with a documented disability condition who needs to arrange accommodations should contact the instructor and Disability Services (612-626-1333) at the beginning of the semester.

Scholastic Dishonesty

Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering, forging, or misusing a University academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis. If it is determined that a student has cheated, he or she may be given an "F" or an "N" for the course, and may face additional sanctions from the University.

Student Writing Support

Students can get one-to-one-consultations on any course paper or writing project at Student Writing Support. Student Writing Support has several campus locations, including the main location in 15 Nicholson Hall. See <http://writing.umn.edu/> for details about locations, appointments, and online consultations.

Student Conduct

To avoid disruptions, please observe the following policies. 1. During class, your attention should be directed toward whomever is speaking or to your assigned task—no whispering, texting, etc. 2. All electronic devices should be used only for class materials. 3. Please address the instructor and your classmates respectfully.

Contact

For a class with a lecture and discussion section, it is best to get in touch with teaching assistants if you have questions about course material, grades, etc., as they are effectively the graders for the course. Please follow their instructions on how best to contact them.

Offensive Material

In this course, students will be required to read words or view images that they may consider offensive. The ideas expressed in any given text do not necessarily reflect the views of the instructor, the English Department, or the University of Minnesota. Course materials have been selected for their literary, cultural, and/or historical value, in order to achieve specific learning objectives and course goals. These materials are meant to be examined in the context of intellectual inquiry and critical analysis, as appropriate for a university-level course. If you are easily shocked and/or offended, please contact the instructor to discuss whether this course is suitable for you.

Other Policies

For extensive information about UMN policy regarding the above topics and others—Student Conduct Code; Use of Personal Electronic Devices in the Class Room; Scholastic Dishonesty; Makeup Work for Legitimate Absences; Appropriate Student Use of Class Notes and Course Materials; Grading and Transcripts; Sexual Harassment; Equity, Diversity, Equal Opportunity, and Affirmative Action; Disability Accommodations; Mental Health and Stress Management; and Academic Freedom—I strongly encourage that you visit the following link:

http://www.policy.umn.edu/Policies/Education/Education/SYLLABUSREQUIREMENTS_APPA.html

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Prologue.

01/16

- Introduction to the course

01/18

- Elizabeth Bishop, "The Man-Moth" (1946)

1. Paranoia and the Counterculture

01/23

- Allen Ginsberg, *Howl* (1956)

01/25

- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), chapters 1-3

01/30

- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), chapters 4-6

2. The Personal Is the Political

02/01

- Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), I-II

02/06

- Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), III-IV

02/08

- Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973), Part One

02/13

- Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973), Part Two
- ESSAY #1 FIRST DRAFT DUE TO YOUR T.A.

3. Nuclear Families: Anxiety and Apocalypse

02/15

- Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1984), Part I: Waves and Radiation

02/20

- Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1984), Part II: The Airborne Toxic Event

02/22

- Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1984), Part III: Dylarama

02/27

- Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (1986-7), chapters 1-6

03/01

- Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (1986-7), chapters 7-12

Interlude.

03/06

- Midterm review and catch-up day
- ESSAY #1 FINAL DRAFT DUE TO YOUR T.A.

03/08

- MIDTERM EXAM

03/13, 03/15

- No class

4. (De)Constructing the Past

03/20

- Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), chapter I

03/22

- Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), chapters II-III

03/27

- Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), chapter IV

03/29

- Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves* (2008), pp. 1-86

04/03

- Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves* (2008), pp. 87-192

04/05

- Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves* (2008), pp. 193-311

5. Times, Spaces, Bodies

04/10

- Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (2006), chapters 1-3

04/12

- Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (2006), chapters 4-7

04/17

- Tracy K. Smith, *Life on Mars* (2011), pp. 3-34

04/19

- Tracy K. Smith, *Life on Mars* (2011), pp. 35-70

04/24

- Eugene Lim, *Dear Cyborgs* (2017), pp. 3-69

04/26

- Eugene Lim, *Dear Cyborgs* (2017), pp. 70-163

Epilogue.

05/01

- Conclusion to the course
- Course Evaluations

05/03

- FINAL EXAM

05/05

- ESSAY #2 DUE TO YOUR T.A.