

English L358

Twentieth-Century American Fiction

a learning guide
(3 credit hours)

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Introduction

English L358: Twentieth-Century American Fiction

English L358, a survey of twentieth-century American fiction, has two basic aims: to help you develop your skills as a careful reader capable of bringing a critical eye to the reading of even the most difficult texts, and to provide you with a broad overview of the fiction produced in America during the twentieth century. We will read a select group of fictional works that are representative of various significant literary trends, including early twentieth-century literary modernism and its permutations later in the century, experimental and historical postmodern fiction, and the southern gothic.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, American writers like Jack London and Theodore Dreiser remained drawn to the doctrine of literary naturalism as set forth by the late nineteenth-century French naturalist Emile Zola, and practiced by such turn-of-the-century American novelists as Frank Norris. A thorough understanding of realism and naturalism is imperative for the student of the twentieth-century novel. Such works as George J. Becker's *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*; Charles Child

Walcott's *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*; Donald Pizer's *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* and *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*; as well as Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* will contribute to your understanding of American fiction by historicizing the literature and providing a variety of frameworks for categorizing and critiquing various works.

As the twentieth century unfolded, writers increasingly rebelled against what they perceived as outmoded literary conventions and developed instead what they considered appropriate new forms. There were many reasons for this rebellion. For one thing, World War I shattered the sense of optimism that turn-of-the-century Americans—even the apparently pessimistic naturalistic writers—had for their future. In reaction to the war, there arose in the 1920s a euphoria and a cynicism toward society which such writers as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald captured in their best fiction. Characters like Daisy and Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, for example, are products of this materialistic “jazz age.”

Moreover, new discoveries in science by men such as Albert Einstein made the world seem a less ordered place and left many people feeling isolated, unsettled, and unprotected. Such writers as James Joyce and the poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, as well as the later French existentialists, reacted in their work to this newly-posed universe; these modernists, who experimented with style and believed, unlike the naturalists, that style was as important as content in a literary work, in turn had a pronounced effect on America's twentieth-century fiction writers. We need look no further than William Faulkner to see James Joyce's influence on the modern American novel. Looking further, however, we see the modernist impulse informing the work of later American writers. The so-called postmodernists—John Hawkes, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon—are also heirs of Joyce and Faulkner. The stylistic experimentations of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and E. L. Doctorow, which owe much to a post-Einstein vision of reality, similarly recall the modernist experiments of Joyce and Faulkner; Ellison, moreover, has often spoken of his debts to T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway.

Because L358 covers so much ground so quickly, we cannot study all of the literary movements that have marked fiction writing in America in the twentieth century. We will, however, focus on the work of such acknowledged twentieth-century American masters as Ernest Hemingway,

William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, and Flannery O'Connor. We will also concentrate on the African-American tradition as a central element within the American tradition. Doctorow's *Ragtime* appears near the end of the course because it nicely summarizes many of the course's concerns: it is the product of an ethnic (Jewish) novelist, it deals with the plight of the African American, and it is modernist (some might say postmodernist) in style. Bookending the course are two collections of short stories, which, along with O'Connor's collection, mark a quintessentially American development that traces its roots back to Edgar Allan Poe's gothic stories and Nathaniel Hawthorne's moralistic tales in the nineteenth century.

Lessons

L358 is divided into eleven lessons, two of which are examinations. Each of the other nine lessons is concerned with a single novel or short story collection and contains the following sections:

- **objectives**, which spell out what you will learn in the lesson.
- the **reading assignment**, which tells you which book to read.
- a **discussion** about the author and the work.
- **study questions** designed to raise significant issues in the texts.
- a **written assignment**, which you will complete and submit for a grade.
- a list of **selected works consulted** that you are not required to read but that will enhance your understanding of the work in question. References to some of these works will be found in the discussion sections of the lessons.

Reading Assignments

The course requires a significant amount of reading, which is why it's important to set aside some time each day for reading a certain number of pages. It's all challenging but ultimately rewarding. Perhaps like no other

works, modern literature engages readers directly, often demanding their active participation. The language, textual structure, complex characterization, and themes relevant to contemporary culture make these works difficult but always exciting, unpredictable, and stimulating.

Get into the habit of taking notes as you read and as you answer each lesson's study questions. Record your thoughts, questions, and responses as you work through each book and the course. While reading each work, you'll find it helpful to note the locations of significant passages or important moments. Doing so will also help you later, when you need to compile evidence for your papers or review for the exams. A regular-sized spiral notebook is good for this purpose.

Note: with the exception of the sixth edition of the *MLA Handbook*, you may use any edition of the required texts for your reading assignments. In this learning guide, when I quote from the books in the reading assignment, I cite pages from the editions specified under Selected Works Consulted at the end of each lesson. If you are using a different edition of that book, the quote may appear on a different page. To help you find the quotes, I've added additional information, like chapter numbers, in my citations. For your written assignments, I'd like you to do the same.

Study Questions

Discussion and study questions are designed not only to extend your understanding of the specific work under consideration, but also to allow you to make connections among the various literary texts we cover during this course. The study questions should help you focus your study of the literary work and challenge your ideas about it. Past students have looked ahead at the lesson's study questions and written assignment before starting to read the required work, which gave them a head start on tracing the lesson's themes and issues.

Please *do not* submit your answers to the study questions. If you'd like to discuss any issues raised by a question, please include your thoughts in a separate document along with your written assignment for the relevant lesson, or contact your instructor, who can answer questions before you complete the written assignment.

Written Assignments

The nine written assignments ask you to write an essay, which should be a thoughtful response to one of the topics provided. Secondary sources need not be consulted for any of these assignments, although you're free to refer to them if you wish. Original thoughts about the novels are especially welcome. Never worry about disagreeing with my interpretations; feel free to do so, as long as your ideas are sensible and supported by logical and appropriate references to the text. Such textual evidence should *always* be used to support your conclusions. Make sure that you use proper documentation when writing your essay, including page citations of both primary and secondary sources and a works cited listing for all works to which you refer. (See appendices A and B on documentation and format.) Without proper documentation, you may face a charge of plagiarism. Your instructor will be using turnitin.com to confirm that your work is original.

Each written assignment should be at least 2–3 pages in length unless otherwise specified. All of your papers must be reasonably free of typographical and mechanical errors. I strongly encourage you to use a word processing program, preferably one with a spell check. Also, make sure that your essay truly answers the question posed in the written assignment. Finally, in order to pass this course, you must submit all of the assignments.

It is important to remember that this is an upper-division, university-level literature course. This means that you are expected to have a basic understanding of how to write a clear and effective formal argument about a work of literature. For some students, this course comes soon after other writing and literature courses, and the assignments may seem easy. For others, it has been longer, perhaps even decades, since you have read a novel, written an essay, or even taken a class. This means that you may have to do extra work so that your writing meets the course requirements for clarity, support, and organization. You should factor in the time that such review may take you as you determine your schedule for lesson submission.

In any literature essay, your first paragraph should introduce the work, its author, and the topic, and end by clearly stating your thesis (the argument which your paper will go on to prove). Generally, your thesis for assignments in this course will be your answer to the topic question. You

should consider your reader educated, but don't assume that your reader is familiar with the text that you are analyzing. Provide enough background so that your reader understands your argument, but remember that you are making an argument, not summarizing or reporting on the literary work.

In the body of your essay, each paragraph should be focused around one main idea that pushes your essay a step closer to proving your thesis. To do so, each paragraph needs to offer direct evidence (quotes, specific scene descriptions, details about characters, paraphrases) from the text, which will support, illustrate, and prove the paragraph's main idea. Make sure to explain each quote's significance to your argument and to express your ideas as clearly as possible. You should conclude each of these paragraphs by restating its main idea and by tying it back to your thesis, making the connection for your reader.

Your final paragraph should restate your thesis and briefly refresh your reader's memory about your paper's main ideas. You should also indicate the significance of your argument so that your reader isn't left asking, "So what?"

Your instructor will return each lesson to you with comments on your writing and your ideas. You are expected to keep these comments in mind as you write each subsequent lesson so that your assignments for this course become a process of sharpening your writing skills.

Examinations

There will be two examinations. In both the midterm (lesson 5) and the final (lesson 11), you will be given several topics and asked to write on two of them. The final exam will cover all the works read in the second half of the course. Each exam will take two hours and must be completed without the aid of textbooks, study notes, your learning guide, or any other supplementary materials.

Grading Standards

All of the nine written assignments will carry the same weight. Combined, they constitute 50 percent of your grade. The other 50 percent comes from the exams, each worth 25 percent. Consideration is given to improvements as you progress through the course. **You must average at least a D– on the exams in order to pass the course.**

This is both a reading and a writing course, designed to sharpen your skills of textual analysis, argumentative writing, and critical thinking. To that end, your essays will be graded using the following criteria:

Presentation. Proofreading; style and readability; proper documentation (Modern Language Association Style); a clear and specific title; clear context for someone who hasn't read the work; effective introduction and conclusion; proper format. (See appendix A for formatting guidance.)

Organization. Thesis; topic and closing sentences; relevant, focused, organized and developed paragraphs; effective sentence and paragraph transitions; clear and understandable overall organization.

Evidence/support. Specific, accurate, convincing details; effective and relevant quotations. (See appendix B for documentation information.)

Analysis. Clear interpretation; added insight into the literary work; overall coherence of argument.

A grade of A is difficult (but not impossible) to receive. A B grade indicates that you have submitted work that is above average but not exemplary in quality. Receiving a C suggests that you have met the requirements of the assignments but have not gone further than the average. Your effort was adequate but not remarkable. A D means that you have written a below-average essay because you have not met some of the assignment requirements, have careless grammatical, mechanical, or punctuation errors, or have presented unclear, disorganized writing. If you receive an F, your essay doesn't meet the assignment requirements, doesn't answer the written assignment question, or includes an excessive number of errors.

Plagiarism

As an educational institution, IU puts learning first. We want you to learn, and we think you value learning as well. We also value honesty and trust. You have every right to expect fair exams, fair assignments, and fair grades. By the same token, your instructor expects the work you hand in to be your own. You are welcome to discuss this course with other students and teachers, but when it comes to writing your assignments, all the words should come straight from you, unless you are supporting your assertions with a properly cited quote.

Passing off someone else's work as your own is plagiarism. As stated in Indiana University's *Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct* (Art. III, § A.3), "A student must not adopt or reproduce ideas, words, or statements of another person without an appropriate acknowledgment. A student must give due credit to the originality of others and acknowledge an indebtedness whenever he or she does any of the following:

- a. quotes another person's actual words, either oral or written;
- b. paraphrases another person's words, either oral or written;
- c. uses another person's idea, opinion, or theory; or
- d. borrows facts, statistics, or other illustrative material, unless the information is common knowledge."

We take plagiarism very seriously. If you are caught plagiarizing, you could receive an F for the whole course.

So how can you avoid plagiarizing? When is it appropriate to cite your sources, and how should you cite them? The answer's simple. Ask your instructor. If you're unsure whether you've cited your sources appropriately, call or e-mail your instructor before you submit your assignment. Not only will you get answers to your questions, you'll reap the fruit of honesty: trust.

Contacting Your Instructor

With each lesson you are required to submit an assignment cover sheet. Every assignment cover sheet has a space for your questions and comments; you are strongly encouraged to use this space. If problems arise between assignments, you can write to your instructor at the Independent Study Program. Many instructors can be contacted via e-mail or reached by telephone during established office hours. To learn your instructor's e-mail address and/or office hours, please refer to the contact information on the back cover of this learning guide.

Unlike traditional courses, Independent Study courses require extra effort on both teacher's and student's parts. Since you and your instructors never actually meet face to face, you both must work to communicate (in writing or via phone) as clearly and effectively as possible. Your instructors will do their best to respond to your work in a way that will help you improve your reading and writing skills. For your part, you must help keep the communication lines open. When you have questions about the learning guide discussion, the written assignments, or about your instructors' responses, please ask them. Open communication should help reduce any frustration or confusion that can attend independent courses of study. It may also generate supplemental ideas that will help lead you to higher intellectual achievement.