

Ryerson University  
Department of English

ENG 604: The Contemporary in Literature: Post 1945  
UPPER LEVEL LIBERAL STUDIES

Winter 2006

Professor Karen Mulhallen

Office; Jorgenson Hall, A 519

Telephone: 416 979-5000, extension 6136

Email: [kmulhall@ryerson.ca](mailto:kmulhall@ryerson.ca)

Web-site: [www.karenmulhallen.com/students.html](http://www.karenmulhallen.com/students.html)

### Course Description

Imaginative writing of the post-war period reflects the complexity of contemporary life. In themes as old as folk tales and as current as new visions of space, writers express the dreams and terrors of post-nuclear life. It is an era in which values and beliefs have been challenged and conventional distinctions—illusion and reality, fact and fiction, the sacred and the profane—have been called into questions by writers as diverse as Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje.

We will study a selection of prose texts, and explore together what it means to be a post-modern, what intellectual and historical influences have shaped the culture of the post second World War period. Additionally, we will address some of the following questions:

- How is meaning in literature constructed?
- How do readers, and writers and critics cooperate in creating the meaning of texts?
- How do we understand the postmodern focus on absences, discontinuities and fragments?
- What is fact in a world of fiction?
- What is the relationship between the historical and the fictional?
- In the contemporary media-saturated flood of images, how does the artist, as J.G. Ballard says, “invent reality”?

This upper level course seeks to provide the student with critical skills in reading, an appreciation of the variety of perspectives from which readers approach texts, and a sense of the limitations of interpretation.

Equally important, the course will engage in contemporary debate about the importance of postmodern literature and art, by considering the way in which postmodernism has been labelled destructive and even nihilistic because of its apparent celebration of the chaotic and the ephemeral, and by examining works which in their celebration of

diversity, openness and freedom, value, as Michel Foucault has written, “difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems.”

### **Methodology:**

This is a lecture- discussion course with a component of student— individual or group— presentations. There will be no final examination, but there will be a series of assignments throughout the term. As the reading list is demanding, and we will be moving quickly through the material, in order to not fall behind, students should read the assigned books in advance of class discussion and bring their texts to the class. Periodic and random attendance sheets will be circulated and a grade will be given for attendance.

Students are urged to consider the importance of the following:

- i. the prereading of the text;
- ii the presence of and use of texts by all in each and every session;
- ii. regular engagement in discussions.

The assigned readings are taken from the enormous body of contemporary international literature. However, contemporary Canadian literature is one of the most exciting and important literatures of our own time. Any student who wishes to focus exclusively on the contemporary in Canadian literature may do so in selecting texts for assignments, in substituting pre-approved texts for specific assignments, or by special arrangement and consultation with myself. For a research assignment, for example, it would be possible to substitute a work by Thomas King or by Tomson Highway, among other Canadian aboriginal voices, for the assigned text by Louise Erdrich.

The translation from printed text to film is an exciting facet of contemporary culture. Most of the texts we are looking at together have been adapted into film. Students are encouraged to view the film responses to the texts under investigation and to consider the different requirements and effects of the different media.

The development of long graphic narrative texts is another compelling aspect of post-war culture. These new ‘comic books’ or ‘comix’ explore a wide range of textual strategies, including biography, autobiography, investigative journalism, social history, myth and romance. These graphic texts seem to represent a new development in the history of the book, and are in many cases works of genius. We will be discussing one of these extraordinary works in class, but others might be explored for assignments.

### **CONTEMPORARY OR POST-MODERN REQUIRED TEXTS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION**

Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, 1966

E. L. Doctorow, Ragtime, 1975

Toni Morrison, Beloved, 1987

Louise Erdrich, Tracks, 1988  
Michael Ondaatje, The English Patient, 1992  
Barbara Gowdy, We So Seldom Look On Love, 1992  
Gil Courtemanche, A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali, 2000  
W. G Sebald, Austerlitz, 2001  
Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis I, The Story of a Childhood, 2003

## **Evaluation**

### **Assignment Number 1 25%**

A brief essay on one aspect of the cultural context of **one of the required** texts for the course.

This assignment is due the second week of February, 2006.

### **Assignment Number 2 35%**

A formal Research Paper using one critical approach, such as feminism, new historicism, reader-response, or psychological criticism, and showing how the approach illuminates the chosen text. Texts should be selected from the required reading list. Should you wish to discuss a text not on the list, the text will need to be cleared with me in advance of the assignment's due date, which will be the second week of March.

### **Assignment Number 3 30%**

An individual, or group presentation, of approximately twenty minutes, on one aspect of the course using a text not discussed in class. Your choice of text, and the name or names of those working on the presentation, will need to be submitted to me immediately after study week at the end of February 2006. I will make up a schedule for presentations after I receive all submissions.

After the presentation you will need to submit to me your outline or notes for the presentation.

### **Assignment Number 4 10%**

Attendance and participation. Attendance will be taken at random.

## **LATE ESSAY AND MISSED ASSIGNMENT POLICY**

Students are responsible for contacting me if they are having trouble making assignment due dates. In general, there will be no extensions on due dates. I do not deduct marks for late assignments. If the assignment is accepted and it is late, except under extraordinary circumstances, the assignment will simply be recorded as received and, ordinarily, will be returned without comment.

## Lecture-Discussion Topics

Week One January 9

Introduction, postmodernism, critical approaches, parody. pastiche. quotation. writing across genres

Week Two January 16

Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, post-colonialism, feminism, new historicism, intertextuality

Week Three January 23

E.L.Doctorow, Ragtime, post-modernism and the polyphonic text, film and the novel, fact and fiction, history as narrative, the volatility of the self

Week Four January 30

Toni Morrison, Beloved, writing history, story-telling, interpretation, reclamation

Week Five February 6

Louise Erdrich, Tracks, oral and print cultures, traditional and postmodern narratives, the nature of the narrator

Week Six February 13

Michael Ondaatje, The English Patient, structure in fiction, politics and the personal, rootlessness

Week Seven February 20

READING WEEK

Week Eight February 27

Barbara Gowdy, We So Seldom Look On Love, transgressive subjects, short stories and films, writing the body

Week Nine March 6

Gil Courtmanche, A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali, the politics of female space, documentary and the novel, the non-fiction novel, filming Rwanda

Week Ten March 13
W.G. Sebald, <u>Austerlitz</u> , looking back, the past and the present, narrative strategies
Week Eleven March 20
Marjane Satrapi, <u>Persepolis I, The Story of a Childhood</u> , illuminations or illustrations?
Week Twelve March 27
Student Presentations
Week Thirteen April 3
Student Presentations
Week Fourteen April 10
Student Presentations
Classes End April 13, 2006
Examination period April 17-April 30, 2006