

English 648

English 648, Katy Ryan, Spring 2007

ENG 648: Twentieth-Century US American Literature The Demands of the Dead

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Office Hours: Thurs. 10:00-12:00 and by appointment

It is the dead, not the living, who make the greatest demands.

Sophocles, Antigone

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"

Course Description

Our class will be, in part, an extended meditation on these two epigraphs. Drawing from literary, performance, and cultural studies, we will explore how the trope of the dead and the demands of mourning organize 20th-century US American literary works. Despite the hermeneutic crisis it often provokes, death is ubiquitous in literature precisely as a sign: it generates and structures ideas about self, community, and nation. At times, death, like femininity, is associated with the unknowable and the unrepresentable (Elizabeth Bronfen and Margaret Higonnet); or, like blackness, with the outside, the threatening, the repressed (Sharon Patricia Holland); or, like queerness, with the transgressive, the destabilizing, and the non-reproductive (Sue-Ellen Case). In their complexity and contradiction, literary deaths can tell us something about what a culture hopes to negate and avoid or to respect and honor. Our focus will be less on death as a cultural register or ontological dividing line than on the dead as a living force and voiced presence in literary and historical works. Our texts conceptualize the dead as angels, souls, ghosts, gods, risen bodies, birds, fragments of songs, and, in one case, a fish. Some works summon the dead in order to critique modes of violence and processes of social exclusion, others to theorize acts of writing and reading; arguably, all of them aim to construct a dynamic and ethical relation to the past with which we might forge a more just future. The interdisciplinary character of our subject will require that we confront the borders within which we work—disciplinary, national, cultural,

sexual, racial, corporeal. The breadth of our study will allow us to think about how a century's literature can be shaped and organized. I have divided our texts into four chronological sections:

The Problem of the 20th Century (1903)

+Modernism, Radical Theatre, and the Popular Front+ (1920-1940)

Visions from the Middle of the Century (1940-1970) Burying the Dead, Living with Ghosts: What is Justice? (1970-2000) We will deal indirectly with modernism and postmodernism, working our way into those categories by way of others that emphasize power relations: workers theatre, social(ist) realism, proletarian grotesque, native literature, and the Black Arts Movement. I will encourage you to gravitate toward the questions, events, issues, and movements of greatest concern to you. My hope is that as we study US American art, culture, and politics, we will also consider the demands of the teaching and writing professions in the twenty-first century.

Course Goals To become well-acquainted with twentieth-century US American literature To study and analyze literary movements and cultural theories To strengthen your ability to formulate ideas in writing and in speech To assess different approaches to teaching 20th-century US American literature To consider the ethical demands of the humanities at our present moment To create a supportive and challenging intellectual community

Required Books W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Norton Critical Edition) (1903) Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930) Irwin Shaw, *Bury the Dead* (1936) Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1962) Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977) Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (1989) Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* (2000) Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004)

Requirements Reader Responses On our listserve, everyone will post at least five responses (approximately 750 words each) throughout the semester. In the response, you should choose one idea, question, image, or scene from our weekly readings to focus on. Be sure to include quotations in your analysis. Pace your responses and try to post by at least 4PM on Monday, so we all have a chance to read the responses before we meet. Please bring to class a hard copy for me. Our listserve can also serve for follow-up discussions and announcements. Option: For anyone who plans to teach 20th-century and/or contemporary American literature, you can, in lieu of two reader responses, design your own syllabus. Your syllabus can be for an undergraduate or graduate course and should include a title, course description, course goals, reading list, and requirements.

Essays You will compose two essays (10-12 pages) in which you pursue a theoretical, historical, philosophical, and/or critical literary question. I will collect brief proposals for each essay about two weeks before the due date. Anyone who would like in the second assignment to follow up on the first essay and compose a 20-25 page essay is welcome to do so.

Resident Experts Everyone will have a chance to be a Resident Expert for one class period. On your assigned day, you will have the option of either a) guiding the first forty-five minutes of our discussion, or b) offering a ten-minute presentation at the beginning of class. Please email and let me know which option you will be pursuing at least two days before we meet. In either case, I would like you to compile an annotated bibliography on the literary work, theoretical approach, or cultural/historical event you have chosen. In order to compile a useful bibliography, you will need to skim a number of articles and books. You do not have to read the work in its entirety; rather, glean for us the main subject, the approach, the range and depth of the research. Each entry should be about 150 words. Use MLA style for the citation and include at least 10 entries. Bring copies of your annotated bibliography for the class. See this website for more information on annotated bibliographies. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill28.htm>

Grade Breakdown Two Essays 60% Five Responses, or Three Responses & Syllabus 20% Participation 10% Resident Expert 10% and Annotated Bibliography

Classroom Atmosphere The English classroom can be a site of engagement with the world—in all its complexity, beauty, pain. It is a place where words and our interaction with words compel us to rethink what we think we know. It should not be easy, nor should it always be comfortable. Because I am interested in how literature can change, not simply reflect, realities, my classes move back and forth between texts and worlds, theories and practices. I try to select literature that is formally sophisticated, socially meaningful, and politically charged. My hope is that our discussions will not be narrowly focused or limited in any way, that we will pursue vibrant, respectful, and sincere questions about, to speak in the old style, the human condition.

Recommended Literary Works (*available at WVU Bookstore) Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, *The Exonerated* H.D. *Sea Garden*, *Asphodel*, and *The Walls Did Not Fall* T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland" Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* Martin Espada, *Short Eyes* *Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Velina Hasu Houston, *Tea* Möises Kaufman, *The Laramie Project* Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* Audre Lorde, *Our Dead Behind Us* Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology* Art Spiegelman, *Maus I and II* John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* John Wexley, *The Last Mile* *John Wideman*, *Philadelphia Fire* August Wilson, *Piano Lesson*

Recommended Documentaries/Performances Toni Cade Bambara, dir. W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography in 4 Voices Toni Cade Bambara, dir. The Bombing of Osage Avenue Jonathan Demme, dir. Swimming to Cambodia (Spaulding Gray, writer) Joel Katz, dir. Strange Fruit The Living Newspaper, One-Third of a Nation (Arthur Arent, writer)

Recommended Theoretical Works Theodor Adorno, "Education after Auschwitz" Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera Elizabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic Leslie Fieldler, Love and Death in the American Novel Henry Giroux, "Education after Abu Ghraib" Sharon Patricia Holland, Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity Joseph Roach, Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance Schedule Most of the secondary readings are available through WVU Libraries E-Reserve: <http://ereserves.lib.wvu.edu/>. My username is ryan2; and our password is 552. A few other readings will be available as handouts or on Project Muse.

Jan 9 Introductions Sign Up for Resident Expert Days

The Problem of the 20th Century (1903)

Jan 16 W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk The Forethought and Chapters I, III, IV, VII, IX, XI, XII, XIV, Afterthought

Eric J. Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (1993) Chapter 5: "Swing Low: The Souls of Black Folk"

Susan Mizruchi, "Neighbors, Strangers, Corpses: Death and Sympathy in the Early Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois." Souls of Black Folk, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: WW Norton, 1999. 273-295.

Recommended: American Literary History 15.1—includes essays by Mizruchi and Sundquist on 19th century multiculturalism and death, and an essay by Catherine Kodat on Faulkner

Modernism, Radical Theatre, and the Popular Front (1920-1940)

Jan 23 Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." Image, Music, Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday P, 1977. 142-148. [\[handout\]](#)

Jan 30 William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying

Marc Hewson, " 'My Children Were of Me Alone': Maternal Influence in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*." *Mississippi Quarterly* 53.4 (2000): 551-568. [[online MLA](#)]

Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (1991)
Introduction, 1-26 and Conclusion, 242-248

Feb. 1 Reminder: Talk by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein Graff, "Demystifying the Academic Game." Rhododendron Room, 12:00-1:00

Feb 6 Irwin Shaw, *Bury the Dead*

Douglas McDermott, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre: Archetype and Example." *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1930*. [next page] Eds. Bruce McConachie and Daniel Friedman. Westport, CN: Greenwood P, 1985. 121-142. [

Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction* (1993)
Chapter 1: "The Legacy of Anti-Communism"

Recommended: Joel Katz, dir. *Strange Fruit and The Living Newspaper, One-Third of a Nation*

Feb 13 Muriel Rukeyser, *Book of the Dead* from U.S. 1 [[handout](#)]

Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (1993) Chapter 3: "The Feminist Vanguard in the Popular Front"

Feb 20 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Philip Joseph, "The Verdict from the Porch: Zora Neale Hurston and Reparative Justice." *American Literature* 74.3 (2002): 455-483. [[Project Muse](#)]

Essay Proposals Due in Class

Visions from the Middle of the Century (1940-1970)

Feb 27 Tillie Olsen, "Tell Me a Riddle" [[handout](#)]

Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the 20th c.* (1997)
Chapter 1: "Waiting for Lefty"

Mar 6 Allen Ginsberg, "Howl" [\[handout\]](#) Anne Sexton, "The Truth the Dead Know," "A Curse Against Elegies," "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further," "Suicide Note," "Oh" [\[handout\]](#)

Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire" *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3.2 (1991): 1-20. [\[handout\]](#)

First Essays Due

Mar 13 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2005) Chapter 1: "Humanism's Sphere"

Harold Bloom, "Ranting Against Cant." *Atlantic Online* 16 July 2003 [\[handout\]](#)

Recommended: *Conversations with James Baldwin*, eds. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt

Recommended: Spike Lee, dir. *Four Little Girls*

Burying the Dead, Living with Ghosts: What is Justice? (1970-2002)

Mar 20 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," 1947; trans 1969) [\[handout\]](#)

Spring Break

Apr 3 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) Preface vii-xlii; Chapter 2: "Authority, Alienation, and Social Death" and Chapter 12: "Slavery as Human Parasitism"

Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000)

Introduction: "Raising the Dead" and Chapter One: "Death and the Nation's Subject, 13-28. [\[handout\]](#)

Apr 10 Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*

Jean Young, "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*. *African American Review* 31.4 (1997): 699-708. [Project Muse]

Fredric Jameson, from *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)
Introduction and Chapter One: "Culture"

Apr 17 Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) Chapter 1: "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear" and Chapter 5: "Violence, Mourning, Politics"

Essay Proposals Due in Class

Apr 24 Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*

Final Essay due on May 2