

**Optional Literature Module:  
American Fiction after 1945**

(7.5 credits)

Autumn 2024

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**Module description**

This course will explore the fictional Americas that American writers of fiction have presented to readers in the long half-century from 1945 to 2001 (and beyond). Of the tens of thousands of American novels by hundreds of writers published over these sixty-odd years, we will be reading a small sample of works that have gained the status of major works in the eyes of critics, readers and scholars. It is a list of works published across this long period, by writers of diverse backgrounds, evoking different genre conventions or establishing new such conventions. They all grapple with something we may call the American condition, or even the ideology of American exceptionalism.

In this course unit we read some 2 000 pages of American prose, a few critical articles, and some extracts from influential theoretical discussions. Students will learn to analyze modern US works of fiction understood as symbolic acts and will acquire a critical perspective on significant trends and themes in American fiction of the past half-century.

The module comprises eight two-hour seminars, all of which involve active participation from the students. The students will read primary texts and, in some instances, secondary material before each seminar. They will discuss the material in groups, in and outside of class, using these meetings as occasions to reflect upon and voice their ideas about their reading of primary texts and understanding of the secondary material. Each student will give a brief oral presentation and write a course essay.

**Intended learning outcomes**

Upon completion of the module, students are expected to be able to:

- Account for the contents of the course literature;
- Display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field;
- Apply these concepts to literary texts;
- Analyze literary texts from a relevant theoretical perspective;
- Motivate their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field;
- Display a good understanding of written English;
- Express themselves in academic English.

**Grading**

The module adopts the 7-grade SU scale (A–F).

To receive a final grade, students must have completed all the examination assignments [not done all examination assignments=no grade].

To receive a passing grade (A to E), students must complete and pass all the examination assignments, and thus demonstrate that they achieved all the learning outcomes at least at the minimum level (as described below).

**Module activities**

The module consists of the following activities:

- Eight two-hour seminars (pre-seminar instructions for each seminar will be posted on Athena);

- Before each seminar, students are expected to finish the assigned reading and do any accompanying tasks. Students should be prepared to discuss the reading and tasks at the seminar;
- Students are expected to complete all the tasks assigned by the teacher.

## **Examination**

Students are required to complete the following:

- Oral presentation: a structured presentation discussing and comparing recurring themes and motifs in a selection of works from the reading list: pass/fail grading. These presentations will be given by students in the seminars. The order will be decided at the start of the module.
- Analytical essay: a research-led argument essays of 2000-2500 words, which must make reference both to primary sources and to at least two secondary peer reviewed sources: A-F grading scale.

## **Module format**

The module will take place in the form of seminars, where students will practice analyzing literary texts in terms of the specific historical, generic and critical perspectives dealt with in the course, as well as develop their skills in providing textual support for their reading.

Seminars are intended to be active, hands-on opportunities for students to practice the skills they will learn throughout the module; for this reason, the students should bring the assigned text(s) with them to every seminar.

## **Required reading / viewing**

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985).

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952), selections: The Prologue, Chapter 1 and 2, and the Epilogue.

Louise Erdrich, *A Plague of Doves* (2009).

Ihab Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism." *Performing Arts Journal* 6, no. 1 (1981): 30-37.

Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. (London: Verso, 1998). 1-20. (Hand-out)

Mark McGurl, "Processing Impersonality," extract from *The Program Era* (2009): 136-48. (SUB e-book)

Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992).

Toni Morrison, "Black Matters" from *Playing in the Dark* (1992), 3-17 (Hand-out)

Flannery O'Connor, the following short stories from *The Complete Stories*: "The Barber," "The Crop," "The Displaced Person," "Good Country People," "The Lame Shall Enter First." (1953-1964).

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).

Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (1997).

Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (1984).

Hand-out with a discussion of and brief extracts from Kenneth Burke, Fredric Jameson and Jane Tompkins.

Carolyn M. Jones, "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *African American Review* 31.3 (Autumn 1997) 481-495.

Students will choose two articles from a range of critical articles for their second essay.

## Schedule

Unit	Set reading
1. Introduction: Period and place, word and world. Ralph Ellison	Brief piece with extracts from Kenneth Burke, Fredric Jameson and Jane Tompkins (hand-outs). Selections from Ralph Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i>
2. The Program Era/Southern literature/Black humor. Flannery O'Connor	Selections from Mark McGurl, <i>The Program Era</i> and from Toni Morrison, <i>Playing in the Dark</i> O'Connor, short stories
3. Early postmodernism/Black humor. Thomas Pynchon	Articles by Fredric Jameson and Ihab Hassan Pynchon, <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i>
4. African-American writing/Black history. Toni Morrison	Carolyn M. Jones, "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's <i>Jazz</i> ." Morrison, <i>Jazz</i>
5. Postmodernism/spectacle and simulacra/satire Don DeLillo	DeLillo, <i>White Noise</i>
6. Multiethnic America/Chicana literature/The coming-of-age novel Sandra Cisneros	Cisneros, <i>The House on Mango Street</i>
7. The Jewish-American novel/The American century/family saga Philip Roth	Roth, <i>American Pastoral</i>
8. Native American literature/family saga/regional novel Louise Erdrich	Erdrich, <i>The Plague of Doves</i>
Final essay: to be submitted no later than January 19, 2025 (Resubmission date: February 23)	

*All dates and times as given in Time Edit. Check Time Edit regularly for updates.*

## Module grading criteria

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>Fx</b>	<b>F</b>
	<b>excellent skills in</b>	<b>very good skills in</b>	<b>good skills in</b>	<b>adequate skills in</b>	<b>satisfactory skills in</b>		
Overview of material	accounting for the contents of the course literature	accounting for the contents of the course literature	accounting for the contents of the course literature	accounting for the contents of the course literature	accounting for the contents of the course literature	The student has displayed some, but not all, of the skills of the level of the criteria for E.	The student's work does not demonstrate the achievement of the course outcomes at a minimally adequate level.
Discussion	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to literary texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to literary texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to literary texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to literary texts	displaying the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field, and applying these concepts to literary texts		
Analysis	analysing literary texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analysis in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing literary texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analysis in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing literary texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analysis in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing literary texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analysis in writing in a manner relevant to the field	analysing literary texts from a relevant theoretical perspective critically, and motivating their own analysis in writing in a manner relevant to the field		
Comprehension	displaying a good understanding of written English	displaying a good understanding of written English	displaying a good understanding of written English	displaying a good understanding of written English	displaying a good understanding of written English		
Expression	expressing themselves in academic English	expressing themselves in academic English	expressing themselves in academic English	expressing themselves in academic English	expressing themselves in academic English		

**NB:** *If the work submitted is close to a passing grade (E) but not sufficient, the student will receive an Fx.*

**Grading criteria: Oral presentation**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Pass</b>	<b>Fail</b>
<b>Content</b>	The presentation introduces the topic of the presentation in a clear and concise manner demonstrating the student's understanding of the literary, historical and theoretical issues discussed. These issues are presented and discussed in a lucid manner.	In the presentation the student does not demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the literary, historical, and theoretical issues discussed. These issues are not presented and discussed in an adequate manner.
<b>Organization and language</b>	The presentation is well structured and easy to follow. The language used is academic and does not contain any severe mistakes.	The organization of the presentation is poor, and the language used contains several mistakes.