

HL2029 American Modernism

Professor: Dr. Kevin Riordan (kriordan@ntu.edu.sg)

Tutor: Olivia Djawoto (OLIV0014@e.ntu.edu.sg)

Lecture: Wednesdays 10:30-12:30 (Lecture Theater 8)

Office Hours (HSS 03-72): TBD

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 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%
Examination	50%

Prospective Itinerary

Week 1 – What is an American?

August 16 – *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

August 23 – Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener;" Whitman and Dickinson, selected poetry

Week 3 – “The Problem of the Twentieth Century”

August 30 – Washington, “Atlanta Compromise Speech;” Du Bois, selections from *The Souls of Black Folk*; Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (in-class)
(September 1 – Hari Raya Haji (No Tutorials))

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

September 6 – Cather, *My Antonia* (3-191); Thomas Edison Studio films (in-class)

Week 5 – Parallel Tracks and Locomotion

September 13 – Cather, *My Antonia* (193-278); Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1-38); *The Great Train Robbery*, dir. Porter (online)

Week 6 – American Dreams

September 20 – Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (39-180); Glaspell, *Trifles* (in-class)

Week 7 – Coming of Age

September 27 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Education: 3-97)
Character Analysis Essay due (~750 words)

Recess

Week 8 – Moving to the City

October 11 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The City: 98-295); McKay and Hughes, selected poetry

No Class (Deepavali) – October 18

Week 9 – Moving Images

October 25 – Stein, selected writings; *The Cameraman*, dir. Keaton (online); Okubo, selections from *Citizen 13660*

Week 10 – American Tragedy and Alternative Endings

November 1 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The Brotherhood and Invisibility: 296-581)

Week 11 – The Personal, the Public, the Political

November 8 – *Citizen Kane*, dir. Welles
Comparative Analysis Essay Due (~1500 words)

Week 12 – The Ends of the Dream

November 15 – Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Final Exam: Friday, November 24