

American literary canons: traditions, schools, movements

BMA-AMED-100

Tue 12:30-2:00, Rm 439

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Office hrs: Tue 11-12 or by appointment

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This is an advanced survey of American literature, of the various traditions, movements, schools, and trends that make up its several literary canons. Building on the knowledge accumulated in American literature survey courses at the B.A. level, here we explore the ways authors responded to their times, the social issues and artistic demands thereof, how they tackled similar problems and often came up with similar or at least comparable solutions. We will explore, in short, the internal dynamics of canon formation.

It is assumed that students are familiar with all the texts in American literature required at the B.A. level. Students who feel they have gaps with regards to these readings are strongly advised to take BBN-211 and BBN-213 lectures (offered in the fall and the spring semesters, respectively, always from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Thursdays, D ép. nagyelőadó).

Grades will be based on (i) class participation, (ii) presenting either two essays or an essay and one book + leading that class discussion, and (iii) one essay/book review. An (iv) in-class final test (pending [see below]).

Reading the assigned texts. Students are required to come prepared for class: having read their assignments for the day, they must be able to understand the texts (know the words as well as the main theses and arguments), remember details, and formulate their critical comments. When students do not read the assigned texts, they will be required to hand in the outline, no more than one page for each text, of the assigned readings for the following class.

Active participation, visibility. Be visible. Mere physical presence, even when you have read the assignments, is not enough: you have to prove your skills in reading, analysis, and argument in class discussions.

Presentations (two essays or books[s]). Here you are required to give two 15 minute presentations of the essays and books listed on the syllabus. You must schedule your two presentations so that one will come at the beginning of the semester and one towards the end. In other words, you must choose

(1) one book/essay from either the Nature Writing (Sept 22), the Female gothic (Sept 29), or the Utopia/Dystopia section (Oct 6, 13) and

(2) one either from the passing novel (Nov 3) or the multicultural identity fiction (Nov 24-Dec 1) section. You should concentrate on the main theses of the book/essay, find its originality and significance. You can use your notes while giving your presentation, but cannot read out complete sentences. Be sure to rehearse your presentation at home so that you know how long it is (you will have to stop after 15 minutes no matter what). As to locating the books, I encourage you to check several Budapest libraries before signing up for presentations. As to the essays, they will be posted in pdf files or distributed in hard copies.

Leading that class discussion. Leading the class discussion the day when your presentation is due will also be your responsibility. This means that you will have to come extra prepared in the assigned readings of the day, understand them fully (you might have to do some research in order to accomplish that), and be able to explain the problematic parts.

Reviewing the book/essay you presented. As a written assignment, you must write up one of your presentations into a proper review for the week following your oral presentation. Check scholarly journals about the genre of the book review. Give a summary of the main theses. Try to contextualize the text, show where it fits in, where it is original and where it might be useful.

In-class final test (pending). This test is given in case students did not do their assignments over the semester, and will cover all the readings, discussions, and presentations.

Main topics

1. Nature writing
2. American (Female) Gothic
3. (Feminist) Utopia and Dystopia
4. The passing novel
5. Poetry of the 50s
6. Jewish fiction
7. Multicultural identity fiction

Schedule of classes and assignments

September 8 **Intro and orientation**

September 15 **Nature Writing/1**

General assignment for every student (all of the following):

Philip Freneau, "The Wild Honeysuckle," "The Hurricane"

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

Walt Whitman, "A Sun-Bath—Nakedness"

September 22 **Nature Writing/2**

General assignment for every student:

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Books for presentations:

John Muir, *The Yosemite* (1874-75) or anything by or on Muir

Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903)

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968)

Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (1972)

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974)

Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986)

The Norton Book of Nature Writing, ed. Robert Finch & John Elder

September 29 **American female gothic**

General assignment for every student (all of the following):

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily"

Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

Essay and books for presentation (max. **two** essays can be presented):

(Asterisks* mark pdf files.)

- *Chapman, Mary. "The Masochistic Pleasures of the Gothic—Paternal Incest in Alcott's 'A Marble Woman'"
- *Davison, Carol Margaret. "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine—Female Gothic Closets in *The Yellow Wallpaper*"
- *Desmond, John. "Flannery O'Connor's Misfit and the Mystery of Evil"
- *Ginsberg, Lesley. "Slavery and the Gothic Horror of Poe's 'The Black Cat'"
- *Gleeson-White, Sarah. "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor"
- *Hume, Beverly A. "Managing Madness in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*"
- *Link, Alex. "Means, Meaning, and Mediated Space in 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'"
- *Roth, Marty. "Gilman's Arabesque Wallpaper"
- *Savoy, Eric. "The Face of the Tenant—the Theory of American Gothic"
- *Thraillkill, Jane F. "Doctoring The Yellow Wallpaper." *ELH* 69.2 (2002): 525-566.

October 6 Utopia and dystopia

Books for presentation (due to the complexity of the books, these presentations can be somewhat longer, 20-25 min):

Plato, *The Republic*

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Woman*

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society*

October 13 Feminist utopia and distopia/1

General assignment for every student (read **one** of the following novels):

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*

Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Essays for presentations (max. **two** essays can be presented):

*Anna Lathrop, "Herland Revisited: Narratives of Motherhood, Domesticity, and Physical Emancipation in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Feminist Utopia"

*Karen S. Drotar, "A Dialogical Response to Feminist Utopian Fiction: Conversations After *Herland*"

*Julie Ann Harms Cannon, "Utopian Feminism and Feminist Pedagogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Everyday Classroom"

*Donna Fancourt, "Assessing Utopia through Altered States of Consciousness" (discusses *Woman on the Edge of Time*)

October 20 Feminist utopia and distopia/2

General assignment (read **one** of the following novels):

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Essays for presentations:

*Claire P. Curtis, "Theorizing Fear: Octavia Butler and the Realist Utopia"

*Hoda M. Zaki, "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler"

October 27 **No class (fall break)**

November 3 **The passing novel**

General assignment for every student:

James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Books/essays for presentations (max. two texts can be presented):

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

*Martin Japtok, "Between 'Race' as Construct and 'Race' as Essence: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*"

Siobhan B. Somerville, "Double Lives on the Color Line" (from *Queering the Color Line*)

*Juda Bennett, "Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative"

*John Sheehy, "The Mirror and the Veil: The Passing Novel and the Quest for American Racial Identity"

Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*

November 10 **The poetry of the 50s**

Poems and essays assigned to every student:

Robert Lowell, "The Holy Innocents", "Colloquy in Black Rock", "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux", "To Speak of Woe That Is In Marriage", "Skunk Hour"

Adrienne Rich, "The Middle-Aged", "The Tourist and the Town", "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law"

Elizabeth Bishop, "The Monument", "Electrical Storm", "Song for a Rainy Season", "The Armadillo"

John Ashbery, "The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers", "Forties Flick", "As You Came From the Holy Land", "Scheherazade"

Charles Altieri, "Modernist Dilemmas and Early Post-Modernist Responses" from *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 157-214.

November 17 **Jewish fiction**

General assignment:

Tillie Olsen, "Tell Me a Riddle"

Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*

Essays for presentations:

*Grauer, Tresa. "Identity Matters: Contemporary Jewish American writing." *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. Ed. Kramer, Michael P. and Wirth-Nesher, Hana. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

*Royal, Derek Parker. "Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*." *Contemporary Literature* 47.1 (2006): 114-140.

*Patrice D. Rankine, "Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man"

*Mark Maslan, "The Faking of the Americans: Passing, Trauma, and National Identity in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*"

November 24 Multicultural identity fiction/1

General assignment:

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Books and essays for presentation:

Allan Chavkin, ed. *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*

December 1 Multicultural identity fiction/2

General assignment:

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Books and essays for presentation:

Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, ed. *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*

Annie O. Eysturoy, *Daughters of Self-Creation*

Singh, Amritjit, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, ed. *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1996.

Singh, Amritjit, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, ed. *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1994.

December 8 In-class final test