

English 348

Katy Ryan, ENGL 348, Spring 2002, Twentieth-Century American Literature

**ENG 348: Justice and Sanctuary in
Twentieth-Century American Literature**

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Office Hours: Mon. and Wed. 10:00-12:00

Let me give witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it's time to give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I'll stain their hands. Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1975)

I am beginning to believe that we know everything, that all history, including the history of each family, is part of us, such that, when we hear any secret revealed, a secret about a grandfather, or an uncle, or a secret about the battle of Dresden in 1945, our lives are made suddenly clearer to us, as the unnatural heaviness of unspoken truth is dispersed. For perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung.

Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones* (1992)

My epigraphs, taken from two of many American writers whom we will not be reading this semester, refer to acts of witnessing and remembering the past. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner writes, "The past isn't over. The past isn't even past." History is not a monolithic, static catalogue of dates, but rather a changing scene of contestation and debate. In this class, we will constantly ask, Who is telling the story? What difference does that make? Our literary texts recall the Middle Passage, slavery, the Holocaust, the French occupation and American war in Vietnam, the L.A. riots, and native American histories. As we study the profound sense of disorientation that characterizes modern and postmodern writing, we will try to determine whose memory and desire shape the historical record.

We will work our way back and forth through the twentieth century, concentrating specifically on ideas about justice and sanctuary. In Part One of the syllabus, we will come up with working definitions of both "justice" and "sanctuary," drawing on writings by Elie Wiesel and Toni Morrison. In Part Two, we will encounter characters who cross culturally created borders--between black and white, female and male, East and West--and discuss the power and danger involved in performing the "other" as we analyze some of the binaries that regulate social life. In Part Three, we will read novels that employ multiple narrators to convey family

histories--the Compsons in Faulkner's imagined Yoknapatawpha County in northern Mississippi and the Kashpaws and Lamartines in Erdrich's fictional account of Ojibwa or Chippewa life in North Dakota. Here, we will consider how to adjudicate truth claims when there are multiple perspectives from which to view a single event. Part Four continues this inquiry into history with poetic and performative voices that give witness to social injustices and testify to the artistic challenge of representing personal suffering and mass violence. In addition, we will watch two videos--*Fires in the Mirror*, Anna Deavere Smith's performance on the Crown Heights riots in New York in 1991, and *The Times of Harvey Milk*, a documentary on the 1978 assassination of the first openly gay person to be elected to city office in California.

Course Goals

to confront the awful, the joyous, and the uncertain in American history

to interpret carefully and thoughtfully different kinds of texts

to consider and critique definitions of literary genres and artistic movements

to strengthen your ability to compose critical, creative, and persuasive essays

to learn to work effectively with others

I also hope that by the end of the semester you will, if asked, be able to say why the study of literature continues in college.

Required Texts

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (HarperCollins 1993 Edition)

William Faulkner, *Sound and the Fury* (Modern Library Edition)

Henry David Hwang, *M. Butterfly*

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (Ed. Thadious Davis)

Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight*

Art Spiegelman, *Complete Maus*

Course Requirements

This course is designated as a Writing Course, which means you will write a significant amount, formally and informally, in class and out of class. In order to receive full credit for the two analytical essays (5-6 pages), you must turn in a mid-process draft and a peer review for another student. You will also write three informal reader responses (2 pages). At the end of the semester, you will create a portfolio that contains all of your writing with a cover letter. You will have the opportunity to revise substantially one of the essays.

There will be two exams that will ask you to identify literary texts and to compose brief essay responses.

Course participation is crucial. Your physical presence is the *minimum* requirement. You will not receive an A for participation simply for coming to class. In order to receive an A, you must actively engage with class discussion, respond to your classmates work, and demonstrate a sustained level of commitment to the readings. At any point, you can make an appointment to ask me about your grade for participation. If you miss more than three classes for any reason, you must make an appointment to speak with me.

Plagiarism Statement

Plagiarism includes the following: presenting someone else's work as your own; quoting a source (book, magazine, or journal) without proper citation; downloading information from the internet without proper citation. Any instance of plagiarism violates the University's policy on intellectual honesty and may result in a failing grade for the course. If you have any questions, please ask.

Grading

Portfolio:

Two Essays 40 points

Three Responses 15 points

Two Exams: 30 points

Participation: 15 points

Response-ability of the Reader

Tues. Jan. 15 Introductions

Elie Wiesel, "Why I Write" (collection 1990)

Thurs. Jan 17 Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize Speech (1993)

NOTE: Judy Richardson, co-producer of *Eyes on the Prize*, will be speaking at the African Methodist Episcopal Church on Beechurst Ave. at 7 PM.

Part One

Crossing Borders: Black/White, Female/Male, East/West

Tues. Jan. 22 *Passing* (1929) Part One and introduction

Thurs. Jan. 24 *Passing* (entire novel)

Tues. Jan 29 *M. Butterfly* (1989)

Thurs. Jan 31 FILM--*M. Butterfly*

Reader Response #1 due

Tues. Feb 5 Allen Ginsberg, *Howl* (1955-56)

Introduction to *Sound and the Fury* and American modernism

Part Two

Multiple Narrators, Dialogic Texts, and Family Histories

Thurs. Feb 7 *Sound and the Fury* (1929): pp. 1-92; Appendix 403-426

Handout on plot

Tues. Feb. 12 *Sound and the Fury*: pp. 93-222

Thurs. Feb. 14 *Sound and the Fury*: pp. 223-329

Tues. Feb. 19 **Workshop--Essay #1 drafts due in class**

Thurs. Feb 21 *Sound and the Fury*: pp. 330-401

Tues. Feb 26 *Sound and the Fury*

Essay #1 due

Midterm Evaluations

Thurs. Feb 28 **Midterm Examination**

Tues. Mar. 5 *Love Medicine* (1993): pp. 1-84

Thurs. Mar. 7 *Love Medicine*: pp. 85-180

Interview with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris

Tues. Mar. 12 *Love Medicine*: pp. 181-298

Thurs. Mar. 14 *Love Medicine*: pp. 299-367

NOTE: Ben Doyle, author of a collection of poems, *Radio, Radio*, will be reading on Friday, March 14, at 5:30 in the Mon Room in the Lair.

Lewis Nordan, author of seven books of fiction, will be reading on Saturday, March 16, at 7:30 in the Greenbriar Room in the Lair.

Part Three

Voices of Witness: Representing Violence and Survival

Tues. Mar. 19 Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" (1928)

Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" (1960)

Due: Information about Emmett Till and Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Reader Response #2 due

Thurs. Mar. 21 Audre Lorde, "Power," "The Art of Response"

Spring Break

Tues. Apr. 2 *Maus* (1991) Part One

Thurs. Apr. 4 *Maus* Part One and Part Two

Tues. Apr. 9 *Maus*

Thurs. Apr. 11 **Workshop--Essay #2 drafts due in class**

NOTE: Stephen Dunn, Pulitzer-Prize winning poet, will be reading on Thurs., at 7:30 in the Gold Ballroom.

Part Four: Performative and Poetic Memories

Tues. Apr. 16 **Essay #2 due**

FILM--*The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984)

Thurs. Apr. 18 Anne Sexton, "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman" (1966)

Muriel Rukeyser, from *The Collected Poems* (1978): "What Have You

Brought Home from the Wars"

Tues. Apr. 23 *Twilight* (1994) introduction

FILM--*Fires in the Mirror* (1996)

Thurs. Apr. 25 *Twilight*

Reader Response #3 due

Tues. Apr. 30 *Twilight*

Thurs. May **Portfolio Due**

Preparation for Exam #2

Final Exam: Friday, May 10 at 3:00