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ENGL1201
Contemporary United States Literature
Section 15
4 Credits
M/T/W/TH 800-850 Lind Hall 302
https://moodle.umn.edu/course/view.php?id=4323

Contemporary U.S. Literature

This course will examine novels, poems, short stories and films produced in the United States over the past six decades. It is a literature course, but our discussions will invariably link our readings to the real world. Some of the big questions we'll think about include: How (and why) writers choose to represent their world, how literature helps us understand (or misunderstand) history, and what our investigation tells us about the United States today.

We will start by exploring the 1990s—the tech boom, branding, and consumer culture. Then we will jump back to the apparent calm of the 1950s and the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s, with particular focus on the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. We'll look closely at the opulence and excess of the 1980s before closing the class with a look at the impact of globalization and transnationalism on American literature today.

Expectations

I firmly believe student-driven discussion will, by and large, produce the best learning experience in a course like ENGL1201. Student-driven means that you must commit to reading the assigned texts before class and sharing your ideas (or uncertainties) about them with others; I will do the same and facilitate our discussions.

To say something in class is always a risk; if we all enter our meetings with the understanding that this is a mutual venture—one in which most of us will make some "mistakes"—we can, I hope, have productive discussions. I will ask that you come to class with a willingness to take risks, to suspend closure, and to accept that asking questions is often more important than being "right."

We'll talk a lot, but since this is a "writing intensive" course, we will also spend time working to improve your ability to write with clarity and power.

Attendance

Keeping up with our ongoing conversation is essential. If you need to miss class, please be in touch in advance—talk to me or send an email. It is your responsibility to find out what you miss and your responsibility to turn in what was due; the grades of late papers drop one step every day they're not turned in. Please note: For each absence after your **third**, your grade will decrease one step (B+ becomes B); if you miss more than **seven** sessions, you will not pass this course.

Along with our reading, we will be watching four movies. You can watch them on your own, of course, but I'll also be showing them on campus, on the big(ish) screen. We'll discuss the films in our subsequent course meetings. Note: The films are all available in the Walter Library Learning Resources Center (on reserve in the basement of Walter, across from the coffee shop) for viewing—as well as from most video stores, Netflix, and—no doubt—through other nefarious means.

Office Hours & Communication

I strongly encourage you to visit me early and often during office hours on the third floor of Lind Hall. They are a great opportunity to get direct assistance; unsurprisingly, students who visit tend to write stronger papers, get higher grades, and go on to lead more fulfilling lives. I will mandate that you meet with me twice—once to talk about your first paper, after you've written it; once to talk about your final paper before you've written it. These will be part of your attendance in the course.

The easiest way to reach me is email, which I check regularly. Please check your U of M email regularly as well, as I will contact you with assignments and updates on occasion.

Work

HISTORY VALUE: 10%

Much of the reading for this course will be enriched by knowledge of what exists beyond the frame of the text. Since most of us haven't lived through (most of) these times, it's essential to recreate this history. In groups (assigned during the first week) your job will be to help us ascertain the history of a particular decade. Each group will be "on call" to give us context for two weeks. This includes little things (like looking up words, dates, names, places) and big things like being able to tell us facts about major historical events (when and why the Vietnam War started; what "Reaganomics" is; who was part of the counterculture).

You should, of course, share what you learn informally (i.e. when it comes up in class), but your grade will be based on (1) a more formal presentation—perhaps a dramatic recreation, a video, or a traditional lecture (approximately 10-15 minutes in length)—and (2) the depth of information you post (preferably with links to useful sources) on the history wiki. Start early! A list of potential topics and sources is available here: https://moodle.umn.edu/mod/wiki/view.php?id=183391&page=view/History%20Wiki

ESSAYS #1, #2, #3 VALUE: 1st @ 10%; 2nd and 3rd @ 15% each

LENGTH: 4-5 pages; DUE: End of Week 5, 8, 11

In these papers, I'll encourage you to link texts we're reading and viewing to one another and to the history and culture of the United States. These should be formal (including citations, standard MLA formatting, etc.). There are no assigned topics, but I'm glad to help you settle on one. I strongly encourage you to cite multiple sources (perhaps two or three poems; perhaps a novel and a newspaper article; a movie, a poem, and a movie review), but spend the most time on your argument. The strongest papers make specific, contestable arguments; they pay attention to details; they present their position with clarity and are never reductive.

ESSAY #4 VALUE: 5%

LENGTH: 3 pages; DUE: End of Week 14

This is a "practice" essay where you'll develop your ideas for the final. It should be three pages long and similar to the first three essays in every way except length. It will be due at the end of the fourteenth week.

ESSAY #5 VALUE: 30%

LENGTH: (at least) 7 pages; DUE: Finals Week

This is your "major" assignment for the course. As such, it should be a substantial paper examining one or more of the texts we've read/viewed. It's your chance to show me what you've thought about in the class. It should be (at least) seven pages long and "formal" (including citations, standard MLA formatting, etc.). Like all preceding papers, there is no assigned topic (again, I'll be glad to help). And like all the preceding papers, it should clearly present a specific and contestable argument, utilize close reading of the literary texts, and draw on other historical sources as well.

[A note about PAGE LENGTHS: "4-5 pages" does not mean three pages and three lines on the fourth or three pages and a Works Cited list; it means at least four full pages of your argument!]

PARTICIPATION VALUE: 15%

Participation is, of course, showing up in class and sharing your ideas—both in the big group and in small group work—and small "daily" assignments. The most key of these is questions. As you read, you should write down questions you have (from "What does susurrate mean?" to "Does Didion mean to critique the idea of American individualism?"). Your participation includes writing these questions on the board when you arrive in class. We won't answer them every day, but seeing what you're thinking about helps me make the class more about your interests and less exclusively about mine. Be aware that I will collect hard copies of your questions from time to time, as well.

READING OUTLINE

Our examination of contemporary American literature will unfold more or less chronologically (after the first three weeks). This is just an outline. You will see specific assignments with page numbers, dates, and links to pdfs on Moodle: https://moodle.umn.edu/course/view.php?id=4323

Week	Novels	Stories, Narratives, Etc.	Poems	Films
1 1990s	Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt			
2 1990s	Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt			
3 1990s	Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt			
4 1950s		Cheever, "The Country Husband"	Ginsberg, Howl; Plath	Far From Heaven
5* 1950s		Martin, "The Welcome Table"	Hughes, Montage of a Dream Deferred (selections)	
6 1960s		Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon"	Brooks; Komunyakaa, Dien Cai Dau (selections)	
7 1960s		Caputo, (from) A Rumor of War; O'Brien, "The Things They Carried"; Butler, "Fairy Tale"		Full Metal Jacket
8* 1960s		Didion, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem"	Lowell; Merwin; Duncan; Bly; Dylan; Simone; Cooke; McDonald	
9 1970s			Rich; Clifton	The Ice Storm
10 1980s	Banks, Continental Drift		Nowak	
11* 1980s	Banks, Continental Drift			
12 1980s	Banks, Continental Drift			American Psycho
13 1980s	Banks, Continental Drift			
14* 2000s		Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven"; "Once in a Lifetime"		
15 2000s		Lahiri, "Year's End"; "Going Ashore"		

*Highlighting indicates pdfs available on Moodle

*Asterisks in the Week column indicate writing is due that Thursday in class.