Underground Narrators in Postwar America:
From Invisible Man to Twitter

“I’m a sick man… A spiteful man.”

Dostoevsky’s Notes from the Underground arguably established a narrative paradigm: an unreliable, self-engrossed “I,” narrating from the social margins, trumps the reader in his self-acusation and claims to self-knowledge. Postwar American literature has made use of Dostoevsky’s invention, overtly or incidentally, for a variety of political projects, and as a means of examining a variety of human concerns. Why was American culture after World War II so taken with the potential allegory such a narrator provides? Is the “underground” narrator Dostoevsky’s invention, or a convenient short hand to describe the inevitable grating and contradictory efforts of alienated self-narration, made manifest in postwar American culture? Why are the American narrators that either directly engage (or indirectly invoke) Dostoevsky’s so often ethnically-identified and male?

In addition to asking questions historical and cultural, this course will also think generally about the efficacy of certain narrative forms. How do narrative mode, frame, and tone affect the way a story is told—and read? How does a garrulous, self-conscious narrator work for or against a “novel of ideas”? Why do the authors who employ these narrators so often write non-fiction that tackles similar themes? What is the political import of this mode of narration?

The course aims to equip juniors with the tools to write a seminar paper; by examining operation of one specific narrative paradigm, it will introduce students to a variety of topics in literary criticism and themes across postwar American literature. Anchored in this way, students will be encouraged to make connections to material outside of the course syllabus, from their presentation on a novel (week 7) to their examination of contemporary and social media (week 13), and in their final paper.

Course Requirements
1) Regular attendance and participation in class
2) A visit to the department writing fellow
3) Weekly short response (1-2 Paragraphs) due 24 hours before seminar
4) 5-6 page short paper, due Week 4
5) Presentation on a novel not on the syllabus (some potential ideas listed below)
6) 2-4 page Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography
7) 15-20 page Draft (Due Nov. 17)
8) Final version of Research Paper

Breakdown of Grading:
The Junior Research Paper, and its related assignments, amount to over half the student’s grade.
Course Requirements #1-3 ~ 20%, #4 ~ 15%, #5 ~ 10%, #6-8 ~ 55%

Junior Research Paper Schedule:
Week 5: Provisional Topic Due
Week 6: 2 Page Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography (8-10 sources) Due
Week 10: 15-20 page draft due Nov. 17 (with subsequent in-class workshop)
After Week 13: Junior Research Paper Due Dec. 8th

Texts and Film:
Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from the Underground (1864)
Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (1944)
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)
Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969)
*Taxi Driver*, dir. Martin Scorsese (1976)
Teju Cole, *Open City* (2011)

**Additionally, a novel of the student’s choice:** Students will be encouraged to be creative in their connections, but here are some starting possibilities: Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Jean Rhys’ *Good Morning Midnight* (though not an American novel), Carol Joyce Oates’ *Expensive People*

**And finally:** Supplementary critical and theoretical readings will be discussed each week, as listed below.

**Week 1: Introduction – Social Critique and Dramatized Narrators**
To be read in class: Read selections from Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What is to Be Done?*
And the first pages of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes From the Underground*
Supplementary: (to be passed out and initially looked at in class) Wayne Booth, Ch. 8 "Telling as Showing: Dramatized Narrators, Reliable and Unreliable" from *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961)

**Week 2: Library visit**
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (1864)
We will discuss this text in the class time not occupied by the library visit, and will return to it throughout the semester.

**Required Tutorial-Wide Meeting #1**
Tuesday, September 15, 4-5pm, Barker 133

**Week 3: “The Age of the Crisis of Man” Part 1**
Richard Wright, “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942)
Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (1944)
Supplementary: Mark Greif, selections from Ch. 4-6 of *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (2015)

**Week 4: “The Age of the Crisis of Man” Part 2**
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952) (first half)

**Short Paper Due**

**Week 5: Tone and Voice, Part 1**
*Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison (second half)

**Students will be expected to name the topic they plan to focus on**

**Week 6: Tone and Voice, Part 2**
Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969)

**Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography Due in Class**
Required Tutorial-Wide Meeting #2
Tuesday, October 13, 4-5pm, Barker 133

Week 7: Tone and Voice, Part 3 (Or: Can there be an “Underground” Woman?)
Supplementary: Sianne Ngai, “Tone” from *Ugly Feelings* (2005)

Week 8: **Student presentations on a chosen novel that picks up on course themes**
This is an assignment specific to this tutorial. Students will be encouraged to choose a novel that responds to the research questions they have chosen.

Week 9: Narrative Theory and Underground Narrators
David Foster Wallace, “Good Old Neon” from *Oblivion*; we will also look at selections, only a few pages long, from Thomas Pynchon’s *V* (1963) and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
Supplementary: We will take this week to focus on how to talk about dramatized narrators and the theoretical questions they raise. We will choose supplementary theoretical reading based on the students’ interests and questions raised thus far. Some options might include:
Richard Aczel, "Hearing Voices in Narrative Texts"
Linda Hutcheon, "Modes and Forms of Narrative Narcissism"
Walter Ong, “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction”
This meeting will also include a general discussion about paper-writing challenges.

Week 10: Narration in the (Global) City
Teju Cole, *Open City*
*Draft Due: Tuesday, Nov. 17*

Week 11: In Class Workshop of Essay Drafts

Week 12: Narration in the (Noir) City
*Taxi Driver* (Screening will be outside of class before meeting)

Week 13: Wrap-Up Discussion + Twitter, Podcasts, and Contemporary Self-Narration
*Students will be expected to bring in examples from contemporary media that take up first-person self-narration in a manner conversant with the questions of this course*

Junior Tutorial Conference
Monday, December 7, 4-6:30pm OR Wednesday, December 9, 4-6:30pm, Thompson Room

Final Essays Due (to department and to tutor)
Tuesday, December 8