

## HL2029 American Modernism

Meets: Wednesdays 2:30-5:30  
Location: TR+111  
Professor: Dr. Kevin Riordan

Office: HSS 03-72  
Consultation hours: TBD  
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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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 so-called 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	15%
Character Analysis Essay	10%
Comparative Analysis Essay	25%
Final Exam	50%

### Prospective Itinerary

#### Week 1 – What is an American?

January 11 – *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 18 – Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener;" Whitman and Dickinson, selected poetry

#### Week 3 – "The Problem of the Twentieth Century"

January 25 – 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 1 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (3-191); Thomas Edison Studio films (in-class)

**Week 5 – Parallel Tracks and Locomotion**

February 8 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (193-278); Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1-38); *The Great Train Robbery*, dir. Porter (online)

**Week 6 – American Dreams**

February 15 – Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (39-180); Glaspell, *Trifles* (in-class)

**Week 7 – Coming of Age**

February 22 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Education: 3-97)

Character Analysis Essay due (~750 words)

***Recess***

**Week 8 – Moving to the City**

March 8 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The City: 98-295); McKay and Hughes, selected poetry

**Week 9 – Moving Images**

March 15 – Stein, selected writings; *The Cameraman*, dir. Keaton (online); Okubo, selections from *Citizen 13660*

**Week 10 – American Tragedy and Alternative Endings**

March 22 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The Brotherhood and Invisibility: 296-581)

**Week 11 – The Ends of the Dream**

March 29 – Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

**Week 12 – The Personal, the Public, the Political – Distance Learning Week (no class)**

April 5 – *Citizen Kane*, dir. Welles

Comparative Analysis Essay Due (~1500 words)

**Week 13 – This Modernism’s Afterlives**

April 12 – Alexie, “What You Pawn I Will Redeem”; Díaz, “Fiesta, 1980”; July, “The Swim Team”

**Final Exam: 3 May 2017**