

HL2029 American Modernism

Professor: Dr. Kevin Riordan (kriordan@ntu.edu.sg)
Thursdays 9:30–12:30 (LHS-TR+33)
Office Hours (HSS 03-72): by appointment

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. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, with its complex staging of these 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	15%
Comparative Analysis Essay	20%
Examination	50%

Prospective Itinerary

Week 1 – What is an American?

January 13 – *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 20 – Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener;" Whitman and Dickinson, selected poetry

Week 3 – “The Problem of the Twentieth Century”

January 27 – 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 Prospect of the West

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

Week 5 – Parallel Tracks and Locomotion

February 10 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (193–278); Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1–38)

Week 6 – American Dreams

February 17 – Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (39–180)

Week 7 – Outlaws and Domestic Concerns

February 24 – Glaspell, *Trifles*; *The Great Train Robbery*, dir. Porter
Character Analysis Essay due (~750 words)

Recess

Week 8 – Coming of Age

March 10 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Education: 3–97)

Week 9 – Moving to the City

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

Week 10 – Moving Images

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

Week 11 – American Tragedy and Alternative Endings

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

Week 12 – The Personal, the Public, the Political

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

Week 13 – The Ends of the Dream

April 14 – Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Final Exam: Monday, May 3 (1 pm)