

Instructor: Matt Lavin

Course: Topics in American Literature

Time and Place: Spring 2012, Time and Location TBA

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Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m. at Capanna Coffee; or by appointment.

## **Novelty and Rebirth in American Literature and Culture, 1898-1936**

In “The New Colossus,” Emma Lazarus imagines the statue of liberty’s crying out across the Atlantic, “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!”

Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* ends with the flourish, “Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!”

Ezra Pound famously said, “Any work of art which is not a beginning, an invention, a discovery is of little worth.”

Alain Locke described “the younger generation” of African Americans associated with the Harlem Renaissance as “vibrant with a new psychology.”

Lazarus, Cather, Pound, and Locke share in common an understanding of a national mythology that integrates novelty, reinvention, and rebirth into the very core of its being. Thinkers since the founding of the United States have imagined a place where Old World failures, transgressions, frustrations, and limitations melt away, where freedom and opportunity stem foremost from the idea of a fresh start. Yet legacies of bigotry, conquest, slavery, and environmental destruction have tarnished the ostensible purity of the United States. Approaching the twentieth century, waves of immigration, the rapid advance of new technologies, and unprecedented urbanization caused these recurrent national themes to take on even more significance.

This class will focus on how American literary thought has tried to understand, question, guide, redefine, and complicate national conceptions of novelty and rebirth from the turn of the twentieth century through the advent of Roosevelt’s New Deal. Our focus will be historical in the sense that we will cover expansion, imperialism, immigration, segregation, the First World War, the Roaring Twenties, evolving policies toward Native Americans, the Great Depression, and the New Deal. However, the class will also emphasize the way history has shaped the formation of literary communities and aesthetic movements. Through this lens we will examine how literary circles defined themselves in relation to what was and ought to be “the next big thing” in American literature, including naturalism, modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, and a constructed idea of American mainstream.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* Penguin Classics, \$10.00 [978-0140187755]

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Norton Critical Editions, \$13.75 [978-0393974997]

William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, \$15.00 [9780393931389]

Jean Toomer, *Cane*, Norton Critical Editions, 13.75 [978-0393931686]

D’Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*, University of New Mexico Press, \$21.95 [978-0826304698]

To assure that we all share page numbers in common, you are required to buy the correct editions of the books for this class. Where you procure these editions is up to you, but they are available today at the University Book Store. In a few rare cases, you will be required to print the day’s reading from ICON. I insist that you have a hard copy with you in class the day we discuss such a reading. In addition to the

day's text or texts, you will need to bring a notebook, paper, and a pencil or pen with you to class every day. Plan to keep your class notes and handouts from past classes in your notebook and make sure you have all course materials with you when you come to class.

**OFFICE HOURS:** Once during the semester I will require that you to come to my office hours for a face to face conversation. This meeting will be an early discussion of the course and your performance to date. I will also respond to your first assignment at this time. Students who miss the required office visit will lose class participation points. During all other weeks you are invited but not required to come visit me during my office hours. Come with questions, comments, concerns, or just to visit more generally. You do not need to buy anything from Capanna to see me there.

**GRADING POLICY:** All assignments are due on or before the stated due date. **Late work is not accepted.** Extensions are possible only in the event of a family or medical emergency, but you must arrange an extension with me face to face. If you know you will be absent on an assignment due date, speak to me in advance. In the event of a legitimate emergency that causes you to miss class, I reserve the right to require a make-up assignment so that you do not fall behind on the work you missed. You will be graded based on the following percentages:

- Participation: 30% (Includes class preparedness, note-taking, class discussion, informal assignments, etc.)
- Formal Writing Assignments (typed, double-spaced, stapled): 30%
- In-Class Presentations: 20%
- Final Exam: 20%
- **Total:** 100%

#### **GRADING POLICY CONTINUED:**

- **A** work is excellent. It *notably* exceeds minimum expectations. It is original, thoughtful, well-developed, and has no more than four errors.
- **B** work is good. It exceeds minimum expectations. It is thoughtful but not particularly nuanced. It is organized logically and has few errors.
- **C** work is average. It meets minimum expectations. It offers some insight, is reasonably clear, and its errors are not such that they notably distract from the content.
- **D** work does not meet all expectations, but it is developed enough to earn some credit. It may have noticeable organizational problems or offer little more than summary. Errors may be distracting.
- **F** work is either so incomplete that it does not deserve full credit, or it does not resemble the particular assignment. Errors may be so distracting that they detract from content.

#### **GRADING – ATTENDANCE:**

- Attendance is more than just filling a seat. You must be alert, prepared, and contributing to the class interaction. I will take attendance every class period; I will also record your participation daily.
- Tardiness is not acceptable. It's distracting and infuriating. If you have a class that meets across campus and lets out ten minutes before we start, you should drop my class. I will tally a tardy as one half of an absence. If you arrive more than 20 minutes late you will be marked absent. If you know for a fact that you will need to be late for class regularly, you should drop this class.
- Absent students cannot participate and are graded accordingly. As this is an elective, I would expect students to be here on time and eager to learn every class period.
- Special conditions may apply in the case of a legitimate emergency.

## **GRADING - PARTICIPATION:**

- Your participation grade is not an automatic A. Students are often surprised to learn that this aspect of the course kept them from the grade they expected.
- This type of course is not about purely based on memorizing and repeating a set of facts. In order to achieve the goal of this class—to better understand various ways of reading and how texts affect our lives—you must not limit yourself to only your interactions with the texts; you must also build on what others bring to the reading experience.
- Excelling at class participation includes attending class regularly and showing evidence that you have done the reading and thought about it. Show me that you are paying attention to others and taking detailed class notes when appropriate. Refrain from distracting behaviors like interrupting class, zoning out, passing out, passing notes, text-messaging, blogging, twittering, doing homework for another class, or cooking a four course meal.
- By far the most distracting habit of recent years has been the impulse to send and receive text messages during class time. I will not tolerate this practice. I expect phones to be off and put away during class. If you need to leave your phone on because of an emergency situation, speak to me in advance.

**GRADING – FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:** There will be two formal papers during the semester. I will circulate assignment descriptions with further details, and a grading rubric, as these due dates approach.

**GRADING – In-Class Oral Presentations: Each student is required to do two in-class oral presentations.** Presentations will take place on a rolling basis, with one or two students per class period offering the entire class a fresh perspective on the work of literature we are currently reading. I will circulate assignment descriptions with further details and a sign-up sheet for dates and topics. Categories for historical context reports are listed below readings assignments on the weekly calendar.

**FINAL EXAM:** You must take the final exam during the time scheduled by the university. An undergraduate student who has two final examinations scheduled for the same period or more than three examinations scheduled for the same day may file a request for a change of schedule before the published deadline at the Registrar's Service Center, 17 Calvin Hall, 8-4:30 M-F, (384-4300).

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT:** Sexual harassment is reprehensible and will not be tolerated by the University. It subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. Visit the sexual harassment awareness site at <http://www.sexualharassment.uiowa.edu/> for definitions, assistance, and the full University policy.

**WRITING CENTER:** This is an important resource that can help many of our students and can make our job as writing instructors a bit easier. For more information about the hours and offerings of the Writing Center go to its website at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~writingc/>

**PLAGIARISM:** Plagiarism is defined as presenting someone else's writing, speech, or idea as if it were your own. The University has a written policy concerning cheating and plagiarism. Improper use of non-original material may result in a failing grade for an assignment and/or the entire course. Plagiarism may also result in additional disciplinary action taken by the CLAS and The University of Iowa.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** I would like to speak with any student who has a disability which may require some modification of seating, testing, or other class requirements so that appropriate arrangements may be made. Please see me in my office during office hours or by appointment within the first two weeks of class.

**SEVERE WEATHER EMERGENCIES:** The University of Iowa Operations Manual section 16.14 outlines appropriate responses to a tornado or to a similar crisis. If a tornado or other severe weather is indicated by the UI outdoor warning system, members of the class should seek shelter in rooms and corridors in the innermost part of a building at the lowest level, staying clear of windows, corridors with windows, or large free-standing expanses such as auditoriums and cafeterias. The class will resume, if possible, after the UI outdoor warning system announces that the severe weather threat has ended.

**CLASS GRIEVANCES:** If you have a concern regarding any part of this course, please speak to me directly during my office hours or by appointment; I will do what I reasonably can to help. If, after we meet, you still have concerns, you may contact the DEO of the English Department. See the CLAS student handbook for more information.

**CLAS:** This course is given by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. This means that class policies on matters such as requirements, grading, and sanctions for academic dishonesty are governed by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Students wishing to add or drop this course after the official deadline must receive the approval of the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Details of the University policy of cross enrollments may be found at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~provost/deos/crossenroll.doc>

**Week 1: American Empire**

TUESDAY: Introduction, Syllabus, Mark Twain, “The War Prayer” (video)

THURSDAY: Stephen Crane, “The Open Boat”; Richard Harding Davis, *Soldiers of Fortune* (excerpt)

Context: The Spanish American War, Pulitzer & Hearst, Yellow Journalism, Muckraking

**Week 2: New Arrivals**

TUESDAY: Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus”; Lee Chew, “Biography of a Chinaman”

THURSDAY: Lewis MacBrayne, “The Promised Land”; Anzia Yezierska, “Wings”

Context: Ellis Island, U.S. Immigration Policy, Nativism

**Week 3: New Arrivals**

TUESDAY: *O Pioneers!*

THURSDAY: *O Pioneers!*

Context: The Homestead Act of 1862, “Pioneers, O Pioneers!” by Walt Whitman

**Week 3: New Arrivals**

TUESDAY: *O Pioneers!*

THURSDAY: *O Pioneers!*

Context: Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Closing of the American Frontier”

**Week 5: Modernism: “Make It New”**

TUESDAY: Ezra Pound “The Imagist Manifesto”; Selected Poetry: Ezra Pound, H.D.

THURSDAY: Nathanael West, “The Imposter”; Selected Poetry: William Carlos Williams,  
Marianne Moore

Context: Art for Art’s Sake, Baudelaire, Little Magazines, Dada, Futurism, Vorticism, Imagism

**Week 6: Modernism: “Make It New”**

TUESDAY: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

THURSDAY: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Context: Music of the Modern Era, Film, Sigmund Freud, Frederick Nietzsche

**Week 7: Modernism: Stream of Consciousness**

TUESDAY: William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

THURSDAY: William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

Context: Henri Bergson, Modern Art (Cubism, Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, Expressionism)

**Week 8: Modernism: Stream of Consciousness**

TUESDAY: William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

THURSDAY: William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

Context: Faulkner's regionalism, Yoknapatawpha County

**Week 9: The Harlem Renaissance**

TUESDAY: Alain Locke, "The New Negro"; Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows* (selections)  
THURSDAY: Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat"; Langston Hughes, *Let American Be America Again* (selections)

Context: Harlem in the 1920s, The Jazz Age

**Week 10: The Harlem Renaissance**

TUESDAY: Richard Wright, "Bright and Morning Star"  
THURSDAY: Jean Toomer, *Cane*

Context: Harlem as a political center, Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance

**Week 11: The Harlem Renaissance**

TUESDAY: Jean Toomer, *Cane*; Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow"  
THURSDAY: Jean Toomer, *Cane*

Context: Segregation, The Jim Crow South

**Week 12: New Deals**

TUESDAY: Carson McCullers, "The Ballad of the Sad Café"  
THURSDAY: John Steinbeck, "The Chrysanthemums"

Context: The Great Depression, Hooverilles, The New Deal

**Week 13: New Deals**

TUESDAY: D'Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*  
THURSDAY: D'Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*

Context: John Collier, McNickle and the Bureau of Indian Affairs

**Week 14: New Deals**

TUESDAY: D'Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*  
THURSDAY: D'Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*

Context: Indian Allotment Act, Assimilation Policies

**Week 15: New Deals**

TUESDAY: D'Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*  
THURSDAY: D'Arcy McNickle, *The Surrounded*

Context: McNickle's struggles with the publishing industry, McNickle's political advocacy