

# HL2029 American Modernism

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

Wednesdays 2:30-5:30 (HSS-TR+1)

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 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%
Examination	50%

## Prospective Itinerary

### Week 1 – What is an American?

August 15 – *The Declaration of Independence*; Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"  
*Citizen Kane* excerpt (in class)

### No Class – Hari Raya Haji

### Week 2 – The Problem of the Individual

August 29 – Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener;" Whitman and Dickinson, selected poetry

**Week 3 – “The Problem of the Twentieth Century”**

September 5 – 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**

September 12 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (3-191); Thomas Edison Studio films (in class)

**Week 5 – Parallel Tracks and Locomotion**

September 19 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (193-278); Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1-38); *The Great Train Robbery*, dir. Porter (online)

**Week 6 – American Dreams**

September 26 – Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (39-180); Glaspell, *Trifles* (in class)

***Recess***

**Week 7 – Coming of Age**

October 10 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Education: 3-97)  
Character Analysis Essay due (~750 words)

**Week 8 – Moving to the City**

October 17 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The City: 98-295); McKay and Hughes, selected poetry

**Week 9 – Moving Images**

October 24 – Stein, selected writings; *The Cameraman*, dir. Keaton (online); Okubo, selections from *Citizen 13660*

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

October 31 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The Brotherhood and Invisibility: 296-581)

**Week 11 – The Personal, the Public, the Political**

November 7 – *Citizen Kane*, dir. Welles  
Comparative Analysis Essay Due (~1500 words)

**Week 12 – The Ends of the Dream**

November 14 – Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

**Final Exam: Wednesday, December 5**