

# HL2029 American Modernism

Professor: Dr. Kevin Riordan (kriordan@ntu.edu.sg)  
Tuesdays 2:30–5:20 (LHS-TR+55)  
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 20<sup>th</sup> Century would be the "color-line," our readings pose challenging questions about 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 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)

*No Class – Chinese New Year*

**Week 4 – Post-War Nostalgia and the Prospect of the West**

February 8 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (3–191); Thomas Edison Studio films (in class)

**Week 5 – Parallel Tracks and Locomotion**

February 15 – Cather, *My Ántonia* (193–278); Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1–38)

**Week 6 – American Dreams**

February 22 – Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (39–180)

*Recess*

**Week 7 – Outlaws and Domestic Concerns**

March 8 – Glaspell, *Trifles*; *The Great Train Robbery*, dir. Porter  
Character Analysis Essay due (~750 words)

**Week 8 – Coming of Age**

March 15 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Education: 3–97)

**Week 9 – Moving to the City**

March 22 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The City: 98–295); McKay and Hughes, selected poetry

**Week 10 – Moving Images**

March 29 – Stein, selected writings; Okubo, selections from *Citizen 13660*

**Week 11 – American Tragedy and Alternative Endings**

April 5 – Ellison, *Invisible Man* (The Brotherhood and Invisibility: 296–581)  
Comparative Analysis Essay Due (~1500 words)

**Week 12 – The Ends of the Dream**

April 12 – Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

**Final Exam: Wednesday, 27 April, 9 am**