

HL2029 American Modernism

Meets: Thursdays 12:30-3:30
Location: TBD
Professor: Dr. Kevin Riordan

Office: HSS 03-71
Consultation hours: Tuesday 10-12
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This course expands students' knowledge of American literature and culture from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While many important figures of "high modernism" were Americans living abroad, this course primarily focuses on the literary developments within the American landscape itself. Following W. E. B. Du Bois's famous prediction that the problem of the 20th Century would be the "color-line," our readings pose challenging questions concerning difference and belonging. We will pay close attention to how individuals can be included and excluded in a national literature, and we will examine how American social realities are represented and contested using new aesthetic strategies during this period. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, with its complex staging of the course themes, will serve as our primary case study. Across the term students will address the following questions: How does the United States produce a distinctive mythology of the individual? How does literature support or refute the American dream, especially in times of crisis? And finally, how do modernist aesthetics and world historical events find unique expression in the American literary tradition?

Core Texts

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (9780140187649)
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (0743273567)
Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (0140481346)
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (0679732764)
Course Reader (available in B1 of HSS)

Course Assessment:

Preparation, Participation, and Presentations	10%
Weekly Quizzes	10%
Writing Assignments (TBD)	30%
Final Exam	50%

Prospective Itinerary

Week 1 – What is an American?

January 14 – *The Declaration of Independence*; Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"
Citizen Kane excerpt (in-class)

Week 2 – The Problem of the Individual

January 21 – Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener;" Whitman and Dickinson, selected poetry

Week 3 – "The Problem of the Twentieth Century"

January 28 – Washington, "Atlanta Compromise Speech;" Du Bois, selections from *The Souls of Black Folk*; Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" (in-class)

Week 4 – Post-War Nostalgia and the West as Prospect

February 4 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (3-191); Thomas Edison Studio films (in-class)

Week 5 – Parallel Tracks and Locomotion

February 11 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (193-278); Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1-38); *The Great Train Robbery*, dir. Porter (online)

Week 6 – American Dreams

February 18 – Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (39-180); Glaspell, *Trifles* (in-class)

Week 7 – Coming of Age, Coming North

February 25 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Education: 3-150); Rankine, selections from *Citizen*

Recess

Week 8 – Living in the City

March 10 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The City: 151-295); Harlem Renaissance Poetry

Week 9 – Moving Images

March 17 – Stein, selected writings; *The Cameraman*, dir. Keaton (online); Okubo, selections from *Citizen 13660*

Week 10 – The Personal, the Public, the Political

March 24 – *Citizen Kane*, dir. Welles

Week 11 – The Ends of the Dream

March 31 – Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Week 12 – American Tragedy and Alternative Endings

April 7 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The Brotherhood and Invisibility: 296-581)

Week 13 – This Modernism’s Afterlives

April 14 – Selected contemporary Fiction

Final Exam: TBD