

Contemporary American Fiction and The Anxiety of Influence
English 8320: Studies in Twentieth-Century American Literature
Prof. Samuel Cohen
University of Missouri
Fall 2011
W 12:30-3, Tate 310
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The Course

In this course we will read fiction written by the latest generation of American writers poised to enter the canon and examine it in the light of the literary- and social-historical fact of its writers' membership in this generation. We will read selected works by four important writers born in the 1960s, David Foster Wallace, Colson Whitehead, Lydia Millet, and Jonathan Lethem, accompanied by fiction written by significant precursors, by their own commentary on fiction and related subjects, and by writing about the idea of literary influence, literary history, and the historical moment. Among the questions we will be asking: How is the fiction produced by these writers effected by their consciousness of the work of the previous generation(s)? How do their responses to these influences compare to their responses to history? What larger models of literary influence/history help us understand all of this? Course work will include short responses to reading and a final paper.

The Texts

John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*
Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic*
Jonathan Lethem, *Chronic City*
Jonathan Lethem, *The Disappointment Artist*
Lydia Millet, *How the Dead Dream*
Lydia Millet, *My Happy Life*
Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*
Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*
David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair*
Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*
A ton of secondary readings in digital form

Seven Things You Should Know

1. This is a graduate seminar, and as such is intended to be a discussion (hence the table instead of those little chair-desk things). You will need to take part in the discussion for this class to work, or we will spend a lot of time staring at each other. You will also need to take part to earn an A in the class. I also have an annoying rule about not eating in class that I'm going to stick to no matter how annoying people think it is.

2. You will print out and bring to class all of the assigned secondary reading for that day's meeting, with scribbles all over it indicating that you've taken notes. If you are one of those electronic people who take electronic notes with their electronic gadgets, you will show me your system so that I can be impressed by your electronicness.
3. You will write a short (no more than a page, double-spaced) response to the day's reading. Responses should make an observation, ask a question, pose a problem, do something interpretive/critical/contextualizing. These responses will be handed in at the start of the class meeting.
4. You will write a seminar paper, which will be built on original research using MLA style documentation.
5. You will present your seminar paper on the last day of class. Presentations must be professional but not read; that is, they must outline the argument of the paper in a cogent way, and they can be made from notes but not simply read aloud. For this reason, papers must be handed in on the last day of class.
6. Your grade for the course will consist of your participation in class discussion (20%), your written responses to reading (20%), your seminar paper (50%), and your paper presentation (10%). (Note: I will be availing myself of the new +/- grading option.)
7. If you need accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please inform me immediately. Please see me privately after class, or at my office. To request academic accommodations (for example, a note taker), students must also register with Disability Services, AO38 Brady Commons, 882-4696. Another resource, MU's Adaptive Computing Technology Center, 884-2828, is available to provide computing assistance to students with disabilities.

Schedule

Introduction

Aug 24 Introduction

Background

Aug 31 Harold Bloom, Introduction, *The Anxiety of Influence*
 John Brenkman, "Innovation: Notes on Nihilism and the Aesthetics of the Novel,"
 Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, v. 2
 Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, "Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and
 Intertextuality," *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*
 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Ch. 1
 Mark McGurl, "The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction,"
Critical Inquiry August 2005

David Foster Wallace

Sep 7 John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*
 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of
 Replenishment" from *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*

Sep 14 Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair*

Sep 21 Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram"

Colson Whitehead

- Sep 28 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
Oct 5 Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*
Oct 12 Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*
Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?*, Ch. 3
Walter Benn Michaels, Erica Edwards, and Aldon Lynn Nielsen, symposium on
What Was African-American Literature?, *Los Angeles Review of Books*
June 13, 2011

Lydia Millet

- Oct 19 William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic*
Jonathan Franzen, "Mr. Difficult" (*The New Yorker* September 30, 2002)
Ben Marcus, "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing,
Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It," *Harper's Magazine* October
2005
Oct 26 Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*; Millet, *My Happy Life*
Nov 2 Millet, *How the Dead Dream*

Jonathan Lethem

- Nov 9 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*
Nov 16 Lethem, *Chronic City*
James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman," *The New Republic* August 30, 2001
Zadie Smith, "This Is How It Feels to Me," *The Guardian* October 13, 2001
Nov 30 Lethem, *The Disappointment Artist* & "The Ecstasy of Influence," *Harper's*
Magazine
Dec 7 presentations