

I. COURSE TITLE: The American Novel

Contact Information

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Office Hours:

- T/R 2:00-4:30
- F 12:30-2:30
- Zoom Hours W 11:00-12:00
- Other times by appointment.

Course Information

3 Credit Hours
WEB

American Fiction's Secular Faith

English 636 - Spring 2023



Image from John Huston's 1979 film adaptation of F. O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

II. COURSE DESCRIPTION AND PREREQUISITE(S):

A study of the American novel from its beginnings to the present—or on a particular period within its history—with attention to historical and critical contexts.

III. COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Students who successfully complete English 636 will be able to:

- Demonstrate familiarity with the aesthetic, historical, and cultural characteristics of several influential American authors from the nineteenth century to the present, and with critical discourse surrounding these writers;
- Demonstrate sophisticated close reading and rigorous critical analysis of a diverse array of major American novels;
- Describe the diversity of American fiction since the late nineteenth century, especially concerning race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and religion;
- Connect major American novels to key movements in American literary history; and
- Engage in respectful and reasoned debate with others—classmates as well as published literary critics—about their interpretations of literary texts and contexts.

“I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialities are in me. I would sit down and dine with you and all the gods in old Rome's Pantheon. It is a strange feeling—no hopefulness is in it, no despair. Content—that is it; and irresponsibility, but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling.”

Herman Melville, from a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, November 17, 1851.

IV. CONTENT OUTLINE:

This course will cover a broad sample of American fiction from the nineteenth century through the present. We will read and discuss ten major American novels, along with numerous secondary materials—including philosophy, literary theory, and literary criticism—which will help us to contextualize our discussions. While our discussions will range across a variety of topics, the selected texts will focus most emphatically on the relationship between religion and secularization in the modern American novel.

How does modern American fiction reclaim, reject, or reimagine religious belief? "The novel is the epic of a world abandoned by God," wrote Georg Lukács in his 1915 theory of fiction. A century later, literary critic Pericles Lewis told a much different story about literature and religion: "Modern novelists frequently imagined their own work as competing with churches in terms of spiritual beauty and emotional power." English 636 will explore this debate through a sequence of American novels, spanning from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, that rethink literature's relationship to religion in a secular age.

Why is a work as ostensibly secular as *Moby Dick* so full of prophets, sermons, and biblical names? What is at stake when a modernist writer gives her professor protagonist the line: "art and religion...are the same thing"? How does an extended meditation on the relationship between church hymns and the blues help a queer Black writer navigate topics like race and sexuality in midcentury America? Why does an atheist nun try to redeem a professor of Hitler Studies from his misplaced faith in consumer culture? How can the spiritual crisis prompted by abandonment and loss inspire a reclusive, bookish child to seek out those who "feel the life of perished things"?

Questions such as these serve as a principle of selection for our reading list, but that is only a starting point. Our conversations will veer in many directions, and what you find interesting in these texts will prove far more important to our study than the organizational scheme outlined here. I look forward to learning from the questions and connections you observe as we explore these texts together.

V. INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES: In this course, students will:

- A. read all assigned texts carefully, commenting on all readings via online class discussion;
- B. submit one recorded presentation and respond weekly to classmates' presentations;
- C. write two short essays (close reading and critical summary); and
- D. develop a self-directed, research-based final project (either a seminar paper or a pedagogy based project) that links the course content to their own needs and interests

This is an **asynchronous** online course, meaning that we will not have scheduled. There are, however, regular deadlines built into the course. If your fall schedule will require some flexibility with these deadlines, please keep me informed with as much notice as possible.

Despite being an online class, this will still be a *discussion-driven*, not lecture-driven, course. I will occasionally post short videos and notes to Canvas in order to provide background information or explain key concepts. For the most part, however, our conversation will take place on the Canvas discussion board. I will also be available throughout the course to meet one-on-one via Zoom.

VI. FIELD, CLINICAL, AND/OR LABORATORY EXPERIENCES: None

VII. TEXTS AND RESOURCES:

Required Texts:

- James Baldwin, *Another Country*. (Vintage International, 1992.) ISBN: 978-0679744719
- Willa Cather, *The Professor's House*. (Vintage, 1990.) ISBN: 978-0679731801
- William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. (Norton, 2022.) ISBN: 978-0-393-61453-4
- Don DeLillo, *White Noise*. (Penguin Classics, 2016.) ISBN: 978-0143129554
- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*. (Penguin, 2017.) ISBN: 978-0-393-28500-0
- Toni Morrison, *The Blues Eye*. (Knopf Doubleday, 2007.) ISBN: 978-0307278449
- Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*. (Grove, 2016.) ISBN: 978-0802124944
- Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*. (FSG Classics, 2007.) ISBN: 978-0374530631
- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*. (Picador, 2020.) ISBN: 978-1250769763
- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*. (Penguin Classics, 2006.) ISBN: 978-0143104919
- Secondary readings will be posted to Canvas as PDFs.

Recommended Websites, Books, and Resources:

- The OWL (Online Writing Lab) at Purdue (<http://ow.english.purdue.edu>)
- *MLA Handbook* (8th edition)

VIII. EVALUATION AND GRADING PROCEDURES:

driven primarily by reading, writing, and class discussion should hinge on a student's overall contribution to the class, not an accumulation of points from assignment to assignment.

On a math exam, there is an obvious difference between a 95% and a 92%. One exam got more answers right than the other. But what's the difference between a 95% and a 92% on an essay? This "math free grading" liberates both of us from worrying about how many points you receive on each assignment, emphasizing instead whether your performance on each assignment meets, exceeds, or does not meet expectations so that you can devote your attention to learning, questioning, and growing instead of just banking points.

You will receive a separate handout for each assignment with details and due dates. Instead of percentages or letter grades, assignments will receive one of the following assessments: "meets expectations," "does not meet expectations," or "unacceptable." In most cases, assignments that meet expectations will be marked "complete" on Canvas, while those that do not will be marked "incomplete." Each of the following counts as one assignment and will include a separate assignment sheet, explaining what "meets expectations," posted to Canvas:

1. Regular participation in Canvas discussion groups, including weekly responses to instructor's prompts and classmates' comments.
2. One recorded presentation, plus weekly responses to classmates' presentations.
3. Two short papers: close reading essay and critical summary essay (~3 pages each).
4. One research-based final project (12-15 page paper or alternate pedagogy project).

Grades for the course will be distributed as follows:

A: All requirements for a B (see below), plus thorough and exemplary participation in Canvas discussion groups.

B: All assignments meet expectations and any late work was approved by instructor with a timely extension request.

C: All requirements for a B, but either (1) weekly participation in Canvas discussion groups is insufficient, (2) one of the short papers is unacceptable or incomplete OR both do not meet expectations, (3) either the recorded presentation or weekly responses are unacceptable or incomplete, or (4) the final project does not meet expectations OR process components of the final project are incomplete.

D: All requirements for a C, but meets more than one of the criteria for reducing a B to a C.

E: Very little participation in Canvas discussion group, final project incomplete or unacceptable, OR both short papers incomplete or unacceptable.

Policy on Revisions and Late Work:

Any essay that you submitted complete and on time may be revised as many times as you wish. Late or incomplete essays turned in without a prior extension will receive no higher grade than "does not meet expectations," and late / incomplete work may not be revised.

Extensions:

Sometimes life interferes with your ability to turn in your best work. This is particularly true as we emerge from over two years of a global pandemic. You may request an extension on any essay. Extended essays will be graded as though they were submitted on time, but they cannot be revised. With the exception of emergencies, you must notify me within 24 hours of the deadline if you wish to receive an extension.

IX. ATTENDANCE POLICY As an asynchronous online course, there is no attendance policy. Regular participation in your Canvas discussion groups is required, however, and it is important that you keep up with all deadlines and notify me at any point that you are worried about falling behind.

X. ACADEMIC HONESTY POLICY:

Murray State University takes seriously its moral and educational obligation to maintain high standards of academic honesty and ethical behavior. Instructors are expected to evaluate students' academic achievements accurately, as well as ascertain that work submitted by students is authentic and the result of their own efforts, and consistent with established academic standards. Students are obligated to respect and abide by the basic standards of personal and professional integrity.

Violations of Academic Honesty include:

Cheating - Intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized information such as books, notes, study aids, or other electronic, online, or digital devices in any academic exercise; as well as unauthorized communication of information by any means to or from others during any academic exercise.

Fabrication and Falsification - Intentional alteration or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise. Falsification involves changing information whereas fabrication involves inventing or counterfeiting information.

Multiple Submission - The submission of substantial portions of the same academic work, including oral reports, for credit more than once without authorization from the instructor.

Plagiarism - Intentionally or knowingly representing the words, ideas, creative work, or data of someone else as one's own in any academic exercise, without due and proper acknowledgement.

Instructors should outline their expectations that may go beyond the scope of this policy at the beginning of each course and identify such expectations and restrictions in the course syllabus. When an instructor receives evidence, either directly or indirectly, of academic dishonesty, he or she should investigate the instance. The faculty member should then take appropriate disciplinary action.

Disciplinary action may include, but is not limited to the following:

- 1) Requiring the student(s) to repeat the exercise or do additional related exercise(s).
- 2) Lowering the grade or failing the student(s) on the particular exercise(s) involved.
- 3) Lowering the grade or failing the student(s) in the course.

If the disciplinary action results in the awarding of a grade of *E* in the course, the student(s) may not drop the course.

Faculty reserve the right to invalidate any exercise or other evaluative measures if substantial evidence exists that the integrity of the exercise has been compromised. Faculty also reserve the right to document in the course syllabi further academic honesty policy elements related to the individual disciplines.

A student may appeal the decision of the faculty member with the department chair in writing within five working days. Note: If, at any point in this process, the student alleges that actions have taken place that may be in violation of the Murray State University Non-Discrimination Statement, this process must be suspended and the matter be directed to the Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity and Access. Any appeal will be forwarded to the appropriate university committee as determined by the Provost.

XI. NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY STATEMENT:

Murray State University endorses the intent of all federal and state laws created to prohibit discrimination. Murray State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, age, veteran status, or disability in employment or application for employment, admissions, or the provision of services and provides, upon request, reasonable accommodation including auxiliary aids and services necessary to afford individuals with disabilities equal access to participate in all programs and activities.

In particular and without limiting the preceding and pursuant to and consistent with the requirements of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and its regulations 34 CFR 100 et seq.; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and its regulations 34 CFR 104; Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 USC 1681 et seq., and its regulations 34 CFR 106 et seq; and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975 and its regulations 34 CFR 110, Murray State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, handicap, or age in its educational programs and activities. This non-discrimination in education programs and activities extends to employment and admissions and to recruitment, financial aid, academic programs, student services, athletics, and housing. Murray State is required by Title IX and 34 CFR part 106 not to discriminate on the basis of sex and the prohibition against sex discrimination specifically includes a prohibition of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Examples of prohibited sexual harassment and sexual violence can be found in the “Policy Prohibiting Sexual Harassment” which can be accessed via the link referenced in Appendix I.

For more information concerning the application of these provisions may be referred to: 1) the Executive Director of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Access/ Murray State University Title IX Coordinator, Murray State University, 103 Wells Hall, Murray, KY 42071 Telephone: (270) 809-3155 Fax: (270) 809-6887; TDD: (270) 809-3361; Email: msu.titleix@murraystate.edu.

Students with Disabilities

Students requiring special assistance due to a disability should visit the Office of Student Disability Services immediately for assistance with accommodations. For more information, students with disabilities should contact the Office of Student Disability Services, 423 Wells Hall, Murray, KY 42071. Telephone: 270-809-2018 (Voice) 270-809-5889 (TDD). **Email: msu.studentdisabilities@murraystate.edu. Our office will contact professors directly regarding any specific accommodation needs that may be applicable to their particular classroom setting.**

XII. STARFISH

Your success is important! This course is part of the Murray State University student success initiative that utilizes the Starfish Student Success Network. Starfish may be used to communicate with you about your academic progress and get you help if you need it. Throughout the term, you may receive emails regarding your attendance, course grades or academic performance. To benefit, it is important that you check your Murray State email regularly and follow through on recommended actions. You may also be contacted directly by others on campus who care about your academic success and personal well-being. This may include your academic advisor and staff from Student Engagement and Success and other student support offices across campus. Starfish provides you with the opportunity to “Raise Your Hand” if you need help. Take advantage of this and other features by logging into your Starfish account through myGate. More information can be found at murraystate.edu/starfish.)

XIII. OTHER INFORMATION

Counseling Resources on Campus

Murray State University has two centers on campus that offer free and confidential mental health services for students. The University Counseling Center is located in Suite C104 in Oakley Applied Science and offers both in-person and remote services. On-call counselors are available 9:00-3:00 Monday through Friday for walk-in sessions. To schedule an appointment, email at msu.counselingcenter@murraystate.edu. For more information, call them at 270-809-6851 or visit their website (www.murraystate.edu/CounselingCenter). The Psychological Center is located in 401 Wells Hall and offers both walk-in sessions and weekly in-person counseling sessions. You can reach them at 270-809-2504 or visit their website at www.murraystate.edu/PsychologicalCenter.

In a crisis situation, or after hours, please contact Murray State Police at 270-809-2222 or call 911 if you are off campus. You can also call the new federal 24-hour suicide lifeline at 988 or contact the Crisis Text Line at 741-741.

Class Absence due to Illness

The University will observe medical guidance with regard to quarantine and isolation for any illness, including COVID. As with any illness, instructors may make adjustments to due dates or other course requirements to accommodate severe cases and/or the availability of resources needed to complete tasks. Notify instructors of any illness that will prevent attendance of class and/or completion of tasks immediately, and follow medical guidance regarding quarantine or isolation. If possible, students will continue to check Canvas and email regularly, and maintain regular communication with their instructors

Accessibility and Inclusion

For critical thinking to thrive, our classroom must be an open and inclusive space for everyone. If you have accessibility needs, whether or not they are documented through the office of Student Disability Services, please feel free to contact me early in the semester so we can discuss the accommodations you need.

Electronic Communication

I regularly communicate with the class by sending announcements and reminders through email and Canvas. **You are responsible for any information sent to your Murray State email address or posted to our course Canvas site.** As a university student, you should plan to check your Murray State email at least once every 24 hours on weekdays and at least once over the weekend.

Pronouns

Canvas has recently updated its setting so that all users can easily establish their pronouns if they wish to do so. You can update your Canvas profile by going to your Canvas account, clicking “settings,” clicking “edit settings,” and selecting from the “pronouns” drop down menu. Canvas has provided a full tutorial at this link: <https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-select-personal-pronouns-in-my-user-account-as-a/ta-p/456>.

COURSE SCHEDULE – Subject to Change

*All secondary readings can be found as PDF files on Canvas.

Week 1: January 17-20

Read:

- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (extracts, chapters 1-31).
- Chalres Taylor, excerpts from *A Secular Age**
- Jenny Franchot, “Invisible Domain.”*
- Joanna Brooks, “From Edwards to Baldwin.”*

Write: Introductions and discussion board responses by Friday, 1/20.

Watch & Respond: Lecture on course theme and week one secondary readings by Friday, 1/20.

Week 2: January 23-27

Read:

- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (chapters 33-38, 41-46, 48-51, 55, 58-66, 70-72, 83, 86-87).
- Melville’s letter to Hawthorne, 11/17/1851 (pages 573-74 in *Norton Critical Edition*).
- Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, excerpt from *All Things Shining*.*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 1/25, replies by Friday, 1/27.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 1/27.

Week 3: January 30-February 3

Read:

- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (chapters 93-94, 96, 99, 106-110, 113-end).
- Lawrence Buell, “The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel.”*
- Dawn Coleman, excerpt from *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel*.*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 2/1, replies by Friday, 2/3.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 2/3.

Week 4: February 6-10

Read:

- Willa Cather, *The Professor’s House*.
- Thomas Ferraro, “No Forgiveness in Heaven, No Forgetting in Hell.”*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 2/8, replies by Friday, 2/10.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 2/10.

Close Reading Essay Due by 11:59 p.m. Monday, 2/13.

Week 5: February 13-17

Read:

- William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*.
- Cleanth Brooks, "Odyssey of the Bundrens" (pages 257-70 in *Norton Critical Edition*.)

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 2/15, replies by Friday, 2/17.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 2/17.

Week 6: February 20-24

Read:

- Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*.
- Steve Pinkerton, "Profaning the American Religion."*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 2/22, replies by Friday, 2/24.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 2/24.

Week 7: February 27-March 3

Read:

- James Baldwin, *Another Country* (Book I, 3-179).
- Vincent W. Lloyd, "Managing Race, Managing Religion."*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 3/1, replies by Friday, 3/3.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 3/3.

Week 8: March 6-10

Read:

- James Baldwin, *Another Country* (Books II & III, 183-436).
- Clarence E. Hardy, excerpt from *James Baldwin's God*.*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 3/8, replies by Friday, 3/10.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 3/10.

Final Project Prospectus Due by 11:59 p.m. Monday 3/13.

Week 9: March 13-17

Read:

- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*.
- Matthew Smalley, "Adapting the Sermon."*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 3/15, replies by Friday, 3/17.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 3/17.

SPRING BREAK: March 20-24

Week 10: March 27-31

Read:

- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*.
- Lydia R. Cooper, “Masculinity and the Western.”*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 3/29, replies by Friday, 3/31.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 3/31.

Week 11: April 3-7

Read:

- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*.
- Anthony Domestico, “Creeds, Memory, and Vision in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*.”*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 4/5, replies by Friday, 4/7.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 4/7.

Week 12: April 10-14

Read:

- Don DeLillo, *White Noise*.
- Eugene McCarragher, excerpt from *The Enchantments of Mammon*.*

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 4/12, replies by Friday, 4/14.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 4/14.

Week 13: April 17-21

Read:

- Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (pages TBD).

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 4/19, replies by Friday, 4/21.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 4/21.

Partial Draft of Final Project Due by 11:59 p.m. Monday 4/24.

Week 14: April 24-28

Read:

- Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (pages TBD).
- Choose one essay from *PMLA* forum on Nguyen. (*PMLA* 133.2, March 2018).

Write: Discussion questions by Wednesday, 4/26, replies by Friday, 4/28.

Watch & Respond: Classmate presentation by Friday, 4/28.

Week 15: May 1-5

Work on final projects.

Final Project Due by Wednesday 5/10.