

HUMS 630
Fall 2025
McCann
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285 Court St., rm 209
office hours: M 5:00 – 6:00 pm and by appt

American Modernism and the Crises of Democracy

The heyday of modernist literature in the United States, the 1920s, was also a time of severe political and cultural conflict. In the wake of global war and a global pandemic, the US experienced multiple sources of social discord: renewed conflict between labor and capital; ascendent nativist politics and, in the Ku Klux Klan, a populist movement for authoritarian ethnic nationalism; and an intense culture war pitting cultural traditionalism against the emerging liberalization of norms about sex, gender, family, and race. All these conflicts were compounded by disruptive new media and technologies (movies, radio, the automobile) and a febrile consumer culture. In this seminar, we will consider the way literary artists responded to these conflicts and the possible comparison between their time and ours.

Requirements

- Two short response essays (3-4 pp, dbl spaced, 12 pt font) on assigned readings (40% of final grade); choose one date before 10/20 and one after
- Final project (40% of final grade);
- Class participation (20% of final grade);
- Revisions to graded essays are encouraged, so long as you follow the “revision protocol” posted on the course Moodle.

Texts

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

Willa Cather, *The Professor's House*
John Dos Passos, *1919*
William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
F. Scott Fitzgerald, "May Day" (m)*
Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*
Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*
H. L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy*
Katherine Anne Porter, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (m)
George Schuyler, *Black No More*
Jean Toomer, *Cane*
Walter White, *Fire in the Flint* (m)*
* (m) = posted on Moodle

Students with Disabilities

It is the policy of Wesleyan University to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students, however, are responsible for registering with Disabilities Services, in addition to making requests known to me in a timely manner. If you require accommodations in this class, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible (during the 2nd week of the semester), so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at <http://www.wesleyan.edu/deans/disability-students.html>.

Classroom Policy

Please do not use laptops or phones during class time. Please bring a hard copy of *primary* readings to class—exceptions for long primary readings posted as PDFs on Moodle acceptable.

AI Policy

Please do not use artificial intelligence chatbots to brainstorm for, draft, or write your papers. Generating ideas, critically analyzing texts, organizing arguments, developing your thoughts on the page, and strengthening your abilities as a writer are all essential to the work of the course—and valuable practice for developing your abilities in and of themselves.* The updated Honor Code states that it constitutes plagiarism to present "words, ideas, and images generated by artificial intelligence" as your own.

You may use Grammarly or other AI tools to assist you in copyediting your writing and generally to format and polish your work.

Please do not use online sources or summaries produced by AI as a substitute for reading and engaging with assigned texts, although you may use such AI tools – *with caution!* – to gain useful contextual information or to clarify textual ambiguities, much as you might cautiously use Google or Wikipedia. Please be aware, though, that like other online resources, AI tools can produce inaccurate or misleading information. If you draw on information produced by AI in writing a paper, please be sure to cite the original source or sources to which the AI tool refers.

Using AI for more substantial tasks like reading or interpreting complete texts or meaningful passages will defeat the purpose of the assignments and rob you of the challenge, and the pleasure, of the effort the course demands. Likewise, it will dishonor the scholarly community to which the seminar and the university aspire.

Schedule

- 9/8 Fitzgerald, “May Day” (m)
McKay, “If We Must Die”; “The White House” (m)
Recommended: Tom Peebles, “Waging War on American Democracy,” review of *American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy’s Forgotten Crisis*, by Adam Hochschild, *Tocqueville 21*,
<https://tocqueville21.com/books/waging-war-on-american-democracy/>
- 9/15 Porter, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” (m)
Recommended: Hochschild, *American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy’s Forgotten Crisis*, chaps. 13 -17
Murphy, chap. 3, “Uphill All the Way: The Fortunes of Progressivism, 1919-1929” (m)
- 9/22 Mencken, *Notes on Democracy* (m)
Recommended:
Lippman, review of Mencken, *Notes on Democracy*
<http://www.mencken.org/text/txt001/lippman.walter.1926.h-l-mencken.htm>
Westbrook, chap 9, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (m)

10/6 Cather, *The Professor's House*

10/13 Dos Passos, *1919*

Recommended: Hoffman, chap. 1, *The 20s: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (m)

10/20 **Fall Break**

10/27 White, *Fire in the Flint* (m)

Recommended: Gordon, introduction and chap. 1, *The Second Coming of the Ku Klux Klan* (m)

11/3 Schuyler, *Black No More*

Recommended: Harcourt, chaps 1 and 2, *Ku Klux Kulture*

11/10 Larsen, *Quicksand*

11/17 Toomer, *Cane*

11/24 Hammett, *Red Harvest*

Recommended: Potter, intro and chap. 1, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture*

12/1 Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

Recommended: Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Modern Temper"

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1927/02/the-modern-temper/649130/>

Wineapple, preface, *Keeping the Faith: God, Democracy, and the Trial that Riveted a Nation* (m)

12/8 Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

Recommended: Stark Young, "Not in Memoriam, but in Defense"

Paul V. Murphy, chap. 1, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought*

* I think this short essay by the Silicon Valley investor Paul Graham puts the case well:
<https://paulgraham.com/writes.html>