

**SYLLABUS- ANG 6184**  
**Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature**

Professor Caroline Brown  
Fall 2011  
Course Meeting Times: Tues, 4-7pm  
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**Course Description**

As the United States transitioned from the nineteenth century to the 20<sup>th</sup>, it experienced cataclysmic political, social, and economic upheavals, hurling it into the modern era. Yet, this evolution was far from a seamless movement. Rather, it can be perceived as a series of uneven shifts, as much bursts of the novel as incremental regressions. This course will study American literature produced from 1900 to 1946. Bracketed by the two world wars, it was an era of contradictions. Rich with both the promise of social progress and material well-being, it was also one of horrifying violence, whether of large-scale warfare or of racialized, domestic terrorism. A time of rapid economic transformation, it witnessed ongoing travel and migration, both within national borders and internationally, particularly from rural to urban and from the United States to Europe and back. What resulted were forms of contact and experimentation previously unimaginable. Avant-garde artists reduced the human form to dizzying abstractions, jazz musicians incorporated earlier traditions into new and innovative compositions, and writers altered narrative conventions, undermining expectations cultivated by investments in the “real,” reworking understandings of time, consciousness, and knowledge itself. Individuals also engaged in acts of recreation, refashioning themselves as a result of new environments, opportunities, and identities. In “Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature,” we will examine a cross-section of texts by a multiplicity of American writers. Works that engage questions of identity, self-fashioning, and experimentation, they insert themselves in debates around passing, eugenics, oppositional sexual identities, class struggle, and political justice. In so doing, they reveal the dynamic cross-talk and cross-pollination between writers and movements, exposing the active forms of transgression occurring in relation to personal style, thought, and literary form.

**Required Texts (Available at UdeM Bookstore)**

William Faulkner	<i>Light in August</i>
F. Scott Fitzgerald	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>
James Weldon Johnson	<i>The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man</i>
Nella Larsen	<i>Passing</i>
Ann Petry	<i>The Street</i>
Gertrude Stein	<i>Three Lives</i>
Jean Toomer	<i>Cane</i>
Nathaniel West	<i>The Day of the Locust and Miss Lonelyhearts</i>
Edith Wharton	<i>The House of Mirth</i>
Richard Wright	<i>Native Son</i>

**Course Objectives**

- (1) A primary objective of this course is for us to be conscious of how we engage in critical inquiry and, in the process, claim space as scholars. There is no prescribed way to be an academic. This course will function as a workshop in which students actively create their own strategies for intellectual engagement with complex texts and issues.
- (2) Central to this process is reading. It's necessary to read for class. Read critically and on time, both the fictional work and assigned scholarly text(s).
- (3) Discussion is the most obvious manifestation of the life of the mind in the university classroom. It's also essential in the creation of a community of thinkers. In order to create a healthy environment, it's important to treat others with respect while feeling that we have the right and responsibility to question and challenge other thinkers and writers.
- (4) Each class participant is expected to lead a seminar. The sign up sheet will be passed around during the second week of class. This is a two-part assignment. The first will be leading the seminar, which is basically setting that day's agenda. Leading the weekly discussion can occur in any number of ways, including responding to or challenging specific issues within a text or brought up by other scholars. Your presentation should be about 30 minutes; another 30 minutes will be allotted for class discussion. You have flexibility in how you lead the discussion and should not feel obliged to reference or rely on the supplemental works that I have chosen for that day. However, whatever approach you take, you need an argument. Spend time creating one. It should be clear and succinct. Be daring here—but realistic. (You have ½ hour.) The second part of the assignment is your self-assessment. There are three segments to this portion of the assignment: (1) Pedagogical Goals: what you were hoping to achieve in your discussion; (2) Methodology: your approach, argument, scholarly supports; (3) Self-Assessment: evaluate your argument and the conversation created. What did you plan? What did you accomplish? What could you have revised? (Feel free to discuss your concerns, worries, and/or developing perspectives with me at least the week before you lead discussion.)
- (5) Your final paper will be 15 to 20 pages. Good research is an imperative in dialoguing with a text on several levels. Your bibliography should consist of 5 to 10 sources. Create a solid and compelling argument that can sustain your interest for that much time. Rather than just the last hurdle to your final grade, it might be worthwhile to approach this endeavor as the foundation for what might become a journal article, conference paper, or larger project. If so, what's already been done in the field? How will your work contribute to a greater understanding of the text and the issues surrounding it, whether during the era of its creation or subsequently? How does the text under examination address/inform/reveal the interests, ambivalence, obsessions, and conflicts of a specific era, including our own? Use prior seminar sessions as a way to gain insight into your own analysis.
- (6) While there can be some overlap between your seminar session and the final paper, please do not simply transcribe your oral presentation to an essay format.

### **Course Mechanics**

- Class participation is a must. It improves the quality of discussion (and is graded for both content and frequency).
- All essays must be typed. Each should be double-spaced and have a one-inch margin. Please use a standard font. Remember to title your essays and include page numbers. Staple all pages together.
- Plagiarism, the uncredited use of another's words, research, and thoughts, is forbidden. Please document your sources appropriately.
- You are responsible for collecting any materials or assignments handed out during an absence.

### **Course Requirements**

Participation	10%
Lead 1 Seminar Session	

(3-4 page self-assessment due the following week)  
Final Essay (15-20 pp)

30%  
60%

## **SCHEDULE**

**WEEK 1** (9/6) Introductions

**WEEK 2** (9/13) *The House of Mirth*, 1905 (Edith Wharton)

- Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, chap. 2 (37-60)
- Elizabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton's Hard-Working Lily: *The House of Mirth* and the Marriage Market"

**WEEK 3** (9/20) *Three Lives*, 1909 (Gertrude Stein)

- Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Black Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (excerpts)
- "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12:1 (Autumn 1985): 204-242

**WEEK 4** (9/27) *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 1912 (James Weldon Johnson)

- David Levering Lewis, "Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites," *The Journal of American History* 71:3(Dec. 1984):543-564
- Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (excerpts)

**WEEK 5** (10/4) *Passing*, 1929 (Nella Larsen)

- Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, chap. 7
- Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge"

**WEEK 6** (10/11) *The Great Gatsby*, 1925 (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

- Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (excerpts)
- Bert Bender, "'His Mind Aglow': The Biological Undercurrent in Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and Other Works," *Journal of American Studies* 32:3 (1998): 399-420

**WEEK 7** (10/18) **Directed Reading**

**VACATION:** Oct. 25, 2011

**WEEK 8** (11/1) *Light in August*, 1932 (William Faulkner)

- bell hooks, "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," *Black Looks*(165-178)
- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (excerpts)

**WEEK 9** (11/8) *Cane*, 1923 (Jean Toomer)

- Robin Kelly, "Dreams of the Marvelous," *Freedom Dreams*, chap 6 (157-185)
- André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism"(1924)/"Second Manifesto of Surrealism"(1930)

**WEEK 10** (11/15) *Day of the Locust*, 1939/*Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1933 (Nathanael West)

- Mike Davis, "Sunshine or Noir," *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (17-46)
- Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (120-167)

**WEEK 11** (11/22) *Native Son*, 1940 (Richard Wright)

- Robin Kelly, "Red Dreams and Black Liberation," *Freedom Dreams*, chap 2 (36-59)
- Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born" and "Blueprint for Negro Writing"

**WEEK 12** (12/29) *The Street*, 1946 (Ann Petry)

- Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race"

**FINAL ESSAY, DUE: WED., DEC. 13, 2011**