

# 20th Century American Literature Syllabus

## English 226: Twentieth-Century American Literature (3 credits)

Instructor: Brian Hartwig  
Department of English, Stony Brook University  
Extended Summer Session I, 2019

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### Office Hours:

By appointment via SBConnect or  
Humanities Building 1028

### Class Schedule:

Online, Asynchronous  
28 May-19 July

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### Course Description:

English 226: Twentieth-Century American Literature introduces students to the major literary works and artistic movements of the Twentieth Century, paying particular attention to the post-1945 period. The course begins with a brief overview of the literary scene in the United States during the Nineteenth Century and quickly launches into an exploration of American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance before addressing Postmodernism and the rise of Ethnic-American literature during the later years of the century.

Throughout the semester, we will consider the historical moments and cultures from which these works emerged, paying close attention to issues of style and genre. Together, we will attempt to make meaning of a century of American life by considering each of these works as representative of a particular movement/ mode of artistic expression. Particular attention will be paid to what American Studies scholars would call, "coefficients of Identity": gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, and religion.

Famously, the publisher Henry Luce declared, "Throughout the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century, this continent teemed with manifold projects and magnificent purposes. Above them all and weaving them all together into the most exciting flag of all the world and of all the history was the triumphal purpose of freedom. It is in this spirit that all of us are called, each to his own measure of capacity, and each in the widest horizon of his vision, to create the first great American Century" (from *Life* magazine, 17 February 1941). In this course, we will measure Luce's argument against the literature on this syllabus and question the extent to which these writers were working alongside this notion of "The American Century" or, perhaps, the extent to which they contested the very existence of an "American Century."

Prerequisite: WRT 102 or equivalent (for more information regarding enrollment and prerequisites, contact Ms. Margaret Hanley, Assistant Directory of Undergraduate Studies in English and Academic Advisor, at [Margaret.Hanley@stonybrook.edu](mailto:Margaret.Hanley@stonybrook.edu) or (631) 632-7400.

**20th century American literature syllabus** is a fascinating exploration into a period marked by profound social, political, and cultural changes. This era saw the emergence of diverse voices and styles, reflecting the complexities of American life and identity. Studying a 20th-century American literature syllabus allows students to engage with pivotal texts and authors who shaped the landscape of literature in the United States. In this article, we will delve into essential themes, influential authors, and notable works that are typically included in such a syllabus, along with suggestions for structuring a comprehensive curriculum.

# Key Themes in 20th Century American Literature

The literature of the 20th century in America is characterized by various themes that resonate with the historical context of the time. Some of the most prominent themes include:

- **Identity and Alienation:** Many authors explored the struggle for personal and cultural identity, often reflecting feelings of isolation.
- **Social Justice:** The fight for civil rights and social equity became central to the works of numerous writers.
- **Modernism:** A break from traditional forms and techniques, with a focus on stream-of-consciousness and fragmented narratives.
- **War and Trauma:** The impact of World Wars and subsequent conflicts on the American psyche.
- **Technology and Urbanization:** The effects of rapid industrialization and the rise of urban settings on American life.

These themes can serve as focal points for discussions and analyses in a 20th-century American literature syllabus.

## Influential Authors and Notable Works

A comprehensive syllabus should include a range of authors who made significant contributions to American literature during the 20th century. Below is a list of essential authors and their notable works, categorized by literary movements.

### Modernism

Modernism is a key movement in 20th-century literature that sought to redefine artistic expression. Important authors include:

1. **F. Scott Fitzgerald** - *The Great Gatsby* (1925): A critique of the American Dream and an exploration of wealth and class in the 1920s.

2. **Ernest Hemingway** - *The Sun Also Rises* (1926): A novel that captures the disillusionment of the post-World War I generation.
3. **T.S. Eliot** - *The Waste Land* (1922): A landmark poem that reflects the fragmented nature of modern existence.

## Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement that celebrated African American literature, art, and music. Key figures include:

1. **Langston Hughes** - *The Weary Blues* (1926): A collection of poetry that highlights African American culture and experience.
2. **Zora Neale Hurston** - *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937): A novel that explores race, gender, and identity through the life of Janie Crawford.
3. **Claude McKay** - *Home to Harlem* (1928): A novel that portrays the vibrant life of African Americans in Harlem.

## Postmodernism

Postmodern literature emerged as a response to modernism, characterized by a questioning of narrative authority and an interest in metafiction. Key authors include:

1. **Thomas Pynchon** - *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973): A complex novel that intertwines themes of war, technology, and conspiracy.
2. **Kurt Vonnegut** - *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969): A satirical anti-war novel that explores the nature of time and trauma.
3. **Don DeLillo** - *White Noise* (1985): A novel that examines the impact of technology and consumerism on contemporary life.

# Structuring a 20th Century American Literature Syllabus

Creating a syllabus for a course on 20th-century American literature requires careful consideration of the texts, themes, and historical context. Here is a suggested structure:

## Course Overview

Begin with a brief overview of the course objectives, including:

- Understanding the evolution of American literature throughout the 20th century.
- Analyzing key themes and their relevance to contemporary society.
- Exploring the influence of historical events on literary movements.

## Weekly Breakdown

Organize the course into weekly sessions, each focusing on specific themes, authors, or movements. Below is a sample weekly breakdown:

1. **Week 1:** Introduction to 20th Century American Literature
2. **Week 2:** Modernism: Key Concepts and Influential Texts
3. **Week 3:** F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age
4. **Week 4:** Harlem Renaissance: Voices of a New Generation
5. **Week 5:** The Great Depression and Its Literary Impact
6. **Week 6:** Postmodernism: Breaking Boundaries
7. **Week 7:** Women's Literature in the 20th Century
8. **Week 8:** Multicultural Voices in American Literature
9. **Week 9:** The Role of War in Shaping Literature
10. **Week 10:** Contemporary Issues: Literature of the 21st Century

## Assignments and Assessments

Incorporate various assignments to encourage critical thinking and engagement with the texts:

- **Reading Journals:** Students can keep journals reflecting on their readings, noting themes, character development, and personal reactions.
- **Essays:** Assign analytical essays that require students to engage deeply with specific texts or themes.
- **Group Presentations:** Encourage collaborative learning through presentations on specific authors, movements, or themes.
- **Final Project:** A comprehensive research paper or creative project that allows students to synthesize their learning.

## Conclusion

A well-structured 20th-century American literature syllabus not only provides students with an understanding of key texts and authors but also facilitates a deeper exploration of the societal changes that influenced literature during this period. By engaging with diverse voices and themes, students can develop critical thinking skills and a greater appreciation for the complexities of American identity and culture. As literature continues to evolve, the lessons learned from this pivotal century remain relevant, providing insights into both the past and the present.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What are the key themes explored in 20th century American literature?

Key themes include identity, alienation, the American Dream, social change, race and ethnicity, and the impact of war and technology.

### Which authors are considered foundational to 20th century American literature?

Foundational authors include F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and Zora Neale Hurston.

### How does modernism influence 20th century American literature?

Modernism introduces fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness narrative, and a focus on inner experiences,

reflecting the disillusionment of the era.

## **What role does historical context play in understanding 20th century American literature?**

Historical context, such as the Great Depression, World Wars, Civil Rights Movement, and technological advancements, shapes the themes and styles of the literature.

## **What are some prominent literary movements within 20th century American literature?**

Prominent movements include Modernism, Harlem Renaissance, Beat Generation, and Postmodernism.

## **How does the Harlem Renaissance impact American literature?**

The Harlem Renaissance celebrates African American culture and identity, leading to a surge in literary output and exploration of race relations.

## **What are common characteristics of postmodern literature?**

Common characteristics include metafiction, unreliable narrators, irony, and a questioning of objective reality.

## **Which novels are often included in a 20th century American literature syllabus?**

Commonly included novels are 'The Great Gatsby' by F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The Grapes of Wrath' by John Steinbeck, and 'Beloved' by Toni Morrison.

## **How do short stories fit into the 20th century American literature curriculum?**

Short stories are essential for studying narrative techniques and character development, with authors like Raymond Carver and Flannery O'Connor often featured.

## **What is the significance of poetry in 20th century American literature?**

Poetry captures the emotional and cultural complexities of the century, with influential poets like Langston Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and Allen Ginsberg.

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