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LIT 236L.02: LT Hist: Modern American Literature

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Ann Emmons and Morgan Beavers

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Modern American Literature: Literary Histories (Fall 2018)

11:00 - 12:50 T R , Fine Art 302

"I try to laugh / At whatever life brings / Cause when I look down / I just miss all the good stuff / When I look up / I just trip over things." Ani DiFranco, "As Is"

"[Literature *does*] educate us about life. ... I'm thinking of the great question of nineteenth-century Russian literature: how should one live? A novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of human possibility, of what human nature is, of what happens in the world. It's a creator of inwardness. ... I can't care about a book that has nothing to contribute to the wisdom project."

Susan Sontag, *The Paris Review* Interview

"wonder is defined as a constriction and suspension of the heart caused by amazement at the appearance of something so portentous, and unusual that the heart suffers a systole. Hence wonder is something like fear in its effect on the heart. This effect of wonder, then, this constriction and systole of the heart, springs from an unfulfilled but felt desire to know... Now the man who is puzzled and wonders apparently does not know. ... Hence wonder is the movement of the man who does not know on his way to finding out."

Albertus Magnus, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*

Overview:

The University of Montana's "Literary Histories" series replaces the survey course. Or, more accurately, it slows down the survey course's too-cursory and too-rapid introduction to the major authors, genres, and works of an extended time period and a given language and culture in favor of more-focused consideration of the intersection of literature and larger cultural and political movements: how does literature reflect and/or define a nation's sense of self and a nation's history?; what is the relationship between literature and life, fact and fiction?; what is fake news? At the most immediate level, this means that we're reading entire texts rather than snippets of text (and, more tangentially, it means that your University is listening to you, hears your complaints and responds). It also means that courses must focus on a specific historic theme or moment. I have focused this course on Space and Migration: the (often mythologized) American move West, to space "enough."

In addition, many of you are not and do not intend to become English majors and thus do not intend more-specialized literary study; much of our discussion will therefore focus on the translation of literary "close-reading" techniques and interpretive strategies to all efforts at careful reading and interpretation.

The list of required texts for this course is long and your weekly reading assignments will average 100 pages. **This reading -- careful, engaged, on-time -- is your primary responsibility for this course.** Writing assignments are limited to two short (4-5 page) essays, plus one significant effort at revision. We will, however, talk about writing -- yours and others' -- all semester and we will all be stronger, more-confident writers come December. (That's one of the happier consequences of reading 1300 pages in 13 weeks)

I'm happy directing your reading, but less happy dictating your reading. If you would like to substitute another text (one you hoped to see on the syllabus but don't), *appropriate to the unit of study*, please come see me and we'll work out an independent-study option for that unit. NB: this creates more work for me. Please don't take advantage and substitute a novel that you've recently read just to reduce your own workload. Your substituted text should be one you've long wanted to read, or one you read long ago in a different time and place, when you were a different reader, one that has haunted you since, but that you have not yet encountered on a course list.

Finally, I expect that laptops and smart phones are being used in the service of our class activities and that they will not distract you, me, or the other students in the class; distractions include noise and your wayward attention. You may take notes on a laptop **only** if you sit within the first row of the classroom.

Required Texts:

Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*

Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle"

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience" - digital copy on Moodle

Annie Dillard, "Teaching a Stone to Talk"

Toni Morrison, "Strangers" - digital copy on Moodle

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" - digital copy on Moodle

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Hernan Diaz, *In the Distance*

Leslie Silko, essay to be determined (digital copy on Moodle)

Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*

Requirements

Writing Portfolio	40%
Midterm exam	15%
Mini Research Projects	20%
Final exam (cumulative)	25%

Your essays must be turned in at the beginning of class on the day they are due, typed and double-spaced, with 1" margins, using in-text citations (MLA format). You **must** revise your first essay; this revision will be graded as a separate stand-alone essay (meaning 3 essays grades compose your "Writing Portfolio" grade). Additional instructions will be provided when the essays are assigned. I encourage you to visit Morgan or me during office hours to discuss the papers and your writing in more detail. The Writing Center (LA 144) also provides valuable assistance.

Twice a semester, you must research a question raised in class and present your findings - **and** their relationship to the text and/or the course - in 1 to 2 pages (plus bibliography). Your research must include one peer-reviewed scholarly source. (We will talk about the available academic-journal search engines in class. The first of two "mini research projects" must be submitted by October 11, the second by November 29. And, each must be submitted within 1 week of our conclusion of the text in question.

Both the midterm and the final exam will feature a combination of questions on terminology and short essays; more details to follow later in the semester.

Academic Honesty

All work that you submit for this class must be your own, and it must be written exclusively for this course. The unacknowledged borrowing of others' words or ideas—whether from books, the internet, or other sources—constitutes the serious academic crime of plagiarism. If you fail to document properly those sources consulted for your writing, you risk an automatic failure for the entire course. If you have any doubts or questions about plagiarism or the University's policy on it, please see me or Morgan.

Special Needs

If you have a documented disability, or otherwise anticipate needing special accommodations for this course, please bring this to my attention as early in the semester as possible so that we have an understanding and can make arrangements.

Tentative Schedule

NB: this schedule is truly tentative and will be adjusted according to the needs of the class. Specific reading assignments will be determined at least one week in advance. All reading must be completed by class time on the date listed; please note that you are not prepared for class unless you have that reading in front of you as we discuss it.

Introduction: Close Reading

Wk 1 (August 27)

- t Course introduction
 - *As I Lay Dying* excerpt
 - *Moby Dick* excerpt
 - Begin *Touching the Void*Reading: Begin *Benito Cereno*
- r *Touching the Void*
Reading for week 2: *Benito Cereno*, part I

Wk 2 (September 3)

- t Discussion: *Touching the Void*
reading for Thursday: finish *Benito Cereno*
- r Discussion: *Benito Cereno*
reading for week 3: “Rip Van Winkle”; “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,”
selections (on Moodle)

Wk 3 (September 10)

- t Discussion: Looking West
Reading for Thursday: “Teaching a Stone to Talk”
- r Lecture: Phenomenology: how we know what we know
Reading for week 4: “Experience”

Wk 4 (September 17)

NB: *HF* is our longest novel/this is your heaviest reading load. Begin early.

- t Lecture: Phenomenology continued
reading for Thursday: Begin *Huck Finn*
- r Lecture: The American Vernacular and Narrative Structure
Reading for week 5: continue *Huck Finn*; Toni Morrison, “Strangers,” digital copy on Moodle

Wk 5 (September 24)

- t Writing Workshop
- r Writing Workshop
reading for Week 6: finish *Huck Finn*

Wk 6 (October 1)

- t Discussion: Huck Finn
Reading for Thursday: begin *As I Lay Dying*
- r Lecture: American Modernism
Reading for Week 7: finish *As I Lay Dying*

Wk 7 (October 8)

- t Discussion: *As I Lay Dying*; Midterm review
- r **Midterm Exam**; Essay-Prompt Development
Reading for Week 8: Begin *Song of Solomon*
You must have submitted your first mini research project by October 11

Wk 8 (October 15)

- t Lecture: American Magical Realism
reading for Thursday: Continue *Song of Solomon*
- r Discussion: *Song of Solomon*
reading for Week 9: none - writing weekend

Wk 9 (October 22)

- t **Essay 1 due**; Writing Workshop
reading for Thursday: Finish *Song of Solomon*
- r Discussion: *Song of Solomon*
reading for Week 10: select poems (to be determined)

Wk 10 (October 29)

- t Environmental Literature Lecture and Discussion (Morgan)
- r Environmental Literature Discussion (Morgan)
reading for Week 11: Hayden White, "On Narrativity"(digital copy on Moodle); *In the Distance*

Wk 11 (November 5)

- t **No Class. Election Day**
- r Lecture: American Modernism II (Narrative Form) Discussion: *In the Distance*
Reading for Week 12 (none; writing weekend)

Wk 12 (November 12)

- t Writing Workshop
- r Writing Workshop
- f **Revised Essay 1 due to my English Dept mailbox by 5:00 pm FRIDAY**
reading for week 14: Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction" to *Through Other Continents* (on Moodle); Stuart Hall excerpts (on Moodle)

Wk 13 (November 19)

- t No Class
- r No Class (Thanksgiving)

Wk 14 (November 26)

- r Lecture: World Literature
reading for Thursday: Silko essay (on Moodle); begin *All the Pretty Horses*
- t Discussion: *All the Pretty Horses*
reading for week 15: finish *All the Pretty Horses*
You must have submitted your second mini research project by November 29

Wk 15 (December 3)

- t Discussion: *All the Pretty Horses*
reading for Thursday: finish *All the Pretty Horses*
- r Course review
- f **Essay 2 due, to my English Department mailbox by 5:00 pm FRIDAY**

Optional Final-Exam Review Sessions, time and location to be determined

Final Exam: Friday December 14, 10:10 - 12:10