

English 349: Contemporary American Literature

Dr. Michael Germana

Spring 2013

Section W01 11:30-12:20 MWF 200 Clark Hall

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Introduction:

In this course we will study the major genres, authors, themes, and topics of American literature from 1960 to the present. In the process, you will create ongoing research projects around emerging topics and/or themes of your choosing.

Successful completion of this course will satisfy WVU's "W" requirement. It will simultaneously (or alternatively) fulfill the 300-level elective course requirement for English majors.

Required Materials:

- Lex Williford and Michael Martone, *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*
- Jorie Graham, *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems, 1974-1994*
- Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God*
- Lorrie Moore, *Like Life*
- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*
- August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

All of the above texts can be purchased at the WVU Bookstore

Course Objectives:

- To understand the development of American cultural history from 1960 to the present
- To learn how to find, evaluate, lucidly summarize, and respond critically to peer-reviewed scholarly sources
- To develop a thesis about a literary text that is informed by relevant research and support that thesis with evidence from scholarly sources
- To practice the conventions of standard written English and appropriate documentation style

Assignments:

Overview:

As befits a writing-intensive or “W” course, the writing and revising processes constitute a significant portion of your overall work for this class. Each student enrolled in this course will complete four short “*précis* and response” papers of 500+ words in response to self-selected academic articles published in peer reviewed journals, compose a 10-15-page final research essay that explores one or more of the primary course texts in critical and cultural context, and compile a portfolio of thoroughly revised writing that will determine 80% of his or her final grade. **Failure to complete any one of these assignments will constitute failure of the course.** All assignments must be printed in 12-point Times or Times New Roman, double-spaced, and properly documented in either MLA or Chicago style. **Late work will not be accepted unless prior arrangements have been made and approved by Dr. Germana. Emailed assignments will not be accepted at all.**

Précis and Response Papers:

During the semester you will complete four “*précis* and response” papers of 500 words or more. To complete these papers you must use the MLA bibliography in conjunction with online resources like JSTOR, Project MUSE, and/or EBSCOHost to find, read, summarize, and analyze a single work of substantial, peer-reviewed scholarship **on a topic pertaining to any one of the literary texts we will have covered since the previous “*précis* and response” paper was due.** Read: your “*précis* and response” papers must summarize and respond critically to *a substantial work of literary criticism*, meaning an article in a peer-reviewed academic journal or an essay in a published collection, not a biographical sketch, encyclopedia entry, or the like.

Each of these papers should begin with a lucid characterization and summary of the argument made by the scholar or scholars whose work you found and carefully read. The challenge here is to condense the scholar’s argument down to one or two paragraphs without oversimplifying it. This *précis* or abstract must then be followed by a critical response from you that engages with and responds to the author of the secondary source. Remember, you’re working toward constructing an argument of your own, so trashing the scholar for his or her writing style isn’t going to get you very far. Consider instead how you might respond as a scholar of equal caliber by asking and answering critical questions like: How has this scholar’s argument influenced your reading of the text? What has he or she overlooked, in your opinion? Etc. The goal in the response is to *demonstrate* how the scholarly source influences your interpretation of the primary text. Finally, you must provide a bibliographic citation of the article you found in either MLA or Chicago format. Tentative grades and suggestions for revision and/or further inquiry will be provided in response to each paper. Your four “*précis* and response” papers, revised for clarity, collective coherence, and argumentative substance, will make up a significant portion of your final portfolio and will, either individually or collectively, form the foundation of your final research essay, details of which are outlined below.

You are encouraged but not required to organize your research around a developing theme over the course of the semester.

Special note: because this is a course in contemporary literature, you may find that many of the authors whose work we are studying have not yet been analyzed in print by literary scholars (the mills of literary scholarship grind slowly, but finely). This means you may have to broaden your searches and draw inferences. For instance, you may not find an article on Deborah Eisenberg’s

story “Twilight of the Superheroes,” or even on Eisenberg herself, but you might find one on post-9/11 themes in American Literature. Use the latter to comment on the former.

Final Research Essay:

The final research essay (10-15 pages) should be your crowning achievement in this course. A detailed description of this assignment will be provided around midterm, but the gist is pretty straightforward. You must generate and develop a thesis—an arguable assertion—that is informed by your secondary research and support this thesis with evidence from the primary source or sources you choose to examine. **No fewer than five secondary sources are required.** You may use any of the articles you analyzed in your “précis and response” papers, but be forewarned: simply plunking your analysis of the secondary source(s) from these documents into your paper whole cloth is ill advised if not reckless. As you might expect, the revision process is necessary here, too. Also, you will need to supplement your research with additional secondary sources to more fully support the topic you choose. I will be happy to assist you in this process, just so long as you ask me for help sooner rather than later.

The final research essay offers you a chance to develop one or more of the topics you explored in the “précis and response” papers. So, for example, a “précis and response” paper on August Wilson’s Blues aesthetic might turn into a broader exploration of the Blues in contemporary African American literature. The options are almost limitless, so you are encouraged to meet with me at any point in the semester to discuss your argument and possible methodologies.

Don’t worry about possible overlap with the “précis and response” papers. Building a usable archive is what doing research is all about, so you shouldn’t feel guilty about tapping into your own archive for the final research essay. You should also feel free to light out for new territory and leave your previous work behind should inspiration strike. You are not limited to the topics explored in your “précis and response” papers.

A rough draft of this essay will be due April 19, so be prepared! Like with your “précis and response” papers, I will return these drafts to you with suggestions for revisions during the student conferences I have scheduled for the week of April 22.

Portfolio:

Final grades will be primarily determined by portfolio. The portfolio you hand in at the end of the semester will contain a brief critical introduction to the portfolio (1-2 pages), **revised** copies of the four “précis and response” papers, and the final draft of the required 10-15-page final research essay. What matters most, in the end, is the quality of the work contained in the portfolio. In other words, if you received a tentative grade of 75% on one of your “précis and response” papers, but you then clearly revised and improved upon the content and delivery of this essay in your portfolio, then your portfolio grade will reflect the improvement. **Note: you are strongly advised to make revisions to your “précis and response” papers as the semester progresses.** It is much easier to make minor changes along the way than wait until the last minute to make major changes at that time.

Schedule of Revision:

- **“précis and response” paper one:** due February 4; returned February 11
- **“précis and response” paper two:** due February 20; returned February 27
- **“précis and response” paper three:** due March 11; returned March 18
- **“précis and response” paper four:** due April 10; returned April 17
- **final research paper draft:** due April 19; returned during your scheduled student conference (conferences start April 22 and end April 26)
- **revised draft of final research paper:** due April 29 (for peer workshop)
- **revised final portfolio:** due May 1 (for peer workshop)
- **final portfolio:** due May 3

Grading System:

Final portfolio consisting of critical introduction, revised “précis and response” papers, and final research paper:	80%
Participation:	20%

All assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale with grade ranges as follows:

+	100-98	+	89-88	+	79-78	+	69-68		
A	97-92	B	87-82	C	77-72	D	67-62	F	59-0
-	91-90	-	81-80	-	71-70	-	61-60		

Evaluation Criteria for Portfolio:

A (90-100): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio demonstrates perceptive and thoughtful responses to the assignments. They are well organized with excellent development of ideas, and they reflect the writer’s command of appropriate rhetorical strategies. The prose is vigorous and fresh, and the writer is clearly in control of the standard conventions of academic writing.

B (80-89): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio fulfills the assignment and shows evidence of clear thought and good planning. Each essay is well organized with good supporting details. The writing is fluent, and there are only minor errors in the mechanics that do not interfere with reading.

C (70-79): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio fulfills the assignment. The writing of each essay is adequately developed, clear, and coherent with relatively few errors in usage and mechanics, but the writer fails to demonstrate any particular strength which would distinguish above-average work.

D (60-69): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio fulfills its respective assignment but exhibits major problems in writing. Each essay may have difficulty with the presentation of ideas (e.g., lack of a clear thesis, weak organization, poor development of ideas, or inappropriate diction, poor spelling) or be marred by enough errors in the mechanics of writing to seriously distract the reader.

F (59 or below): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio is so poorly presented that it fails to fulfill the assignment. Each essay fails to present basic ideas, either because of poor organization and lack of clarity or because the writing reflects a lack of control over the basic conventions of standard academic usage.

0: Any one of the documents contained in the portfolio represents dishonest work by the student, principally the use of ideas or writing that are clearly not one's own work. Refer to the West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog for the University policy on Academic Dishonesty.

Attendance Policy:

Because participation counts for 20% of your grade you have to show up and contribute. Also bear in mind that some days (e.g., workshop days) count more than other days since your classmates will depend on you more to help them fulfill their assignments. You can miss up to five non-workshop, non-assignment-due dates without penalty. Choose your five days judiciously. Subsequent absences will drop your participation grade one letter grade per day. **A failing grade for the course will be recorded for any student with ten or more absences.**

If you are more than five minutes late for class, you will be counted absent.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the (mis)representation of someone else's work as your own. It may be direct (e.g., not documenting a quoted source) or indirect (paraphrasing ideas, thoughts, etc. without due credit). In either case, neglecting to acknowledge sources for outside material is a serious offence and may result in failure for the assignment and possibly the course. Please see me if you are not sure about how to use or acknowledge certain materials.

Social Justice Statement:

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veterans' status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Disability Services (293-6700).

Additional Resources:

The WVU Writing Center is committed to helping students become better writers. For more information about the Writing Center, including its hours, how to make appointments, and additional resources, visit their webpage at <http://english.wvu.edu/centers-projects/writing-center>

The Downtown Library also hosts a term paper clinic throughout the semester. Scheduling details TBA.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the course or concerns you would like to share privately with me, please contact me via email at Michael.Germana@mail.wvu.edu. **But please do not write to ask me for lecture notes or to request a summary of what you missed on any given day.** If you miss class and need class notes, ask one of your classmates.

You are also invited and encouraged—but not required—to follow me on Twitter at @michael_germana. If you already have a Twitter account but want to keep your personal account private, you can always create a second one solely for academic use. **When I tweet about this course, I will use the hashtag #ENGL349W. You can and should do likewise if you would like to share something with the class.**

Course Calendar:

January:

- 14 M Introduction/s
Overture: The Medium and the Message
- 16 W Russell Banks, “Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story” (Williford and Martone 1-18)
- 18 F Vachel Lindsey, “The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race” (handout) + Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* Chapters 1-18
- 23 W *Mumbo Jumbo* Chapters 19-46
- 25 F **library instruction session—class meets in room 136 of the Downtown Library**
- 28 M *Mumbo Jumbo* Chapters 47-end
Case Study I: August Wilson, the Blues, and the Politics of Cultural Appropriation
- 30 W Excerpts from LeRoi Jones, “Blues People” and Ralph Ellison’s review of same (handout) + Act One of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

February:

- 1 F Act Two of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”
- 4 M Alice Walker, “Nineteen Fifty-five” (Williford and Martone 616-627) + **précis and response paper one due**
(Post)modern Problems and Magic Realism
- 6 W Kevin Brockmeier, “The Ceiling” (Williford and Martone 93-102)
- 8 F Stacey Richter, “The Cavemen in the Hedges” (Williford and Martone 533-546)
- 11 M George Saunders, “Sea Oak” (Williford and Martone 547-566)
Case Study II: The Poetry of Jorie Graham
- 13 W from *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*: “The Way Things Work” + “One in the Hand” + “The Geese” + “Over and Over Stitch”

- 15 F from *Erosion*: “I Watched a Snake” + “History”; from *The End of Beauty*: “To the Reader” + “What the End Is For”
- 18 M from *Region of Unlikeness*: “Fission” + “Holy Shroud” + “The Marriage” + “The Tree of Knowledge”
- 20 W from *Materialism*: “The Dream of the Unified Field” + **précis and response paper two due**
- War, Identity, and Ideology: Three Snapshots
- 22 F Tim O’Brien, “The Things They Carried” (Williford and Martone 469-483)
- 25 M Anthony Doerr, “The Caretaker” (Williford and Martone 152-180)
- 27 W Deborah Eisenberg, “Twilight of the Superheroes” (Williford and Martone 190-213)

March:

- Case Study III: Three By Lorrie Moore
- 1 F “Places to Look for Your Mind” (Moore 92-115) + “The Jewish Hunter” (Moore 116-141)
- 4 M “Like Life” (Moore 149-178)
- Family Guise: Parenthood and Performance
- 6 W Mary Gaitskill, “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” (Williford and Martone 228-238)
- 8 F David Means, “The Secret Goldfish” (Williford and Martone 397-404)
- 11 M Jamaica Kincaid, “Girl” (Williford and Martone 319-320) + **précis and response paper three due**
- 13 W Janet Desaulniers, “After Rosa Parks” (Williford and Martone 129-143)
- Re-imagining Difference in Contemporary American Literature
- 15 F ZZ Packer, “Brownies” (Williford and Martone 503-532)
- 18 M Antonya Nelson, “Female Trouble” (Williford and Martone 431-451)
- 20 W Amy Bloom, “Silver Water” (Williford and Martone 72-79)
- 22 F **student conferences—class does not meet**
- Spring Recess---

April:

- 1 M Melanie Rae Thon, “Xmas, Jamaica Plain” (Williford and Martone 609-615)
- The Unheimlich: Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*
- 3 W *Child of God* 1-81 (all of part I)
- 5 F *Child of God* 85-141 (all of part II)
- 8 M *Child of God* 145-end (all of part III)
- 10 W **précis and response paper four due**
- 12 F research day—class meets in the Downtown Library
- 15 M research day—class meets in the Downtown Library
- 17 W research day—class meets in the Downtown Library
- 19 F **final research paper rough draft due—bring one copy to turn in to Dr. Germana**
- 22 M **student conferences—class does not meet**
- 24 W **student conferences—class does not meet**
- 26 F **student conferences—class does not meet**
- 29 M **peer review of revised final research paper draft—bring one copy of revised essay**

May:

- 1 W **peer review of revised final portfolio—bring one copy of each of the revised documents in your portfolio**

3 F **final portfolio (one-two-page critical introduction + revised précis and response papers + completed final research essay) due** + course evaluations administered