Myth and Mystery in Post-World War II U.S. Short Fiction [DRAFT]

**Location and Contact**

T/Th 3:15-6:15pm EST

Science Center 110

Email: [pwhitmarsh@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:pwhitmarsh@fas.harvard.edu)

Office Hours: TBD

**Course Description**

This seven-week Harvard Summer School course surveys a host of short prose fiction published in the United States after 1945. Ranging from canonical works by Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth to lesser-known works, including several by women and writers of color, this course explores the various ways that authors grapple with political uncertainty, social instability, and cultural identity following the end of World War II. Students will examine different strategies of genre and style and ask how postwar writers both participate in and challenge the American mythos: the nation’s self-constructed history of exceptionalism and progress. Some central questions this course asks are: What does it mean to think of “America” (or the United States) as a myth? How does mythic imagery inform national identity? How do different literary genres (science fiction, spy fiction, Gothic fiction, etc.) offer unique expressions of the ambiguities that reside in American history and culture? We will rely heavily on class activities and discussion, complemented occasionally by mini-lectures to expand on historical context and background.

**Grading**

Attendance/Participation: 30%

Twelve Canvas Posts: 15%

Close Reading Analysis: 20%

Paper Draft: 10%

Final Paper: 25%

**Required Texts**

*Goodbye, Columbus* by Philip Roth (ISBN-13: 978-0679748267)

**Assignments**

*Canvas Posts*

Every student will make twelve posts on Canvas over the course of the term. Posts should correspond to the day’s assigned reading. You may make up to two posts per week, but no more—so plan accordingly! Posts are due by 11:59pm the night before class and should be 300-400 words. They should be thoughtful responses to the assigned material; this could be a close reading of a passage, an examination of a particular pattern (repeated image, rhetorical feature, etc.), or elaboration on a question you were left with after reading. They should not be summaries of the texts or lists of what you thought was good or bad about a reading. Posts should be written in complete sentences and proofread closely.

*Close Reading Analysis*

All students will submit a close reading essay on Thursday, 7/7 of roughly four to five pages. This essay should feature a sustained engagement with one work of fiction read for class and offer an argument about its textual details and/or organization. You may choose which source you want to write about. You will support your argument with evidence from the text. Be specific and cite your work! No outside research is necessary for this assignment. All your evidence should come from the text itself. You will be graded on clarity and complexity of your argument, appropriateness of evidence, overall organization, and quality of your prose (including spelling, grammar, mechanics).

*Paper Draft*

All students will come to class on Thursday 7/28 with a partial draft of their final paper for workshopping in small groups. The paper does not need to be finished but should be at least seven pages of coherent prose. You will receive full credit for completing the draft and attending the workshop. Students who are absent will not receive any credit for the assignment.

*Final Paper*

Students will complete a final paper, due Thursday 8/4, that consists of a sustained engagement with two works of fiction read for class. You may choose any two works you like, including the one you wrote about for your close reading analysis. The final paper should put forth an argument about a complementary feature, technique, or cultural element that connects the two texts, and should identify something that we are able to see when we put the two sources in conversation. In other words, it should not say “This happens in one text” and “That happens in the other”; rather, it should present a thesis that says something about both texts. Final papers will be roughly 3000-4000 words and should incorporate research of secondary scholarship, including at least three secondary sources not assigned in class.

\*For graduate students: final papers will be roughly 5000-6000 words and feature a wider array of secondary scholarship (at least six sources not assigned in class). The paper should demonstrate a sustained engagement with one or two primary sources and with the relevant critical discourse surrounding their topic. Grad students should meet with me by the end of Week 2 to discuss planning their final papers.

**Schedule**

**Week 1: Introducing the Postwar U.S.**

T 6/21

Marshall McLuhan, “Myth and Mass Media” (1959)

Leslie Fiedler, “The New Mutants” (1965)

In-class writing assignment (ungraded)

Th 6/23

Ann Douglas, “Periodizing the American Century: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism in the Cold War Context” (1998)

Michael Szalay and Sean McCann, “Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left” (2005)

**Week 2: White Suburbia**

T 6/28

Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959)

Critical component: Kenneth Jackson, “The Baby Boom and the Age of the Subdivision”

\*By this class, you should have made at least one Canvas post!

Th 6/30

John Cheever, “The Swimmer” (1964)

Thomas Pynchon, “The Secret Integration” (1964)

\*For graduate students: meet with me to discuss final papers by end of this week

**Week 3: Cold War Paranoia**

T 7/5

Philip K. Dick, “The Hanging Stranger” (1953)

Philip K. Dick, “The Father-Thing” (1954)

Thomas Pynchon, “Under the Rose” (1961)

Th 7/7

Don DeLillo, “Human Moments in World War III” (1983)

Critical component: Harilaos Stecopoulos, “Cold War Postmodernism”

\*For all students: close reading analysis due by **Thursday, 7/7 at 3:15pm**

**Week 4: Alternate Dimensions (Race)**

T 7/12

Ralph Ellison, “Battle Royal” (1947)

James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” (1957)

Th 7/14

Charles R. Johnson, “Exchange Value” (1981)

Toni Morrison, “Recitatif” (1983)

Critical component: bell books, “Postmodern Blackness”

\*For grad students: paper proposal due by **Thursday, 7/14 at 3:15pm**

**Week 5: Alternate Dimensions (Gender)**

T 7/19

Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1955)

Kate Wilhelm, “Baby, You Were Great!” (1967)

Th 7/21

James Tiptree, Jr. (aka Alice Sheldon), “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973)

Sylvia Plath, “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” (1977)

Critical component: Joan W. Scott, “Experience”

**Week 6: Alternate Dimensions (Genre)**

T 7/26

Ursula K. Le Guin, “Schrödinger’s Cat” (1974)

William Gibson, “The Gernsback Continuum” (1981)

Critical component: Andrew Hoberek, “Literary Genre Fiction”

Th 7/28

John Crowley, “Snow” (1985)

\*For all students: partial draft for in-class workshop due **Thursday, 7/28 by 3:15pm**

**Week 7: The End of History**

T 8/2

Don DeLillo, “The Triumph of Death” (1997)

Critical Component: Phillip E. Wegner, “October 3, 1951 to September 11, 2001”

Th 8/4

Kathy Acker, “The Meaning of the Eighties” (1990)

\*For all students: final paper due **Thursday, 8/4 by 3:15pm**

**Course Policies**

*Attendance, participation, and class culture*: Attendance is required. More than two missed classes will have a significant impact on your final grade. Our class will be a space for intellectual conversation, debate, and questioning, so your active participation and engagement with the material is imperative. If you are quieter by nature, please speak with me so we can discuss strategies for your participation. For the duration of class, please make sure to close any apps that might prove distracting and to mute notifications on messages and emails.

*Pronouns*: Preferred gender pronouns will be respected by everyone in class. Please address your fellow students directly by name or “you” when responding to a point made by your classmates, with whom you are in conversation during our discussions.

*Subject material*: Our subject matter can be divisive and offensive and is certainly worthy of scrutiny and critique. However, I encourage you to approach the material as an important (if often difficult) part of history and culture, meant to spark lively discussion about its past and its present significance. You are welcome to come speak with me if you have any concerns.

*Readings*: Most of our readings will be available as PDFs through the course site but please make sure to purchase any other required materials as soon as possible to avoid delays in getting hold of readings. When discussing readings in class please have copies and any accompanying notes with and in front of you. You may have a computer in class (phones are not permitted).

*Email and Canvas*: I will sometimes provide email updates about readings, assignments, and other course matters. While I am always happy to talk outside of class, you are also welcome to email me with any questions. I try to respond to all emails within a 48-hour period; please read and respond to your email regularly. Please also check the course Canvas site frequently for any changes to the readings and assignments.

*Deadlines and extensions*: All material must be submitted via Canvas by the deadline specified on the syllabus. You will have three grace days throughout the course of the term that you may use at your discretion with no questions asked. Once you have used all grace days, no extensions will be given except in extreme circumstances (i.e., a medical emergency). Late assignments will be marked down one level for each 24-hour period they are late (i.e., an A- becomes a B+). Extensions may not be given on the final paper.

*Accommodations*: If you need academic adjustments or accommodations in this course, please speak with me and present your letter from the [Accessibility Services Office](https://summer.harvard.edu/academic-opportunities-support/services/accessibility-services/) (ASO) in the Division of Continuing Education, which is a resource for students with disabilities and temporary health conditions who may require accommodations to fully participate in all aspects of Harvard student life. If you wish to notify me, please do so by the end of the first week of the term so that I may respond in a timely manner, since accommodations are not retroactive. The ASO consults with any student who experiences barriers related to physical or mental health, or learning disabilities, and works collaboratively with students and their faculty. Students are not required to share their diagnoses or clinical documentation with anyone outside of the ASO, but you may wish to notify me if there are potentially inaccessible elements of this course. All discussions will remain as confidential as possible within the parameters of FERPA; I may consult ASO to discuss appropriate implementation. Please be in touch with the ASO directly if you are not yet registered.

*Plagiarism*: You may find it helpful to consult with your peers about readings or paper ideas, and our class will also provide opportunities to work collaboratively on peer editing. However, all written work submitted for evaluation should be the product of your own thought, research, and writing. Accordingly, you must properly cite any engagement with other authors. Plagiarism is a serious offense and maybe result in failure of the course as well as disciplinary action by the Administrative Board. Please review the [Student Handbook](https://studenthandbook.summer.harvard.edu/) and [Student Responsibilities](https://summer.harvard.edu/academic-opportunities-support/policies-and-regulations/student-responsibilities/) web page for more information. You are also encouraged to speak to me if you have any questions.