

## Who Will Survive in America: Fictions of American Families

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Office Hours: TBA

### Course Description

Qualifying the quixotic promises of national belongingness that emerged during a period of sweeping social and political change in the United States, the American poet Gil Scott-Heron culminated his 1970 poem “Comment #1” with a query about a prerequisite to belonging: “Who will survive in America?” With Scott-Heron, this tutorial will assess the American preoccupation with belonging by studying the cultural record of one of its chief tropes, that of the family, in the American literary tradition, especially the twentieth-century American novel. Our work will foreground the varying connections between survival and family as depicted in writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, William Faulkner, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker.

Through examination of landmark texts that indexed and incited cultural attention to the promises and problems of family belonging in the twentieth century, we will consider how and why the family repeatedly became a rich topic of formal representation and revision. We will address these formal concerns in relation to key philosophical, intellectual, and cultural histories of what might be called fictive kinship, the formation of family bonds where they presumably had not existed. Especially against the backdrop of a tenacious American invocation of family decline, collapse, and dissolution, how do novelists use their works to critically refigure the family itself—or, just as important, stage its alternatives? What tropes and literary techniques reappear across texts in a way that brings out their family likeness, thereby constructing and consolidating an otherwise submerged tradition of American fictions of the family? How can and should we relate the twentieth century focus on the family to broader literary histories and forms, such as the long tradition of literary naturalism or the nineteenth-century American uptake of Romanticism?

Throughout our reading and our writing, we will survey the alternative forms of kinship, relation, and sociality proposed by the novels we read, asking how these categories offer critical revisions to models of family belonging while highlighting the thoroughgoing interrelation between belonging and what Giorgio Agamben has called bare life, a politicized conception of life as survival, in America.

### Required Texts

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

Ann Petry, *The Street*

Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

## Unit I: Imagining Family

### Week 1

Course introduction: Un-focus on the family

#### *Brief Introductory Texts*

- Biblical source texts of Genesis: Garden of Eden, Creation *Ex Nihilo*, and Cain and Abel
- Samson Occom, “A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul” (1772)
- John Marrant, “A Black Minister Held Captive by the Cherokees” (1785) in *The Minority Presence in American Literature*
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Duston Family” (1836)
- Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983, selections)

## Unit II: Nationalizing Family

### Week 2

#### *Primary Text*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), first half

#### *Secondary Texts*

- Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (1990, selections)
- Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998, selections)

#### *Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources*

- Cynthia Brantley Johnson, “Hawthorne’s Hannah Dustan and Her Troubling American Myth” (2001)

### Week 3

#### *Primary Text*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), second half

#### *Secondary Texts*

- Lawrence Buell, “The Reluctant Master Text” in *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014)
- Sari Altschuler, “Touching the Scarlet Letter: What Disability History Can Teach Us About Literature” in *American Literature* (2020)
- Seth Cosimini, “A is for African: The ‘Black Man’ and Demonic Ground of The Scarlet Letter” in *Studies in American Fiction* (2021)

#### *Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources*

- Student Choice

## Unit III: Commodifying Family

### Week 4

#### *Primary Text*

Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (1913), first third

#### *Secondary Texts*

- Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899)
- Ticien Marie Sassoubre, “Property and Identity in ‘The Custom of the Country’” in *Modern Fiction Studies* (2003)

#### *Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources*

- Student Choice

### Week 5: Anthologizing America: Research Support and Sources Module

#### **Short paper due.**

Harvard Library Research Services visit

#### *Secondary Texts*

- Takayuki Tatsumi, “Literary History on the Road: Transatlantic Crossings and Transpacific Crossovers” in *PMLA* (2004)

In-class workshop on primary, secondary, and tertiary sources:

- *The Minority Presence in American Literature, 1600-1900* (1977)
- *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988)
- *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1989)
- *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1994)
- *A New Literary History of America* (2009)
- *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, tenth edition (2011)

### Week 6

#### *Primary Text*

Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (1913), final two-thirds

#### *Secondary Texts*

- Philip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (1999, selections)
- David Grant, “Trusting America: Undine Spragg’s Revolutionary Break in The Custom of the Country” *Canadian Review of American Studies* (2016)

*Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources*

- Student Choice

## Unit IV: Mythologizing Family

### Week 7

*Primary Text*

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), first half

*Secondary Texts*

- Cleanth Brooks, "Absalom, Absalom!: The Definition of Innocence" in *Sewanee Review* (1959)
- Lennart Björk, "Ancient Myths and the Moral Framework of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!" in *American Literature* (1963)
- Patricia Tobin, "The Time of Myth and History in Absalom, Absalom!" in *American Literature* (1973)

*Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources*

- James A. Snead, *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* (1986, selections)

### Week 8

**Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due. In-class discussion of final paper topics.**

*Primary Text*

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), second half

*Secondary Texts*

- David Walter, "Sibling Love Triangles in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! And Balzac's La Fille Aux Yeux D'or" in *Comparative Literary Studies* (2007)
- Erin Pearson, "Faulkner's Cryptic Closet: Forbidden Desire, Disavowal, and the 'Dark House' at the Heart of *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *Mississippi Quarterly* (2011)

## Unit V: Naturalizing and Denaturalizing Family

### Week 9

*Primary Text*

Ann Petry, *The Street* (1946), first half

*Secondary Texts*

- Evie Shockley, "Buried Alive: Gothic Homelessness, Black Women's Sexuality, and (Living) Death in Ann Petry's 'The Street'" in *African American Review* (2006)

- M. Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be A Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas” in *Feminist Review* (1994)

*Presentation: Tertiary Sources and Additional Resources*

- Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965, selections)
- Todne Thomas, *Kincraft: The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality* (2021, selections)

Week 10

*Primary Texts*

Ann Petry, *The Street* (1946), second half

*Secondary Texts*

- Hsuan L. Hsu, “Naturalist Smellscapes and Environmental Justice” in *American Literature* (2016)
- Shane Vogel, “Ann Petry and the Existential Phenomenology of Race” in *American Literature* (2023)

Week 11

**Final paper complete draft due.**

*Primary Text*

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)

*Secondary Texts*

- Susan Neal Mayberry, “Something Other than a Family Quarrel: The Beautiful Boys in Morrison’s *Sula*” in *African American Review* (2003)
- Claude Pruitt, “Circling Meaning in Toni Morrison’s ‘*Sula*’” in *African American Review* (2011)

Unit V: Rewriting, Revisioning, Repenting Family

Week 12

**In-class final paper workshop.**

*Primary Text*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

*Secondary Texts*

- Linda Abbandonato, “A View from ‘Elsewhere’: Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine’s Story in *The Color Purple*” in *PMLA* (1991)

- Martha J. Cutter, “Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*” in MELUS (2000)

Week 13

**Final paper due.**

*Primary Text*

*The Color Purple* film screening (2023)

*Secondary Texts*

- Danielle Allen, “Toward a Connected Society” in *Our Compelling Interests: The Value of Diversity for Democracy and a Prosperous Society* (2016)
- Final Report of the Harvard Presidential Task Force on Inclusion & Belonging (2018)
- Report of the Presidential Committee on Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery (2022)