

THE PERFECT EXPERIMENT: Two Hundred Years of American Short Fiction

This course moves chronologically through short fiction written in the U.S. from Washington Irving and writers of the first American Renaissance, including Hawthorne and Poe, through modernism and the Harlem and Southern Renaissances, and down to the recent flourishing of immigrant literature in the U.S., including Jamaica Kincaid and Jhumpa Lahiri.

As we observe changing authorship, subject matter, and formal choices over the course of almost two hundred years, we will ask ourselves: how did the short story function as the ideal experimental apparatus for writers-in-training and established writers alike? Who got their start writing short fiction? How did these brief, sometimes gem-like, other times rough-and-ready pieces of writing allow new voices, subject matter, demographic groups, and viewpoints to enter the mainstream of American literature? From the early attempts to define “American” literature as itself colonial in relation to the Old World, through the protest fiction of Melville, the feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the break-through stories of African American writers like Jean Toomer and Richard Wright, the science fiction thought experiments of Ursula K. Le Guin and Isaac Asimov, and more recent explorations of identity in Junot Díaz, Alexie Sherman, and other living authors, we will traverse a diverse terrain of people, ideas, and movements, all linked by the protean form of the short story.

The course demands rigorous close reading of these small masterpieces, and an active engagement with critical debates surrounding questions of genre, the relation between literature and culture, and the shifting territory of literature and literary studies over the decades. The course is also designed to give scope to your own interests, and can be molded to reflect the aspects of these topics that you are most keen to read about and study.

In addition to familiarizing you with the similarities and diversity among American short stories, the course will walk you through the steps of conceiving, planning, and executing a junior essay that engages intelligently in a critical conversation, thus preparing you to write a rigorous senior thesis.

General Goals: *To introduce the discipline and practice of English literary studies at a rigorous level, and to write 20-25 page research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. Over the course of the Tutorial, you will:*

- Design a research question
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including a range of methods and viewpoints
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with a your own ideas and with other criticism
- Write with greater clarity and precision

Course-Specific Goals: *To reflect critically on the conventions—or experimentations—of the short story genre, and its place in American culture more broadly over the past two centuries. Over the course of the Tutorial, you will:*

- Become familiar with the history of the American short story
- Analyze formal aspects of brief prose fiction

- Be prepared to explain how the history and formal dimensions of the short story intersect with philosophical, cultural, and political questions in the U.S.

Requirements

Participation (totals 20%)

- * Active, thoughtful participation in discussion: 10%
- * Presentations framing discussion for two (separate) class meetings: 10%
 - * One primary source presentation: *a brief presentation offering framing one or more of the primary texts for that week*
 - * One secondary source presentation: *select (and pre-circulate) a critical article about one or more of the primary texts and prepare a brief presentation discussing its argument, methodologies, strengths, and weaknesses*

Short written work (totals 15%)

- * Short paper: 15%

Written work for Junior Paper (totals 65%)

- * Annotated bibliography and 2-page prospectus: 10%
- * Starter draft of junior essay: 5%
- * Full draft of junior essay: 10%
- * 20 page junior essay: 40%

[NOTE: You **must** submit a completed Junior Paper to pass the Tutorial.]

Course Policies

You are allowed one unexcused absence over the course of the semester; all other absences must be accompanied by a medical note or Dean's note. Each unexcused absence after the first one will bring your participation grade down by 2 percentage points.

I will grant extensions so long as you ask early: if you ask one day in advance, you may have a one-day extension; two days in advance, a two-day extension, and so on up to three days. Late work will lose 5% for each day it is delayed beyond the allotted extension.

Let's forego laptops during discussion. If this policy presents a significant burden, please speak with me privately.

Email: You can always reach me at mgrunes@fas.harvard.edu with questions, but please allow up to 24 hours for a response. If you haven't heard from me within that window, I encourage you to send a follow-up or reminder!

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or*

misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."

Collaboration: You are encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each other's work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, or take-home exams), academic collaboration and external sources (including class lectures or discussions) should be always cited.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: "Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term, **[DATE]**. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation."

Texts to Purchase

Great American Short Stories (Dover Thrift) (Amazon list price: \$4.50)

Oxford Book of American Short Stories, 2nd ed. (2012) (Oxford UP) (Amazon list price: \$15)

OPTIONAL:

Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories (Vintage) (Amazon list price: \$10)

Masterpieces: The Best Science Fiction of the 20th Century (Ace) (Amazon list price: \$16)

Mandatory General Meetings for Tutorial Program

General Meeting #1 (Week 2): Tutorial Program Welcome and Overview

TBA

General Meeting #2 (Week 4): Introduction to Critical Methods

TBA

General Meeting #3 (Week 6): Seniors Tell All: Reflections on the Junior Essay

TBA

Junior Tutorial Conference

TBA

Provisional Topics, Readings, and Schedule

(tentative and subject to change based on student interests!)

UNIT I: What Is American Literature?

AUG 31: Folktales

Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) [Oxford]

Uncle Remus Stories: "Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby" [Online]

"How Mr. Rabbit was too sharp for Mr. Fox" [Online]

Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935)

Franz Boas, Preface [Online]

"Introduction" [Online]

"Why Negroes are Black" / "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men":

- Starting: "There was a storm of laughter following Charlie's tale."

- Ending: "You men is still braggin' 'bout yo' strength and de women is sittin' on de keys and lettin' you blow off till she git ready to put de bridle on you."

Alice Walker, "The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus," in *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988). [Xerox]

D.H. Lawrence, "Foreword." *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Final Version)

***Incredible Shrinking Summary Assignment: due by email to Marissa [Saturday 8pm]**

WEEK OF SEPT 5: American Gothic

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) [GASS]

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) [GASS, Oxford]

"The Fall of the House of Usher" [Online]

Herman Melville, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855) [Oxford]

Secondary sources: Allen, Tom. "Melville's "Factory Girls": Feminizing the Future." *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 2003): pp. 45-71.

[**Methodologies:** genre studies; cultural studies]

Ronan, John. "'Young Goodman Brown' and the Mathers." *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (June 2012): pp. 253-280.

[**Methodologies:** literary history; intellectual history]

***Short Paper: due by email to Marissa [Saturday 8pm]**

UNIT II: After the Civil War

WEEK OF SEPT 12: East/West/North/South: What's in a Region?

Stephen Crane, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1878) [GASS]

"Moonlight on the Snow" (1901) [Xerox]

Sarah Orne Jewett, "A White Heron" (1886) [GASS, Oxford]

Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1909) [GASS]

Mark Twain, "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed" (1885) [GASS]

Secondary sources: Donald T. Blume, "'A Quarter of an Hour': Hanging as Ambrose Bierce and Peyton Farquhar Knew It." *American Literary Realism*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter, 2002), pp. 146-157.

[**Methodologies:** historicism]

Sorrentino, Paul. "Stephen Crane's Sources and Allusions in 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' and 'Moonlight on the Snow.'" *American Literary Realism* 40.1 (2007): 52-65.

[**Methodologies:** historicism; cultural studies; biographical criticism]

***Individual conferences with Tutor this week about Short Paper**

***Topic warm-up assignment: write-up due by email to Marissa [Saturday 8pm]**

WEEK OF SEPT 19: Early Modernism: Psychology and Aesthetics

[**Half of class: Library Consultation with Odile Harter**]

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-paper" (1892) [GASS, Oxford]

Henry James, "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903) [Xerox]

Secondary sources: Goodheart, Eugene. "What May Knew in 'The Beast in the Jungle.'" *The Sewanee Review* 111.1 (2003): 116-127.

[**Methodologies:** narrative theory; psychoanalytic criticism]

Jürgen Wolter, "'The Yellow Wall-Paper': The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2009), pp. 195-210.

[**Methodologies:** cultural history; feminist crit.; biographical crit.]

WEEK OF SEPT 26: City, Town, Country, and Expats: American Modernism

Jack London, "To Build a Fire" (1908) [GASS]

F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" (1920) [GASS]

Ernest Hemingway, "The Killers" (1927) [GASS]

Potential secondary source: Berman, Ron. "Vaudeville Philosophers: 'The Killers.'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring, 1999): pp. 79-93.

[**Methodologies:** cultural history]

*** Student-led presentations (primary and secondary) #1**

***3-4 Annotations for Bibliography due (by email to Marissa)**

WEEK OF OCT 3: The Harlem Renaissance

Jean Toomer, "Blood-Burning Moon" (1923) [Oxford]

Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat" (1926) [Xerox]

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1957) [Oxford]

Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" (1961) [Oxford]

Potential secondary source: Sherard, Tracey. "Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's 'Blues Text' as

Intracultural Critique.” *African American Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter, 1998): pp. 691-705.

[**Methodologies**: comparative arts; race and ethnicity; cultural history]

* Student-led presentations (primary and secondary) #2

*3-4 Annotations for Bibliography due (by email to Marissa)

WEEK OF OCT 10: The Southern Renaissance

William Faulkner, “Barn Burning,” (1939) [Xerox]

Eudora Welty, “Moon Lake,” (1949) [Xerox]

Flannery O’Connor, “The Displaced Person,” (1955) [Xerox]

Potential secondary source: Zender, Karl F. “Character and Symbol in “Barn Burning.”” *College Literature*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1989): pp. 48-59.

[**Methodologies**: psychoanalytic criticism; genre studies; semiotics; narratology]

* Student-led presentations (primary and secondary) #3

***Individual conferences with tutor this week about Prospectus**

UNIT III: Realism and the Uncanny: Post-War Stories

WEEK OF OCT 17: The Suburban Surreal

Raymond Carver, “Cathedral” (1983) [Vintage/Xerox]

John Cheever, “The Swimmer” (1964) [Xerox]

Potential secondary source: Kozikowski, Stanley J. “Damned in a fair life: Cheever’s “The Swimmer,”” *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Summer 1993): p. 367-375.

[**Methodologies**: intertextuality]

* Student-led presentations (primary and secondary) #4

* **2-page Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due Monday, Oct. 17**

WEEK OF OCT 24: Hey, Mister, What’s that Sound? The Vietnam Era

Tim O’Brien, “The Things They Carried” (1987) [Oxford]

Viet Thanh Nguyen, “The Americans” (2010) [The Chicago Tribune online]

Andrew Lam, “Grandma’s Tales” (2013) [online]

First 30 min: In-class Prospectus Conference

***Starter draft of junior essay due Saturday, Oct 29 (7-10 pages of your first draft)**

WEEK OF OCT 31: Social Critique and Science Fiction

Ray Bradbury, “Dark They Were, and Golden Eyed” (1949) [SciFi Anthology]

Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973) [SciFi Anthology]

Isaac Asimov, “Robot Dreams” (1986) [SciFi Anthology]

George R. R. Martin, “Sandkings” [SciFi Anthology]

Secondary source: Simon, Linda. “William James’s Lost Souls in Ursula Le Guin’s Utopia.” *Philosophy and Literature* 28.1 (2004): 89–102.

[**Methodologies:** intellectual history; philosophy]

***Complete draft of junior essay due Week of November 7 [TBA]**

WEEK OF NOV 14: Native Voices, New Voices: The Great American Melting Pot

Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl" (1978) [Vintage/Online]

Leslie Marmon Silko, "Yellow Woman" (1981) [Xerox]

Jhumpa Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" (2004) [Oxford]

WEEK OF NOV 21: The Great American Melting Pot, continued

Sherman Alexie, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" (2003) [New Yorker Online]

Junot Diaz, "Edison, New Jersey" [Oxford]

Qais Omar Akbar, "A Talib in Love" [Xerox]

WEEK OF NOV 28: Open Week (readings decided by students)

Dates and times TBD:

***5-minute conference paper presentations based on Junior Essay**

***Junior Essay due in hard copy [Date TBD]** (Marissa's English Department mailbox)