

English 429B: Mid-Twentieth Century American Fiction – Syllabus
University of Victoria / Fall 2021
Dr. Tim Personn

Description

This course focuses on American novels published between the end of World War Two and the mid-1970s. During this time of material plenty and rapid social change, literary production accelerated, and fiction enjoyed perhaps its highest point of influence on American society before it was replaced as a predominant cultural force by later technological innovations. We will try to do justice to this breadth of creative output by focusing on a variety of schools and genres: from literary realism (Bellow) to the experiments of modernism (Nabokov) and postmodernism (Pynchon/Reed), and from the role of African-American literature (Ellison) to the rise of science fiction (Le Guin). What these texts registered, among other things, was a distinct feeling of modern alienation, along with a sense of possibility and playfulness in creating new cultural codes and forms of expression. We will therefore historicize the novels from this period not just within the Cold War culture that was developing, but also with a view to the various subcultures that arose in response to the cultural mainstream. As we read, we will revisit the influence of earlier literary movements such as romanticism, naturalism, and existentialism on mid-century fiction and philosophy. At the same time, we will also look forward to our own historical moment and ask how texts from the 1950s and 1960s anticipate the cultural debates of today: How does Bellow's depiction of Wall Street greed and confidence men hold up? What can Ellison's and Reed's stances on race in the era of civil rights teach us about current social justice movements? What does it mean to read Nabokov in the era of #MeToo? Are there resonances, or perhaps even hidden influences, between Pynchon's countercultural paranoia of the 1960s and today's networked conspiracy theories like QAnon? Can Le Guin's thought experiments in science fiction contribute to today's debates on gender fluidity and LGBTQ+ rights? How do these texts register the beginnings of multiculturalism in American fiction? And, finally, what is the meaning of America, now and then?

Contact:

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Office Hours:

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Course:

Tue / Wed / Fri 11:30-12:20pm

Clearihue C110

Texts:

Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

All books are available in the [University Bookstore](#).

Attendance:

Regular attendance is obligatory. Continuous absences may result in a grade penalty or failure in the course through incompleteness. Special note for fall 2021: [Current Public Health Office](#) and University of Victoria guidelines for fall 2021 state that students, staff, and faculty need to stay at home if they are experiencing symptoms of COVID 19. Please also make sure to familiarize yourself with the current university and provincial policies on [a safe return to campus](#) and [mask mandates](#).

Assignments:

1/ Five reading quizzes, to be taken *online* on the first day the novels are to be read, except for the first novel (15%). One quiz *can* be replaced by a personal response paper (length about one page) that is due the same day as the quiz for the respective novel.

2/ A close reading assignment on a passage from one of the first three novels (of about 750 words; due *online* Oct. 8th), worth 10%.

3/ For the essay assignment you have two options:

Option A: a single essay of 2,500 words (about 7 pages; worth 43%), due *online* Nov. 9th.

Option B: two essays, one about 1,200 words (about 3-4 pages; worth 18%), due *online* Oct. 22nd; and one about 1,800 words (about 5 pages; worth 25%), due *online* Nov. 23rd. These essays must be on different novels.

3/ A final assessment: Instead of a final exam, you will complete a concept map for this course. A concept map is a graphic tool for organizing and representing knowledge. The assignment asks you to synthesize the course material in a way that makes sense to you and to make connections across different texts. Your map should include all the texts that we've covered this semester and you may organize the map any way that you'd like (due date TBA; worth 32%).

Grading:

I use the University of Victoria's scale to calculate grades:

<u>Grades</u>	<u>Grade Point Value</u>	<u>Percentage for Instructor Use Only *</u>	<u>Description</u>
A+	9	90 – 100	Exceptional, outstanding and excellent performance. Normally achieved by a minority of students. These grades indicate a student who is self-initiating, exceeds expectation and has an insightful grasp of the subject matter.
A	8	85 – 89	
A-	7	80 – 84	
B+	6	77 – 79	Very good, good and solid performance. Normally achieved by the largest number of students. These grades indicate a good grasp of the subject matter or excellent grasp in one area balanced with satisfactory grasp in the other area.
B	5	73 – 76	
B-	4	70 – 72	
C+	3	65 – 69	Satisfactory, or minimally satisfactory. These grades indicate a satisfactory performance and knowledge of the subject matter.
C	2	60 – 64	
D	1	50 – 59	Marginal Performance. A student receiving this grade demonstrated a superficial grasp of the subject matter.
F	0	0 – 49	Unsatisfactory performance. Wrote final examination and completed course requirements; no supplemental.
N	0	0 – 49	Did not write examination or complete course requirements by the end of term or session; no supplemental.

Late Assignments:

Late essays will receive a 2% penalty per day, including weekends. Each submission will be *online*, in a dropbox on our course Brightspace site. Missed quizzes receive a 0. Students who do not submit the essay(s) or the final assessment will receive an “N” in the course (failure through incompleteness). If you ever have a problem with an assignment, talk to me *in advance* of the deadline and you may be able to negotiate an arrangement to fit your situation.

Academic Integrity:

Students are part of the intellectual community at the University of Victoria. There are ethical standards we all adhere to; one serious breach of such standards is plagiarism. According to the University of Victoria Calendar, plagiarism is the representation of someone else’s work as one’s own work. This can include intellectual theft or merely inadequate attribution of borrowed material to its author. Plagiarism includes not just the use of another’s words, but also the use of another’s ideas. Plagiarism includes the uncredited use of Internet sources as well as the unattributed use of print or other sources. An assignment that plagiarizes someone else’s work will result in a failure for the course, but there can be further penalties as well, including disciplinary probation or expulsion from the university. If you have questions about plagiarism or the use of other peoples’ ideas, please come and talk with me about them. See the [University Calendar online](#) for definitions and regulations of plagiarism, where it says:

Principles of Academic Integrity

Academic integrity requires commitment to the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. It is expected that students, faculty members and staff at the University of Victoria, as members of an intellectual community, will adhere to these ethical values in all activities related to learning, teaching, research and service. Any action that contravenes this standard, including misrepresentation, falsification or deception, undermines the intention and worth of scholarly work and violates the fundamental academic rights of members of our community. This policy is designed to ensure that the university's standards are upheld in a fair and transparent fashion.

Students are responsible for the entire content and form of their work. Nothing in this policy is intended to prohibit students from developing their academic skills through the exchange of ideas and the utilization of resources available at the university to support learning (e.g., The Centre for Academic Communication). Students who are in doubt as to what constitutes a violation of academic integrity in a particular instance should consult their course instructor.

Plagiarism

A student commits plagiarism when he or she:

- submits the work of another person in whole or in part as original work
 - gives inadequate attribution to an author or creator whose work is incorporated into the student's work, including failing to indicate clearly (through accepted practices within the discipline, such as footnotes, internal references and the crediting of all verbatim passages through indentations of longer passages or the use of quotation marks) the inclusion of another individual's work
 - paraphrases material from a source without sufficient acknowledgement as described above
- The university reserves the right to use plagiarism detection software programs to detect plagiarism in essays, term papers and other work.

Schedule and Course Outline:

In addition to listing when we'll be reading the novels – and each is to be read *entirely* by the first day we discuss it – this outline also suggests the major problems we'll be addressing for each text.

Sept. 8 Introduction to mid-century American fiction

- modernism, modernity, alienation
- the Cold War context

Sept. 10 • overview of literary schools and movements

Sept. 14-17 Bellow, *Seize The Day* (3)

- the heritage from romanticism and naturalism
- human tragicomedy; Jewish humour
- the mind-body split and the Emersonian soul
- realism and free indirect discourse

- David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*
- Wall Street and confidence men, now and then

Sept. 21-Oct. 1

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (6); quiz

- *Invisible Man* and the Cold War consensus
- using other people's words: performance and identity
- double consciousness and ironic consciousness
- is this European existentialism or Emersonian individualism?
- what Ellison learned from romanticism and naturalism
- Ellison and sociology
- Ellison's concept of improvisation and the self in American society

Oct. 5-15

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (6); quiz; close reading due (Oct. 8th)

- parody and unreliable narration
- psychoanalysis and criminology
- solipsism and narcissism
- 1950s youth culture/consumerism
- seduction and/in the novel
- is this high modernism or early postmodernism?
- *Lolita* and #MeToo

Oct. 19-29

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (6); quiz;
First essay due Oct. 22nd (Option B)

- what Pynchon learned from modernism
- alienation and national identity: withdrawal/counterculture
- the legacy from romanticism: postmodernism and the human self
- the existential condition: illusion and the creation of meaning
- *Lot 49* and post-secularism
- science as metaphor: entropy
- oscillation and ontological uncertainty
- power as conspiracy: Pynchonian paranoia and QAnon

Nov. 2-9

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (4); quiz;
Term essay due Nov. 9th (Option A)

- the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis"
- genre fiction: fantasy and science fiction
- critique of binary thinking
- world reduction: gender and sexuality, conflict and capitalism
- is this gender essentialism or gender constructivism?
- Le Guin and anthropology

<u>Nov. 10-12</u>	Reading Break; no classes
<u>Nov. 16-17</u>	Le Guin, continued (2)
<u>Nov. 19-Dec. 1</u>	Ishmael Reed, <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> (6); quiz; Second essay due <u>Nov. 23rd</u> (Option B) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parody and/or a <i>roman à clef</i>? • <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> as historiographic metafiction • anthropology and cultural survivals • multiculturalism and afrofuturism • what is/was African-American literature? • authority and authorship; appropriation and resistance • postmodernism as new foundationalism?
<u>Dec. 3</u>	Conclusion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened in mid-century America and why it still matters today
<u>TBD</u>	Final Assessment due

How to Do Well in this Course¹

- Read the books *before* we discuss them. Otherwise, you will not be able to follow lectures or conversations in class. Plus, demonstrating you've read the book means you'll likely do well on the final assessment.
- Write while you read. For me, this means annotating a text as I read it. You can annotate print and digital texts. (See me if you need ideas or resources.)
- Come to class with ideas and questions, and perhaps even passages to discuss. Be curious. Seek connections not only between texts but also between this course and other courses you're taking.
- Take notes during class meetings. Students who take notes not only understand but also retain the material better. This may help when sitting down to compose the essays, too.
- Let me know when you don't follow what I'm saying (you can do so confidentially by email). I find this stuff fascinating, but I will not always know what you want to

¹ Adapted from a syllabus by Dr. Christopher Douglas.

investigate or learn more about. If you have questions, then please don't hesitate to ask them.

- Persuasive writing takes time. Before you submit an assignment, consider circulating drafts to friends or peers. Chat with me during office hours. Consider how your writing can extend and even complicate our class discussions. Also, avoid writing that is primarily descriptive. Push your work into an analysis of the assumptions and ambiguities at work in literature. Further, think about how fiction reflects our culture and, at times, even intervenes in it.
- Your writing for the essays should address a significant problem. Be explicit about the problem. Try to figure something out. Your essay should perform intellectual labor. If you can't tell, after reading it, what work it has done, it is not finished.
- Consider thinking of your essay as making an intervention into an already ongoing debate. Very few, if any, good essays are written 'in a vacuum.' The best writing makes its point explicit by showing the ways it responds to what others have said on a topic, often by agreeing (with a difference), disagreeing, or through a combination of the two. For a literature class, this means researching secondary sources that display a critical position to respond to. Come talk to me if you need to be pointed in the direction of contributions to such critical debates on the texts we are reading.
- During class and in writing, be concrete when you comment on anyone's work (including the fiction we're discussing). Quote it. Speak to specific gestures. And then respond with your own interpretations. When the work is by a peer, affirm their ideas (e.g., "I like how you...").

TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All University of Victoria classes, including this one, take place on the traditional territory of the WS'ANEC' (Saanich), Lkwungen (Songhees), Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. We acknowledge that many of us are uninvited visitors and settlers on these lands and that it is our responsibility to seek and learn from opportunities for truth telling and supporting Indigenous resurgence.