The Art and Science of U.S. Modernism

The allied artistic and literary movements of the early twentieth century known as modernism continue the project of realism, dramatizing and critiquing current scientific thinking for a wide audience. In U.S. literary modernism in particular, we see a strain of anti-modernity sentiment demonstrated in the poetry, stories and novels of major figures. This is not surprising, given that the Second Industrial Revolution is well underway. However, can we make a connection to the quantification of personality at the start of the twentieth century that is not technologically deterministic? Gertrude Stein’s disruption of language indicates her inquiry into the science of the self, W. E. B. DuBois demonstrates the creation of new histories as well as the breakdown of disciplinary borders: these and others show a disruption of perfect communication and assumptions about the audience through the interweaving of media and the development of private language. We will investigate these issues in work by Stein and Paul Bowles. We will also see if this scientific angle makes it possible to open up the canon of modernists to include contemporaries such as Henry Adams, Zora Neale Hurston, as well as Du Bois.

Course Grade

Average of in-class assignments and quizzes 40%
Final exam on last day of class 60%

As in the American system, a grade of A (1.0) is awarded for a score greater than 92%. An A- (1.3) is awarded for 90%-92%, and so on. Less than 60% is failing (5.0/nicht bestanden).

Textbooks

We will read three texts in full that you should purchase (Three Lives, The Souls of Black Folk, and The Sheltering Sky). The other texts are available online; please see the links on Moodle.

Magister Students

Magister students wishing to get credit for this course must write a Belegarbeit or a Hausarbeit. Please consult with me before the semester’s end. Brief proposals are due no later than 23 June and preliminary bibliographies are due 7 July. Final papers are due no later than 1 September.

Course Standards

In order for this classroom community to function, all members must adhere to these guidelines:

Attendance – On-time attendance is a strict requirement of the course. Students with more than two absences automatically fail. There is no such thing as “excused absences” and doctor’s notes are not necessary. Students who miss less than 20 minutes of class (arrive late, take a break, or leave early) are recorded as late, the equivalent of one-third of an absence. Missing more than 20 minutes counts as an absence. Deadlines are in effect even if you are not in class.

Decorum – Please limit your comments and questions to the material at hand, helping to progress the matter of discussion without distracting the class from it. You should not hold side conversations. All electronic devices must be turned off (silenced is not sufficient); this includes phones, pagers, games, laptops, handhelds, players or recorders. You must pay attention; eating and sleeping are not permitted. Visitors need the advance approval of the instructor.

Honesty – Cheating and plagiarism are not tolerated and may result in punishment that includes failure of the course. You may not use notes or other materials during quizzes or exams. Please be advised that a person who allows someone to cheat (by allowing someone to see a test paper or communicating test questions, for instance) is just as guilty as the person who does the cheating and will be equally punished.
Originality – By handing in work for this class (assignments, quizzes, exams, or other projects) you attest that they are your own original effort. The work you hand in must never have been handed in to fulfill the requirements of another class.

Plagiarism – Plagiarism is a serious offense to the instructor and the university that at the least will be punished by failure of the course. By handing in assignments, quizzes, or exams, you attest that they are your own original work. You are reminded that to best combat plagiarism, you should close all source materials when writing. In addition, you must cite all sources outside of your own experience. You must never use someone else’s words in your own document unless you use quote marks and an appropriate citation system. Further information will be provided in class.

Tentative Schedule

21 April.  Introduction


12 May.  Stein – *Tender Buttons*, “Rooms.”

19 May.  Stein – *Three Lives*, “Melanctha” (the middle part of the novel).


23 June.  Hurston – “Sweat.”


21 July.  Final Exam.