

**The Postmodern American Novel, or
How to Sound Hip and Cool at Cocktail Parties
English 484W, Section 1
Syllabus**

Sam Houston State University, Fall 2007

TR 12:30-1:50, Evans 262

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Office Hours: TR 3:30-5:00, by appointment, and by chance

So we're all postmodern now, whatever that means. Or maybe we're all post-postmodern now, whatever that means, postmodernism itself being "so yesterday." In this course, we² won't definitively answer either of those questions—What is postmodernism? What is post-postmodernism?—but we will, in postmodern fashion, take a few tentative steps toward identifying traits in late 20th Century American fiction³ that might be labeled "postmodern." We'll consider how various authors (or author-functionaries) have "broken the frame," "revisited history," "revised tradition," "blurred the lines between high culture and low (or pop) culture," "explored the boundaries between fiction and (non)fiction," and, generally speaking, "tried to find new ways to write about the (cult)ure(s) in which we now live."⁴ Our focus will primarily be novels though we'll use a number of selected short stories⁵ and critical essays to help guide us. Texts will include: *The Crying of Lot 49*, by Thomas Pynchon; *Mumbo Jumbo*, by Ishmael Reed; *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison; *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko; *Housekeeping*, by Marilynne Robinson; *Blood Meridian*, by Cormac McCarthy; *White Noise*, by Don DeLillo; *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman; and *Snow Crash*⁶, by Neil Stephenson.

Thank you.⁷

¹ Author of *Ordination*, winner of the 2004 Ohio State University Prize for Short Fiction, published by Ohio State University Press and available via various online booksellers. Currently employed as an assistant professor of English at Sam Houston State University.

² By "we," the author of this course description means "the professor and the students," which is not to say that the professor and the students are, in all instances, members of the same group. At times during the semester, it will be necessary to distinguish between "you and me" or "he and they" or "he and you" and the encompassing "we" will be ignored.

³ The author of this course description recognizes the shortcomings of such boundaries—in this case by period, nation, and genre, and he further recognizes that the study of other periods, other nations, and other genres would assist in our study and complicate our study, often in illuminating ways, but in the interest of time and university requirements, the person responsible for this course, including grades, has chosen to place these admittedly artificial and liminal boundaries around this class. He apologizes in advance.

⁴ We'll also consider, albeit briefly, why authors (or those who perform the author-function) "speak in quotations."

⁵ The professor is still deciding upon the "exact" short stories and essays to be included but you might expect stories by William Gass, Tim O'Brien, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, and George Saunders, just for instance.

⁶ The author of this course description admits that this isn't his favorite novel on the list and that he also considered *The Corrections*, by Jonathan Franzen; *Neuromancer*, by William Gibson; *Blood and Guts in High School*, by Kathy Acker; and *Infinite Jest*, by David Foster Wallace (ha-ha, it's like 4,000-pages long), but he thinks students will like this novel better than he does.

⁷ In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that the author of this course description is also the professor assigned to teach this course (see above). It should also be noted that this professor spent his youth in a town called Colon. He cannot be held responsible for this sad fact.

Course Objectives

As a senior-level literature course, we will (1) read, or at least attempt to read, complex literary texts closely and seek to understand those texts through the relationship of the various elements of fiction, including character, plot, point of view, structure, language, genre, parody, pastiche, satire, illustration, diagrams, etc., which is to say, whatever these so-called postmodern authors choose to utilize on the printed pages someone has paid to print, distribute, and sell, and you have (not) purchased, (not) borrowed, and/or (not) stolen for the purposes of this class; (2) place those works in the context of the American literary tradition, and the social and cultural transformations of the second half of the 20th Century; (3) think critically about, analyze, and respond—orally and in writing—to those texts, the ideas raised by those texts, and the critical conversation surrounding those texts; (4) license you to use the word “postmodern” at cocktail parties and other social-cultural gatherings where it might be (in)appropriate.

Required Texts:

The Crying of Lot 49, by Thomas Pynchon

Mumbo Jumbo, by Ishmael Reed

White Noise, by Don DeLillo

Snow Crash, by Neal Stephenson

Ceremony, by Leslie Marmon Silko

Beloved, by Toni Morrison

Blood Meridian, by Cormac McCarthy

Maus, by Art Spiegelman

Attendance

If you miss more than four classes for the semester, regardless of the reason, I may drop you from the class. If you know you will be absent in advance, be sure to let me know in advance. You are still responsible for work that you may miss. If circumstances arise during the course of the semester that interfere with your ability to attend class or to complete assignments, see me as soon as possible.

Grades

Attendance and Participation (10 percent): I expect students to be in attendance every day and to actively participate in all discussions.

Discussion Board (25 percent): Each student must make a substantial contribution (minimum 750 words) to the discussion board for each novel. A student may initiate a line of discussion; may respond to a line of discussion begun by the professor or another student; may respond to a question posed by a professor or another student; may introduce into the discussion of a particular novel (or the course as a whole) a particular critical article or perspective; may extend our discussion to postmodern aspects of other arts and/or the culture at-large. Posts are due by the first day of discussion of the following novel with the exception of *Maus*, in which case they are due the last day of the class discussion of the book. However, I encourage you to post during the discussion of a given novel, and not just in the end.

Midterm Exam (20 percent): Short answer and essay. Blue books required.

Final Exam (20 percent): Short answer and essay. Blue books required. Cumulative.

Major Paper (25 percent): An approved proposal; an approved draft and final annotated bibliography; a completed draft and final revision of the essay are all required. See forthcoming assignment sheet for details.

900-1000 A, 800-899 B, 700-799 C, 600-699 D, 559 or less F.

Paper Format

All submitted papers should be typed double-spaced in a 12-point font with one-inch borders AND STAPLED. No wacky fonts, please. Any assignments longer than two pages must have page numbers. Correct grammar, usage, punctuation and spelling are expected. Work flawed by pervasive mechanical errors will be penalized accordingly. Always be certain to keep a hard copy and a copy on disk. Title all essays. In the upper right-hand corner, type your name, e-mail address, and the date.

Timely Submissions

Any late work will be penalized one full grade for each class period it is late. For example, if the assignment is due on Tuesday and it is submitted to me the following morning, the grade will be reduced one full letter grade. If I receive it in class the following Thursday, the penalty is the same. Extensions will be granted only in advance and only in cases of emergency.

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism

Academic honesty is fundamental to the activities and principles of a university. All members of the academic community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain an advantage not given to all students is dishonest whether or not the effort is successful. The academic community regards academic dishonesty as an extremely serious matter, with serious consequences that range from probation to expulsion. When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, consult the course instructor. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines* (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

Americans with Disabilities Act

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines* (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

Religious Holidays

Students are allowed to miss class and other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. Students remain responsible for all work. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines* (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

Visitors in the Classroom

Only registered students may attend class. Exceptions can be made on a case-by-case basis by the professor. In all cases, visitors must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. Students wishing to audit a class must apply to do so through the Registrar's Office.

Instructor Evaluations

Near the end of the semester, students will be asked to complete a course/instructor evaluation form.

Classroom Etiquette

Cell phones, off. Period. If a cell phone disrupts class, or if a student is sending or receiving text messages during the course of class, I reserve the right to confiscate the phone for the duration of the class period. In the case of a second offense in the course of the semester, I reserve the right to remove the student from the class.

Introduction to the Class (Post to Blackboard Discussion Board before the second class)

Write a letter of introduction to the class. In addition to the basics (name, year, hometown, major, career goal, what you want to do with your life, etc.), the letter should include responses to each of the following:

Why are you taking this class?

What do you hope to gain from this class?

When you read (unassigned), what do you prefer to read? Why do you read?

What was your favorite book from last semester? Why was it your favorite book?

What was the last unassigned book you read? What did you think of it?

Name five books you want to read again and explain briefly why you'd want to read each again.

Name one book you hope you never have to read again and tell me why.

Name one book you secretly think is overrated.

Name your favorite poet.

Name the last book of poetry you read.

List five favorite movies and briefly explain why these are your favorite movies.

Name your favorite living author. Why?

Name your favorite dead author. Why?

Name your favorite postmodern theorist. Why?

What is the best class you've had in college? Why was it the best class?

If you were to write a novel, it would be about...

If you were to write the story of your life, the first sentence would be...

Are you postmodern? Why? Why not?

Complete this sentence: Postmodernism is...

Tentative Schedule (subject to change)

Tuesday, August 21—Distribution of Syllabus. What's Wrong With This Course (Already)? Or, The Problematics of the Terms: "postmodern," "American," "novel." The Course Description as Postmodern Text. Introductions to the Bodies and/or Consciousnesses in the Room. Other *Items of Business*.

Thursday, August 23—Stories: "The Balloon" and "Indian Uprising," by Donald Barthleme; "Lost in the Funhouse," by John Barth; "The Garden of Forking Paths," by Jorge Luis Borges.

Tuesday, August 28—*The Crying of Lot 49*, by Thomas Pynchon.

Thursday, August 30—*The Crying of Lot 49*.

Tuesday, September 4—*The Crying of Lot 49*.

Thursday, September 6—*Mumbo Jumbo*, by Ishmael Reed.

Tuesday, September 11—*Mumbo Jumbo*.

Thursday, September 13—*Mumbo Jumbo*.

Tuesday, September 18—*White Noise*, by Don DeLillo.

Thursday, September 20—*White Noise*.

Tuesday, September 25—*White Noise*.

Thursday, September 27—*White Noise*.

Tuesday, October 2—*Snow Crash*, by Neil Stephenson.

Thursday, October 4—*Snow Crash*. **Proposal for Research Paper Due.**

Tuesday, October 9—*Snow Crash*.

Thursday, October 11—*Snow Crash*.

Tuesday, October 16—Mid-term Exam.

Thursday, October 18—*Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Tuesday, October 23—*Ceremony*.

Thursday, October 25—*Beloved*, by Toni Morrison. **Working Annotated Bibliography Due.**

Tuesday, October 30—*Beloved*.

Thursday, November 1—*Beloved*.

Tuesday, November 6—*Beloved*.

Thursday, November 8—*Blood Meridian*, by Cormac McCarthy.

Tuesday, November 13—*Blood Meridian*.

Thursday, November 15—*Blood Meridian*. **Draft of Research Paper Due.**

Tuesday, November 20—*Blood Meridian*.

Thursday, November 22: No class. Thanksgiving.

Tuesday, November 27—*Maus*, by Art Spiegelman.

Thursday, November 29—*Maus*.

Tuesday, December 4—*Maus*.

Thursday, December 6: Last Day of Class. *Maus*. **Research Paper Due.** Prepare for final.

Finals Week—**Final Exam.** TBD.

A Few Recommended Texts

Many of the essays listed below may be accessed through JSTOR or Project Muse.

- Barth, John, R.V. Cassill, Leslie Fiedler, John Hawkes, David Hirsch, Lee Kearsse, Frank Kermode, Robert Scholes, Mark Spilka, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Roger Henkle. "Wrestling (American Style) with Proteus" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 3.3 (Spring 1970): 197-207.
- Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." *The Friday Book*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons XXX.
- "The Literature of Replenishment." *The Friday Book*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons XXX.
- Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002.
- Douglas, Ann. "Periodizing the American Century: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism in the Cold War Context" *Modernism/Modernity* 5.3 (1998): 71-98.
- Fiedler, Leslie. "The New Mutants" from *A New Fiedler Reader*. Reprinted at <http://www.texaschabookpress.com/newmutants01.htm>. Accessed: 8/20/07.
- Geyh, Paula. "Assembling Postmodernism: Experience, Meaning, and the Space In-Between" *College Literature* 30.2 (Spring 2003): 1-29.
- Graff, Gerald. "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough." *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism*. Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1993.
- Green, Jeremy. *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*. New York: Palgrave McMillen 2005.
- Hassan, Ihab. "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context" *Philosophy and Literature* 25 (2001): 1-13.
- "Postmodernism: A Self-Interview" *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006): 223-228.
- "POSTmodernISM" *New Literary History* 3.1 (Autumn 1971): 5-30.
- "Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism." *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism*. Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1993.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information." *American Literary History* 2.3 (Autumn 1990): 394-421.
- Herman, David J. "Modernism versus Postmodernism: Toward an Analytic Distinction" *Poetics Today* 12.1 (Spring 1990): 55-86.
- hooks, bell. "Postmodern Blackness" *Postmodern Culture* 1.1 (1990). Accessed via Project Muse, Newton Gresham Library, Sam Houston State University, 8/20/07.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History" *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter 1986-87): 179-207.
- Huyssen, Andreas. "Mapping the Postmodern" *New German Critique* 33 (Autumn 1984): 5-52.
- Jameson, Fredric. "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate" *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 53-65.
- *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1991.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press 1984.
- Sarup, Madan. *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press 1993.
- Shapiro, Fred R. "Prehistory of *Postmodern* and Related Terms: Evidence from the JSTOR Electronic Journal Archive and Other Sources" *American Speech* 73.3 (2001): 331-334.
- Sloan, De Villo. "The Decline of American Postmodernism." *SubStance* 16.3 (1987): 29-43.
- Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation" from *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Reprinted at: <http://www.susansontag.com/againstinterpretationexcrpt.htm>. Accessed: 8/20/07.
- Spevick, Philip. "Sheherazade runs out of plots, goes on talking; the king, puzzled, listens: an essay on new fiction." *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism*. Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1993.
- Wicke, Jennifer and Margaret Ferguson. "Introduction: Feminism and Postmodernism; Or, the Way We Live Now" *boundary 2* 19.2 (Summer 1992): 1-9.

A Few Helpful Websites

<http://www.cla.purdue.edu/English/theory/postmodernism/modules/introduction.html>

An excellent introductory website from Dino Felluga at Purdue University. In particular, Felluga provides a brief overview of the movements from the Renaissance to the postmodern. He also provides definitions for key terms and “modules” on Linda Hutcheon, Fredrick Jameson, and Jean Baudrillard, three key players in the discussions of postmodernism.

<http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html>

A page intended as an introduction to postmodernism, but it actually does a better job of delineating some of the basic assumptions of modernism—in a helpful manner. From Mary Klages at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

<http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/436/pomo.htm>

From the University of Alabama’s Department of Anthropology, it’s described as a “guide prepared by students for students.”

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/pomo.html>

From Martin Irvine at Georgetown University, a page that discusses the differences between postmodernity, postmodernism, and the postmodern.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>

A “definition” of postmodernism from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/postmodern.html

Think of this page as a portal to other sites dedicated either to ideas of postmodernism or to leading commentators on/theorists of postmodernity, postmodernism, and the postmodern.

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/

The homepage for the influential journal, *Postmodern Culture*. You should be able access all these issues via your SamID (thanks to Project Muse).

The Norton Anthology of Postmodern Fiction, "Introduction"

"Perchance to Dream: In An Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels" (the *Harper's* essay), by Jonathan Franzen

"Why experimental fiction threatens to destroy publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and life as we know it: A correction," by Ben Marcus (also from *Harper's*)

I don't know yet where it goes:

"How to Tell a True War Story," by Tim O'Brien

Calvino

Gass: "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country"

Fukuyama, "The End of History"

Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, the Logic of Late Capitalism..."

Anti-foundationalism

Surface

Play

Openness (Refusal of Closure)

Parody

Pastiche

Genre

Hi/Lo

History and postmodernism

Trauma and postmodernism

Post-structuralism and postmodernism: race, class, gender, sexuality

Human/nonhuman

Queer Theory

High postmodernism

Popular postmodernism

Alienation as the norm

Self-reflexivity

Loss of political import (neither the liberal humanism of romanticism nor the fascist elitism of modernism)

Opening Day

Survey the students about the word “postmodernism.” What does it mean to them? What do they think it means? Where have they heard the word used? To what do they hear it applied? Does it have a positive or negative connotation for them? If someone says, “Oh, that’s so postmodern,” what do they mean? If someone says, “We live in a postmodern age,” what do they mean? If someone says, “That’s a postmodern novel,” what do you expect to find when you read it?

What is “modernism”? If post-modernism implies “after modernism,” what does postmodernism follow upon? Does it imply a break of some sort? Does the word also imply something contiguous with modernism—since it doesn’t get its own term, like Romanticism or Victorianism or Restoration, etc.? How to define modernism? Characteristic writers and artists of modernism—relationship to the larger society—characteristics of modernist works?

What is a novel?

What is the role of literature in society? What is the function of a novel? Of architecture? Of art? Of music? What should be the relationship of art to society? What should be the relationship of art to popular culture? What’s the difference?

What is art? What is the relationship of art to life?

What is the relationship of the novel to life?

What is the role of art in society?

Why do you read? Why do you make art or look at art or ignore art? Duchamps readymades?

What is your conception of history?

Will it all work out in the end? Why or why not?

What is the most important factor in determining what happens to a person over the course of his or her life? Or what are the three most important factors . . . rank in order?

Are you postmodern?

T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”—thumbs up or thumbs down? Why?

Thomas Kinkaide—thumbs up or thumbs down? Why?

Pop music—thumbs up or thumbs down? Why?

Beer or wine?

What are the last three, non-assigned books you’ve read? Last three movies? Name your favorite painting and/or painter?

Some of the above questions could make for good first blog prompts.

Thursday, August 23

“Lost in the Funhouse,” by John Barth

“The Balloon,” by Donald Barthleme

“Indian Uprising,” by Donald Barthleme

“The Garden of Forking Paths,” by Jorge Luis Borges

How do you begin to approach these stories? In what ways do they refuse to fulfill your expectations as a reader? What expectations do you have as a reader when you begin a story? Why do you have these expectations?

If these writers refuse to grant readers certain pleasures they expect of a story, what other pleasures do they grant in exchange?

Why does the narrator in “Lost in the Funhouse” continually describe the techniques of the fiction writer?

How is “The Balloon” a fable or allegory about the creation of new art? Is the understanding of this allegory necessary to the understanding of the story?

How would you describe the construction of “Indian Uprising”? How does it handle issues such as time and place and character?

Why would writers such as Barth, Barthleme, and Borges begin writing such stories in the late ‘50s, early ‘60s? Which writers preceded them?

Ezra Pound provided the mantra for the modernist era with his statement to “Make It New.” It has been said that the postmodernist mantra should be, “Get It Used.”