

ENGLISH 2710-106
INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE: FICTION
Thematic Title: *Contemporary American Fiction* (Fall 2012)
TTh 3:30-4:45 PM
Lalumiere Language Hall 140

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Office Hours: MW 12:00-2:00 PM or by appointment

“Those who are truly contemporary,” Giorgio Agamben writes, “who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. ... To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary.” This course traces the sense that truly contemporary literature is always slightly out of sync with its present, and always striving towards a moment that is yet to come, across American fiction since 1960. We will seek out this vertiginous sense of the “contemporary” in literary explorations of identity and difference, history and futurity, politics and community, and war and the environment. From the private lives of individuals and families, to the very public relationships that exist in and between diverse communities, to the nation’s assent to global superpower status in the context of a nuclear-powered Cold War, to the discovery that the environmental costs of consumer capitalism have now begun to threaten all life on Earth, we will find that American fiction in the postwar period is always looking forward, with both hope and trepidation, towards an unknown and very uncertain future.

LEARNING GOALS

At the completion of a Core studies course in literature, the student will be able to:

- Produce oral and written assessments of literary and cultural texts using the language and concepts of literary study;
- Articulate how literary and cultural texts can transform one’s understanding of self, others, and communities;
- Apply the methodologies of literary criticism to representative works of literature.

In addition, at the conclusion of this course the student will be able to:

- Identify and understand various formal characteristics of contemporary American novels;
- Demonstrate understanding of the cultural, historical, and political contexts in which various contemporary novels have been produced;
- Apply techniques of critical analysis appropriate to the science fiction genre;
- Use literary study to develop skills for careful reading and clear writing;
- Read and discuss literature on the levels of both form and content.

REQUIRED TEXTS (available at the Book Marq on 16th Street)Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969)Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)Mary Doria Russell, *The Sparrow* (1996)Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

Three additional readings are available from the ARES Reserve System at Raynor Memorial Libraries (http://www.marquette.edu/library/find/class_reserves.shtml). The password for our course is “contemporary.”

Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?” (2007)

Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973)

Ted Chiang, “Exhalation” (2009)

Additional short readings and handouts may occasionally be distributed in class or through D2L.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation 25%

D2L Forum Posts 25%

Midterm Paper (4-6 pages) 25%

Final Paper (6-8 pages) 25%

Detailed descriptions of the midterm and final papers will be distributed in class well in advance of the due date.

GRADING

Grades will follow the following rubric:

* To earn a **C**, you must clearly restate the meaning or project of a text in your own terms. A C essay may volunteer an original argument, but will likely lack evidence or analysis of its sources. C essays are clearly written, though they might display some grammatical weakness.

* To earn a **B**, you must begin to raise important questions about the text under consideration and to use those questions to drive your own interpretive agenda. A B essay typically advances an original argument and provides solid analysis of the text(s) under consideration. B essays are clear, concise, and free of grammatical errors.

* To earn an **A**, you must construct an essay that does more than simply comment on the work of others; you must forward, counter, or transform what they have to say. An A essay advances an original argument that builds toward a climax and makes a persuasive case for its own significance. A essays are clearly written, and often eloquent.

* A **D** means that you have not written in clear prose or that you seem to have deeply misunderstood the text. An **F** means that you did not fully or seriously engage the assignment.

* **AB, BC, and CD** grades fall squarely in the gaps between the above categories.

FORMAT OF WRITTEN WORK

Written work must be typed in twelve-point font, double-spaced with one-inch margins, saved in a format Microsoft Word can open. I expect you to *edit* and *proofread* all written work, even D2L forum posts. Drafts that contain excessive typos or grammar mistakes may be returned to the author for correction before I offer comments.

Please give each piece of writing an original title, and include your name, assignment, and due date in a header on the first page. Insert page numbers if your work spans more than one page. All written work should be submitted via D2L's Dropbox by class time on the due date. **Late midterms will be penalized a full grade for each day that it is late; late finals will not be accepted at all.** Except in very unusual circumstances, work will not be accepted by email.

ATTENDANCE AND CLASS PARTICIPATION

Class discussion is an essential component of this seminar. It is important that you come to class every day having read the required material and prepared to discuss it. **Consequently, attendance in this class is mandatory.** You should plan on attending every class.

Please talk to me (in advance if possible) if you ever find you will need to miss a class meeting.

The course adheres to Marquette University's attendance policy, which can be found on the Internet at <http://bulletin.marquette.edu/undergrad/academicregulations/#attendance>.

You are allowed **three** absences over the course of the fall semester. **After that, your class participation will drop by a letter grade for each additional unexcused absence.** Upon the sixth unexcused absence, you will receive a WA (Withdrawn—Excessive Absences) for the semester.

Merely being present in class is insufficient to earn an “A” for class participation. Each student is expected to *participate in* and *contribute to* our discussions. Just being in the room is not enough.

D2L FORUMS

This course will make extensive use of the D2L forums at <http://d2l.mu.edu/>. In addition to being a place where you can find electronic copies of the syllabus and other course handouts, D2L also features an online forum where we can continue our discussions after class is over.

The D2L discussion forums are an excellent place for people who may feel inhibited by in-class discussion to share their opinions with the class. I will be reading the discussion forum regularly and I recommend you do the same. **Each student is required to write a short forum post—one or two substantial paragraphs are fine—responding to either Giorgio Agamben's “What Is The Contemporary?” or Ursula K. Le Guin's “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by noon before our next class meeting on Thursday, August 30.**

After that, students must write **four short posts** responding to **any four** of the six remaining texts: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Kindred*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Sparrow*, *The Road*, or

“Exhalation.” **These posts must be completed by noon before one of the class discussions devoted to that text.**

You may choose either to begin a discussion thread on a new topic or to respond to a post composed by one of your classmates.

Additional posts, and posts that respond substantively to other students’ arguments, will be looked upon very favorably when I calculate your final grade.

EMAIL

Students in this class are required to check their official Marquette email account—whatever account D2L sends its emails to—at least once a day, in case there are any last-minute announcements or disruptions.

LAPTOP POLICY

In-class use of laptops, Kindles, and iPads is permitted for access to electronic versions of our texts and for notetaking. However, students *must* refrain from non-class-related computer use, including email, instant messaging, Facebook, Twitter, and the like. I reserve the right to ban individual technological devices if this becomes a problem. No use of cell phones will be permitted during class time; please turn off your ringers and put them out of sight.

CONFERENCES

In lieu of our scheduled class on September 25, **all students are required to meet with me in a short one-on-one conference at my office at least once during the semester** to discuss the course and your work within it. Please know I am very happy to meet with you individually to discuss either graded work or work-in-progress in excess of this requirement as many times as you like. Simply come to my weekly office hours, or see or email me to set up an appointment.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Students are expected to abide by the academic honesty policy outlined in your undergraduate bulletin. I urge you all to examine this material and consult me with any questions you may have about plagiarism or academic integrity *before* it becomes an issue.

Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not an acceptable excuse for plagiarism. **Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the course.** No exceptions or special dispensations will be made.

Full details of Marquette’s academic integrity policy are available on the Internet at <http://bulletin.marquette.edu/undergrad/academicregulations/#academichonestypolicy>.

ACCOMODATIONS

Students with disabilities who believe they will require accommodations in this course should contact me early in the semester so your learning needs can be appropriately met. Per university policy, you are required to provide documentation of your disability to the Office of Disability Services. If you are unsure of what you need to do to qualify for services, you can begin by visiting the Office of Disability Services in Marquette Hall, Lower Level, Room 05, or by visiting their website at <http://www.marquette.edu/disability-services.index.shtml>.

WRITING CENTER

Students are strongly encouraged to make use of the Writing Center, located in Raynor Library Room 240, at any stage of the writing process. Please visit the Writing Center website at <http://www.marquette.edu/english/writingcenter/> to find out how to schedule an appointment and to access the studio's online resources.

FLEXIBILITY

If it will benefit the class, changes may be made to the above.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

We all enter this classroom with preexisting political, ethical, and intellectual commitments. You are all required to engage the material—but you are absolutely *not* required to agree either with any of the writers we will discuss, or with me, in whole or in part.

RESPECT

This classroom is a community. It is crucial that we treat each other with the appropriate level of courtesy and respect. No one should be made to feel unwelcome here.

Failure to treat other students with the respect they deserve will **severely** negatively impact your class participation grade.

PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE

Any changes to this schedule will be announced in class as they become necessary.

Students should come to class prepared to discuss the listed texts or chapters.

	DATE	READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS
T	August 28	INTRO TO THE CLASS “What Is the Contemporary?” (ARES)
Th	August 30	“What Is the Contemporary?” continued (ARES) Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (ARES)

T	September 4	<i>Slaughterhouse Five</i> , Chapter 1-3 END OF DROP ADD
Th	September 6	<i>Slaughterhouse Five</i> , Chapter 4-6
T	September 11	<i>Slaughterhouse Five</i> , Chapter 7-8
Th	September 13	<i>Slaughterhouse Five</i> , Chapters 9-10
T	September 18	<i>Kindred</i> , Prologue, The River, The Fire MIDTERM GUIDELINES DISTRIBUTED
Th	September 20	<i>Kindred</i> , The Fall
T	September 25	NO CLASS
Th	September 27	<i>Kindred</i> , The Fight
T	October 2	<i>Kindred</i> , The Storm
Th	October 4	<i>Kindred</i> , The Rope and Epilogue
T	October 9	<i>Handmaid's Tale</i> , Night, Shopping, Night
Th	October 11	<i>Handmaid's Tale</i> , Waiting Room, Nap
T	October 16	<i>Handmaid's Tale</i> , Household, Night MIDTERM DUE
Th	October 18	FALL BREAK
T	October 23	<i>Handmaid's Tale</i> , Birth Day, Night, Soul Scrolls, Night, Jezebel's
Th	October 25	<i>Handmaid's Tale</i> , Night, Salvaging, Night
T	October 30	<i>Handmaid's Tale</i> , Historical Notes on <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> FINAL PAPER GUIDELINES DISTRIBUTED
Th	November 1	<i>The Sparrow</i> , Chapters 1-6
T	November 6	<i>The Sparrow</i> , Chapters 7-14
Th	November 8	<i>The Sparrow</i> , Chapters 15-20
T	November 13	<i>The Sparrow</i> , Chapters 21-25
Th	November 15	<i>The Sparrow</i> , Chapters 26-29 LAST DAY TO WITHDRAW
T	November 20	<i>The Sparrow</i> , Chapters 30 through end of book
Th	November 22	THANKSGIVING BREAK—NO CLASS
T	November 27	<i>The Road</i> , p. 1-114
Th	November 29	<i>The Road</i> , p. 115-189

T	December 4	<i>The Road</i> , p. 190 through end of book
Th	December 6	Ted Chiang, "Exhalation" (ARES)
F	December 14	FINAL PAPER DUE BY 3 PM

Giorgio Agamben
from "What Is the Contemporary?"

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.

Naturally, this noncoincidence, this "dys-chrony," does not mean that the contemporary is a person who lives in another time, a nostalgic who feels more at home in the Athens of Pericles or in the Paris of Robespierre and the Marquis de Sade than in the city and time in which he lives. An intelligent man can despise his time, while knowing that he nevertheless irrevocably belongs to it, that he cannot escape his own time.

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze to it. (40-41)

In the firmament that we observe at night, the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness. Since the number of galaxies and luminous bodies in the universe is almost infinite, the darkness that we see in the sky is something that, according to scientists, demands an explanation. It is precisely the explanation that contemporary astrophysics gives for this darkness that I would now like to discuss. In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light.

To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary. As such, contemporaries are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to firmly fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. In other words, it is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss. (46)