

ENL336 American Fiction: 1945 to the Present

Fall '08 Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. Edwin J. Thompson, Professor of English, UMass Dartmouth

Course Overview: American Fiction, 1945 to the Present encourages students to reflect seriously on American culture as it is represented artistically in some of the best American fiction writing published since the cataclysmic year in the course title. The reading assignments are grouped chronologically by decade even though the shorthand by which we generalize about "the Fifties" or "the Sixties" is imprecise even in terms of the calendar. It is often pointed out, for instance, that "the Sixties" didn't really begin, culturally speaking, until sometime after the assassination of JFK in 1963 and the era's end coincides with that of the Vietnam War in the mid 1970s. Then, too, the publication dates of some works like Sylvia Plath's **The Bell Jar** are misleading. While clearly a product of the '50s, Plath's disturbing and ironic novel was not published in England until 1963 or in America until 1971. Nevertheless, this decade-based cultural analysis has entered into popular discourse because it usefully maps some of the major shifts in American values and behavior over the last half century.

Among the many principles of selection one might use to draw from the hundreds of significant volumes of fiction that have been published in America since 1945, I have deliberately emphasized those works that not only exhibit literary merit but that most intriguingly reflect and comment on the cultural moment in which they were written. Although they are challenging and critically praised texts, most have also attracted a wide readership or an intense cult following. They are, in other words, the products of authors who speak to and for large segments in the several American generations that have matured since the end of World War II.

Texts: The literary texts you will need for ENL 336 American Fiction: 1945 to the Present include excerpts from novels, short stories, and complete novels. I will post the excerpts and short stories as needed along with their associated "Study Materials." The texts you will need to purchase are the complete novels listed below. I will place an order for them in the UMass Dartmouth Campus Shop, but you may also purchase them, new or used, at a local bookshop or online at Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>) or Barnes & Noble (<http://www.barnesandnoble.com>). The study materials I supply for each assignment will sometimes be keyed to page numbers in the particular paperback editions I have placed on order, but you can use any edition as long as you don't mind searching for the corresponding page numbers.

Complete Novels (students will need to purchase these)

Thomas Pynchon, **The Crying of Lot 49**

Kurt Vonnegut, **Slaughterhouse Five**

E.L. Doctorow, **Ragtime**

Toni Morrison, **Song of Solomon**

Bobbie Ann Mason, **In Country**

Don DeLillo, **White Noise**

Douglas Coupland, **Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture**

Chuck Palahniuk, **Fight Club**

Excerpts (supplied)

Robert Penn Warren, **All the King's Men**

Norman Mailer, **The Naked and the Dead**

J.D. Salinger, **The Catcher in the Rye**

Ralph Ellison, **Invisible Man**

Jack Kerouac, **On the Road**

Sylvia Plath, **The Bell Jar**

Joseph Heller, **Catch-22**

Robert Pirsig, **Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance**

Short Stories (supplied)

Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"

Ursula LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

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

Raymond Carver, "Cathedral," "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love"

Sandra Cisneros, selections from **Woman Hollering Creek**

General Expectations: Since we will not have a physical classroom setting, the importance of keeping up with the reading assignments and discussion board postings cannot be overstated and is reflected by the weight given to participation in the course's grading system. [see below]

The organizing folder for each unit of the course includes a "Read This First" page that includes a list of required readings and discussion board postings for the unit. It also includes a due date/time by which all work on the unit must be completed. However, you should not wait until the last minute to post discussion board responses. These should be posted periodically during the week as you complete the readings. On the other hand, you might want to wait until later in the week to post replies to classmates' postings in order to have more of a selection to choose from. If you are puzzled by a text or by any of the study questions I have asked you to consider in relation to it, you might find the responses of other students quite helpful in clarifying your own thoughts.

Please notify me by class e-mail if you fall behind with the assignments. I will not penalize anyone for an occasional posting that is slightly late, but if serious illness or personal issues arise you should communicate these to me so that we may consider whether make-ups are possible or whether course withdrawal is the better route to follow. A pattern of consistently late or missing work will result in lowered grades and possible course failure.

Course Requirements:

1. On time submission of several discussion board postings per week as listed for each course study unit on the class homepage. Responses should be carefully composed paragraphs of about 150 words. Replies to other students' postings should be about 50 to 100 words. I would strongly recommend composing your work in a word processor with spell and grammar check features and then pasting it on to the discussion board. That way you will not only guard against composition errors, but you will have copies of all your work in the event anything is lost online.

2. On two occasions at five week intervals students will submit to me via e-mail a short essay (500-750 words) responding to some aspect of the course reading during that period. These essays may reconsider in more depth an item you or a classmate posted earlier to the discussion board, an issue raised in the study materials that you had not previously written about, or any new insight.

3. A Final Project with two options:

-- Option 1: A final essay exam that will be posted during the last week of the course. Students will have a week to compose and submit it via e-mail.

-- Option 2: A 4-6 page critical paper on an appropriate novel or selection of short stories not covered in the class syllabus or a comparative study of two works that are included. Several weeks before the end of the course, I will distribute a comprehensive title list of significant American fiction published since 1945 and more details about how to approach this assignment.

Grading:

Course grades will be determined according to the following formula:

A. Participation as evidenced by timely and conscientious contributions to the discussion board: 50%

B. Two short response essays (taken together): 25%

C. Final Project (Exam or Paper): 25%