

ENGL 124

Contemporary Literature

General Description

Course Goals

For our purposes, “contemporary” literature refers to the literature of the present generation. This time span of thirty years or so presents us with a large quantity of what is considered “literature.” The quantity of contemporary literature as well as its very newness make it difficult to know how what we read today may be regarded tomorrow. Though opinions may change in the future, you can be sure that your course materials all reflect important trends in thinking and in writing. Taken together, they should help you develop a sense of what contemporary literature is and does, so that when you have finished the course you will be able to read and to form your own opinions about what you read.

English 124 offers you an opportunity to read several contemporary poems, plays, essays, stories, and novels and to confront these works in terms of their own characteristics as well as in terms of your responses to them. Many of the writers represented here believe no general truths exist unless a single writer or reader perceives them. Thus, truth lies not in the general but in the particular. To apprehend and experience the world in a way that yields knowledge, individuals must begin with themselves and work from themselves outward. If we want to read contemporary literature, we must begin by accepting that the personal reaction of each writer, as well as of each reader, is vital.

In keeping with this personal stance of contemporary literature, the assignments will ask you to express something of your own reactions, as well as to couple those reactions to some specific literary analysis. There are four goals for you to achieve:

- become familiar with the styles and concerns of contemporary literature

- learn critical ideas and vocabulary so that your appreciation and understanding of what you read is increased
- gain confidence in your own perceptions and ability to enjoy reading literature on your own
- develop confidence in your ability to express your critical evaluations of the literature in a clear and persuasive written format.

Course Materials

The works required for this course are the following:

- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.
- Margaret Edson, *Wit*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1999.
- David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Barbara Kingsolver, ed., *The Best American Short Stories 2001*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Alan Lightman, ed. *The Best American Essays 2000*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Toni Morrison, *Sula*. New York: Penguin, 2002.
- Mark Salzman, *Lying Awake*. New York: Knopf, 2000.
- Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- Mark Strand, ed., *Contemporary American Poets*. New York: Signet, 2000.

These textbooks may be purchased from the Higher Grounds Bookstore, located in the Friday Center. You may use the book order form included in this manual to order your texts. You can also order them online at <https://s4.its.unc.edu/HigherGrounds>.

Feel free to ask for suggestions for additional reading, if you like, as you and I correspond. I will try to suggest additional titles to suit your personal interests. The most important suggestion I can give you is that whatever you read, be curious and read curiously.

Course Plan

Based on the nine books, there are thirteen **readings** in the course. This manual will introduce each reading and guide your thinking. Your **first written assignment**, or **pre-assignment**, follows the first reading. While you will not be

graded on this, you will be required to prepare and submit it. Then, there are seven **written assignments** that ask you to write about one or more of the works of literature you've read. You must complete these assignments and send them in to your instructor for evaluation. Your grade will be based on these general criteria:

- how thoroughly you do what the assignment calls for
- how insightfully you relate what you already know and have learned in the course to the readings under discussion
- how clearly you express your points and how fully you support and illustrate them.

Your Reading Journal

You will be assisted in the preparation of your assignments by keeping a **reading journal**, where you will record your observations, thoughts, and questions. Special boxed sections in this manual called "Questions for Your Journal" will, I hope, prompt your thinking and writing about the works in your reading journal. Many of the questions and suggestions are intended to help you come to significant observations on your own. You are not required to write answers to the questions in these boxes; you are free to use them as you will. However, you **are** required to write in your journal, and you will profit by considering at least some of the questions as you write. Ideally, your reading journal explorations will stimulate you to synthesize what you've learned and will help you prepare to write your assignments. I hope this questioning and analysis, as it alternates with answering and synthesis, will lead to an ongoing dialogue between you and me.

Note that there are two basic ways to approach writing in your journal, and you'll need to do both. First, at least once a week (perhaps more), write down your impressions of what you've been reading in the course and how, in terms of your own life, you react and relate to what you've been reading. Second, use the journal as a place to make specific observations, prompted by the Questions for Your Journal boxes, or to ask questions of your own about the meaning, structure, imagery, technique, and the like, of the works you're reading. Then try to answer these questions for yourself. Both approaches to journal writing are important, and they should allow you flexibility to create

entries that are meaningful to you while also reflecting your efforts in the course.

No matter how you approach your journal, writing about what you've read will have several good results:

- It will help you to remember details about what you've read—characters, events, and themes—and thereby help in studying for the final examination.
- It will help you recognize your weaknesses in understanding.
- It will raise questions you might not otherwise think about.
- It will stimulate observations you might not otherwise have made.
- It will provide ideas for your written assignments.
- It will help you connect your reading to the real world.

The length of time you spend on your reading journal and the degree to which you use it to stimulate thought will depend on you. After you finish Reading 4, you must send your journal in for my comments, though I will not grade it at that time. At the end of the course, you will submit your journal as an assignment for grading. Note that the “correctness” of your ideas is **not** a criterion for evaluation. When you finish the course, I will judge your journal on two criteria only: **length** and **engagement**.

Length: You should make a journal entry for each of the thirteen readings assigned in the course. Try to use complete sentences. Writing complete sentences will force you to have complete thoughts. I suggest you consider one side of a standard-sized (8.5 x 11) page as a *minimum* for each journal entry you make.

Engagement: Engagement means the degree to which you interact with the material—carry the thoughts further, challenge your thinking, try to illustrate your ideas, or in some way deal with the readings so as to make them your own. What questions does the reading raise for you? How could you answer these questions?

Number your journal pages, date each entry, and include a

heading that identifies the work or works being discussed.

Grading and Final Exam

Your journal will be evaluated as follows:

A: more than 25 full pages, each reading considered, consistent engagement with the text.

B: 20 pages or so, each reading considered, frequent engagement with the text.

C: 15 pages or so, some observations about each reading, genuine effort, though entries as a whole may be more mechanical than thoughtful.

D: fewer than 15 pages or failure to consider each reading in some way.

In addition to the grades you receive on the reading journal and the written assignments, the final examination will help determine your grade for the course. The final exam will have two parts—an identification section that asks you to identify and comment on passages from the works you've read, and an essay section that asks you to write about some ideas and techniques you will have observed and learned about during the course. The identifications and essays will be drawn from the discussions in this manual, including the *Questions for Your Journal* boxes. **Note that no matter how well you do on the reading journal and written assignments, you cannot pass the course without passing the final examination.**

There is no midterm examination. In determining your final grade, the written assignments will count 60 percent, the reading journal 25 percent, and the final examination 15 percent.