**ENGLISH 4313/5313: AMERICAN FICTION SINCE 1900 (CRN 28124/28125)**

Spring 2015, 10:50-12:050 TTh, Irby 201

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Office Hours: 9:00-11:00 am MWF, 2:30-4:30 pm TTh, and by appointment

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**:

The university catalogue describes this class as exploring “developments in the aesthetics of American fiction since 1900, and the relation of that fiction to contemporary American life and history.” With the first of these goals in view, we’ll look specifically at the stylistic features and innovations that characterize each of our writers—for example, Ernest Hemingway’s pared-down, paratactic(!) style and use of narratively unconnected but thematically related elements; Ben Fountain’s creation of word clouds and use of trauma to structure his characters’ consciousness while he uses the progress of a football game to structure his external narrative; Jack Kerouac’s breathless, hypotactic style and incorporation of narrative conventions from Asian literature; Dawn Powell’s updating of nineteenth-century British novel conventions to describe life in post-World War II New York City; and Toni Morrison’s deployment of a welter of Biblical and classical allusions and incorporation of elements of Magic Realism drawn from Latin-American fiction. With the second goal in mind, we’ll focus on how our authors handle some of the following themes that are central to American life and history (as well as any others that you deem relevant, of course): the effects of war; conflicts over gender roles; conflicts over issues of race, ethnicity, and class; the image and reality of the American dream; and differing concepts of love and romance. As we progress toward these goals, we’ll look at some secondary texts as well as the primary ones listed below.

Louis Menand’s three basic ways of approaching a work of literature:

as “an autotelic [having a purpose within itself] verbal construction, a work of art”

as “a participant in the dialogics [the multiple independent voices] of literary history, a commentary on the tradition to which it belongs”

as “a window on its time, an artifact”

C. Day-Lewis—“It is unwise to equate scientific activity with what we call reason, poetic activity with what we call imagination. Without the imaginative leap from facts to generalisation, no theoretic discovery in science is made. The poet, on the other hand, must not imagine but reason—that is to say, he must exercise a great deal of consciously directed thought in the selection and rejection of his data: there is a technical logic, a poetic reasoning in his choice of the words, rhythms and images by which a poem's coherence is achieved.”

Vladimir Nabokov—“In art as in science there is no delight without the detail, and it is on detail that I have tried to fix the reader’s attention. Let me repeat that unless these are thoroughly understood and remembered, all ‘general ideas’ (so easily acquired, so profitably resold) must necessarily remain but worn passports allowing their bearers shortcuts from one area of ignorance to another.”

"Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality . . . enabling us to encounter, in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within our problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us."—Chinua Achebe, “What Has Literature Got to Do with It?”

“Why, you might ask, should we care how other people think and feel about stories? Why do we talk about them in this language of value? One answer is that it is just part of being human. People tell stories and discuss them in every culture, and we know they have done so as far back as the record goes. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Tale of Genji*, the Ananse stories I grew up with in Asante, weren’t just read or recited: they were discussed, evaluated, referred to in everyday life. We wouldn’t recognize a community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination. So one answer to the question why we do it is: it’s just one of the things that humans do. But a deeper answer is that evaluating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world. And that alignment of responses is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of our relationships.”—Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*

“Some people ask me, ‘Why don’t you write plays that I know exactly what the specific answer to the question you’re raising is by the end of the play?’ And I always have to answer these people by saying that I find I can ask an awful lot more interesting questions if I don’t have to supply the answers to them. If I limited the content of my plays to what I could give specific answers to, I think I’d write very dull plays.”—Edward Albee, *The Spectator*, ed. Studs Terkel

**TEXTS**:

Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Dawn Powell, *The Wicked Pavilion*

Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Ben Fountain, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*

**READING SCHEDULE**:

“To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent . . .. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.”—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Weeks 1-2: *In Our Time*

Weeks 3-4: *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*

Weeks 5-6: *The Great Gatsby*

Weeks 7-8: *Goodbye, Columbus* (**note: we’ll only discuss the title novella in class, not the five short stories also included) Midterm due at beginning of week 8 (Tuesday, March 3rd)**

Weeks 9-10: *The Dharma Bums*

Weeks 11-12: *The Wicked Pavilion* **Rough draft of research essay due at beginning of week 12 (Tuesday, April 7th)**

Weeks 13-14: *Song of Solomon* **Final draft of research essay due at beginning of week 14 (Tuesday, April 21st)**

April 30: FINAL EXAM, 11:00-1:00 P.M.

**ATTENDANCE**: Attendance—**on time**—is mandatory. Four or more absences will lower your class participation grade, as will recurrent late arrival. If you miss six classes, you'll have one week after the last absence to see me with a believable excuse and a promise to sin no more; if you don't make this deadline, you'll be dropped from the course with a WF grade. And if you miss a seventh class following our conference about the six absences, you'll likewise be dropped with a WF.

**EXAMS**: Our midterm exam will cover the course material through *The Great Gatsby*. The final exam will have one section covering the course material from *Goodbye, Columbus* through *Song of Solomon* and then a second section taking in the whole course. Both of these exams will consist of essay questions, and both will be take-home rather than in-class in format. I'll discuss these exams and their make-up in greater detail in class about a week before their due dates.

**ESSAYS**: Each student must submit an original essay dealing with one or more of the works we cover in class or with outside works that fall within the genre and time period of the course—American fiction from 1900 to the present day. This essay requires secondary research; undergraduate students' essays should be 7-10 pages and must make use of at least five secondary sources; graduate students' essays should be 12-15 pages and must incorporate at least ten secondary sources. We'll have much to say as the course progresses concerning various approaches you might take to writing these essays, important secondary sources for each author, and specific grading criteria. Note from the outset that although your essay's content is the most important factor in determining your grade, how well you write (i.e., thesis, organization, style, coherence, grammar, etc.) will affect this grade as well, since even the best ideas in the world aren't really useful if you can't communicate them intelligibly to a reader. My requiring you to submit a rough draft gives us the opportunity to address all these areas before the pressure of a grade comes into the equation.

All rough and final drafts of this essay are due by the beginning of class on the date assigned. You may submit your rough draft as a Word attachment via e-mail or submit a hard copy; for the final draft, you must submit a hard copy. **Note**: You must submit all required written work—including the rough draft—to receive a grade other than F for the course (see also the note in the “grades” section below on this subject). The form and documentation techniques you use in the essay must follow the guidelines specified in the *MLA* (Modern Language Association) *Handbook*, which can also be found, in condensed form, at the English Department website link <http://uca.edu/english/mla-formatting/>.

**JOURNALS**: Each student must keep a journal of his or her thoughts on the assigned readings, with one entry devoted to each reading before we discuss it in class and then a second entry at the conclusion of our discussion. For the pre-discussion journals, I’ll pose a question for you to respond to in each entry, with that response consisting of at least three paragraphs, and I’ll also ask you to state what you feel is the most important issue for us to cover in class and explain briefly why you feel that’s the case. Beyond those requirements you're also free to write as much more as you wish about whatever intrigues you, inspires you, confuses you, or upsets you about the work in question, and about this work's relationship to other works you've read and its relevance to human life in general and your own life in particular. There are two goals to this assignment, both of which you're probably already aware of. First, the act of writing stimulates thinking: even if at the outset you feel you have nothing at all to say about a given work, you'll find that putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard will bring ideas forth; if you do have some ideas to start with you'll find that writing them down will cause you to extend and refine them. Second, as is obvious from what's been said above, these entries will provide a rich source of class-discussion, exam, and essay topics.

You'll submit these pre-discussion journals by e-mail to the address listed for me at the top of the syllabus **no later than 24 hours prior to the first class meeting during which we'll discuss that work**. I won’t accept a journal entry after the due date, but you are allowed to miss one journal with no penalty.

The way we’ll handle the post-discussion journal is at the end of our allotted discussion time for each work, I’ll ask you to devote the last ten minutes of class to writing an entry evaluating our two weeks of conversation on that novel—noting what issues are now clear to you, which ones you feel need further thought, which ones might connect to earlier readings we’ve done, and any other observations you may have. I’ll respond to these in writing, with the aim of helping you to think further on that material.

I'll grade you for each submission: if your entry shows an honest, thoughtful effort to come to grips with the work, you'll get somewhere from 8 to 10; if it shows a solid but not all that insightful effort, you'll get somewhere from 4 to 7; if you don't do the entry, or if you blow it off with superficial comments, or if you just crib ideas from critics and label them as your own, you'll get somewhere from 0 to 3. This does not mean that you're forbidden to read criticism to get your ideas going; you're welcome to do so, and to address critics' ideas in your journal, as long as you clearly identify which ideas are the critic's and which are your own in response to what that critic has to say.

**Important note**: Don't worry about coming up with the "right" response to any given work; what we're interested in is *your* response to it, whatever that may be. And don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar in your journal; just let your thoughts flow. The point of a journal isn't a finished, polished presentation, as it is for a more formal essay, but rather your immediate, engaged response to what you've read. At the end of the semester, I’ll figure your final journal grade by taking the ratio of the total points you’ve earned to the total points possible, which will be 130 (we’ll do fourteen journals, but remember that you’re allowed to miss one—if you do them all, I’ll drop the lowest one). (My grading scale is 90-100=A, 80-89=B, 70-79=C, 60-69=D, below 60=F.)

**ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**: Beyond writing a longer and more heavily researched essay, as outlined above, and attending supplemental class meetings (time to be determined), each graduate student will make several oral presentations to the class on articles that raise crucial issues regarding one or another of our texts. These presentations will constitute part of the attendance/participation grade.

**GRADES**: Your final grade will come from the following percentages:

Attendance/Participation: 20%

Journal: 20%

Midterm Exam: 15%

Research Essay: 25% (**note: there is no separate grade for the rough draft of this essay—the grade is for the final draft—but I won’t accept a final draft unless you’ve previously submitted the rough draft**)

Final Exam: 20%

**COURSE EVALUATIONS** (in which *you* get to grade *me*): Student evaluations of a course and its professor are a crucial element in helping faculty achieve excellence in the classroom and the institution in demonstrating that students are gaining knowledge. Students may evaluate courses they are taking starting on Monday, April 13th, through the end of finals week by logging in to myUCA and clicking on the Evals button on the top right.

**UNIVERSITY POLICIES**

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**: Knowingly presenting someone else’s work as your own, whether in an exam, journal, or any other format, constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism carries serious penalties, from failure on a particular assignment to failure for the course. If you ever have any questions on this subject, please feel free to ask me about them, without fear of embarrassment, and/or consult this file for more information: <http://uca.edu/academicaffairs/files/2012/08/Plagiarism.pdf>

**Here is UCA’s official policy statement regarding academic integrity**: The University of Central Arkansas affirms its commitment to academic integrity and expects all members of the university community to accept shared responsibility for maintaining academic integrity. Students in this course are subject to the provisions of the university’s Academic Integrity Policy, approved by the Board of Trustees as Board Policy No. 709 on February 10, 2010, and published in the Student Handbook. Penalties for academic misconduct in this course may include a failing grade on an assignment, a failing grade in the course, or any other course-related sanction the instructor determines to be appropriate. Continued enrollment in this course affirms a student’s acceptance of this university policy.

**DISABILITIES:** UCA adheres to the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you need an accommodation under this act due to a disability, contact the UCA Office of Disability Services at 450-3613.

**BUILDING EMERGENCY PLAN:** An Emergency Procedures Summary (EPS) for the building in which this class is held will be discussed during the first week of this course. EPS documents for most buildings on campus are available at <http://uca.edu/mysafety/bep/>. Every student should be familiar with emergency procedures for any campus building in which he/she spends time for classes or other purposes.

**TITLE IX DISCLOSURE:** If a student discloses an act of sexual harassment, discrimination, assault, or other sexual misconduct to a faculty member (as it relates to "student-on-student" or "employee-on-student"), the faculty member cannot maintain complete confidentiality and is required to report the act and may be required to reveal the names of the parties involved. Any allegations made by a student may or may not trigger an investigation. Each situation differs and the obligation to conduct an investigation will depend on those specific set of circumstances. The determination to conduct an investigation will be made by the Title IX Coordinator. For further information, please visit: <https://uca.edu/titleix>. *\*Disclosure of sexual misconduct by a third party who is not a student and/or employee is also required if the misconduct occurs when the third party is a participant in a university-sponsored program, event, or activity.*

***First journal question***—due via e-mail by noon Monday, January 12th:

In a letter to a friend, the literary critic Edmund Wilson, Hemingway said about the just-completed *In Our Time* that the vignettes “give the picture of the whole between examining it in detail. Like looking with your eyes at something, say, a passing coastline, and then looking at it with 15x binoculars. Or rather, maybe, looking at it and then going in and living in it—and then coming out and looking at it again. . . . I think you would like it [the book], it has a pretty good unity.” Based on your reading thus far—read at least “On the Quai at Smyrna” and the first four chapters—what sorts of unity do you see Hemingway creating: similarity of plot situations; repeated actions, images, or statements; tonal connections; other things?