

## ENG4100 MAJOR AUTHORS: MODERNIST AND POSTMODERN WRITERS”

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### COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, we will study the works of some of the major writers in English literature in the twentieth century (with the exception of one text, *White Teeth*, which was published in 2000 and is therefore strictly speaking a twenty-first century text) through close reading. The chronological treatment of the works will allow us to explore the progression from literary modernism to postmodernism in the twentieth century. However, the course is not interested in stable, fixed definitions of “modernism” or “postmodernism,” nor is it primarily **about** modernism or postmodernism. Although there will be reference to philosophically or theoretically important thinkers throughout, the focus is really on the literary texts, and their varied and idiosyncratic modernisms and postmodernisms. Deliberately basing our course on very broad conceptions of “modernism” and “postmodernism,” we will not work with a fixed, exhaustive list of characteristics, but instead discover our own list in the works studied.

The course will examine a variety of literary themes and critical issues, such as identity, power, gender, purpose, religion, terrorism, conformity, transgression, genetics, multiculturalism, and the interaction between form and content. It will also analyze the socio-historical contexts behind the works, in order to understand how the historical background helped shape the works. This will encourage a comparative approach between the authors and their context, with the purpose of deepening students’ understanding of the course material, and of how writers mutually influenced each other.

Apart from this focus on text and context, the course will ask students to actively link themes and theoretical ideas to our own context of Hong Kong through the tutorial presentations and a short visual/textual assignment to be shared with coursemates on Blackboard. This will enable us to see how the literary works covered are connected to the space in which we are studying them (in our own lives and in Hong Kong), and to practise expressing these links to others.

Some of the questions the course will ask are: What were the contributions made by a particular author to the development of literature? Are there any common themes we can discover in works by different writers, and why were these themes so important to them? What do the writing styles that different writers have tell us about their methodology and philosophy? How did the earlier authors engage with modernity, and the later ones with postmodernity? And how are these works directly relevant to us here in Hong Kong today?

The goals of this course are:

1. To examine some of the key works in the twentieth century, analyzing their thematic and formal aspects and innovations.
2. To evaluate the importance of the major writers studied.
3. To explore the links between literary issues and changing sociohistorical conditions in the twentieth century.
4. To examine the subtle shift from modernism to postmodernism in the texts studied.
5. To reflect on the links between the works, our own lives, and the Hong Kong context
6. To develop further skills in critical and creative thinking, and oral and written communication.

SCHEDULE

Week	Topic	Works
1	Introduction to the course: <b>major</b> authors? Modernity? Postmodernity?	-----
2	Social conformity and superiority; realism and modernism	H. G. Wells, “The Country of the Blind”
3	Power; transgression, terrorism and anarchy; socialism and revolution; modernist ambiguity	Joseph Conrad, <i>The Secret Agent</i>
4		
5		
6	Identity; gender; class; the social development of English literature	Virginia Woolf, <i>Orlando</i>
7		
8	Love and gender in the postmodern era; the socioeconomics of English literature; realism vs postmodernism	A. S. Byatt, <i>Possession: A Romance</i> (focusing on chapters 1-3, 6-7, 12-14, 20, 23, 26-28)
9		
10	Genetics, race and multiculturalism in postmodernity; realism vs postmodernism revisited	Zadie Smith, <i>White Teeth</i> (focusing on chapters 1-4, 9, 11-12, 16-20)
11		
12	Wrapping up <i>White Teeth</i> ; conclusion to the course	

REQUIRED TEXTS

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Wordsworth Classics, 1997)  
A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (Vintage Books, 1991); ISBN 10: 0099800403  
Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (Penguin Books, 2001 or 2006)  
Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Wordsworth Classics, 1995)

It is important that students use the editions of the texts by these specific publishers, because any page references in class will be based on them. In the case of *The Secret Agent* and *Orlando*, the year of publication does not matter, as long as the publisher is identical.

Although I greatly encourage students to read the novels *Possession* and especially *White Teeth* (which is great fun) in their entirety, I will only absolutely require the chapters designated above for the purposes of assessment. These two are quite substantial novels, and in order to allow students to come to terms with them, I have designated one week off for the purpose of reading and understanding them. Please make good use of this week.

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

The *Cambridge Introductions* to two of the four main authors studied in this course (Conrad and Beckett) are excellent as a starting point for further research.

Some more recommended reference works include:

Nicola Allen and David Simmons (eds.), *Reassessing the Twentieth-Century Canon: From Joseph Conrad to Zadie Smith* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Nick Bentley (ed.), *British Fiction of the 1990s* (Routledge, 2007)

Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2002)

Peter Childs, *Modernism* (Routledge, 2000)

Jane De Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006)

S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *A Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Blackwell, 2010)

Louisa Hadley, *The Fiction of A.S. Byatt* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 2003)

Tim Middleton, *Joseph Conrad* (Routledge, 2006)

Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Brian W. Shaffer (ed.), *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000* (Blackwell, 2008)

Michael Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester University Press, 1999)

As with most reference books, these are not meant to be read from cover to cover; instead, make use of the indices at the front and the back of these reference books to choose the topics or chapters you are looking for.

Additional reference material will also be introduced during the lectures, and quoted in the Powerpoint lecture slides.

#### ASSESSMENT

Attendance and participation: 10%

Tutorial presentation: 10%

Midterm paper: 30%

Final paper: 50%

## Department of English

### **Grade A / Excellent: Outstanding performance on ALL learning outcomes.**

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would surpass the normal expectations at this level and typical of standards that may be common at higher levels of study. The 'A' grade should be reserved for truly excellent work that exceeds the level expected for the majority of students and are expected to be achieved only by a small minority

### **Grade A- / Very Good: Generally outstanding performance on ALMOST ALL learning outcomes.**

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would fully fulfill the normal expectations at this level and occasionally reaches standards that may be common at higher levels of study.

### **Grade B+ / Good (Plus): HIGH performance on all learning outcomes, OR HIGH performance on some learning outcomes which compensates WELL for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.**

Demonstrates the ability to apply WELL the principles or skills learned in the course in a comprehensive manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level WELL.

### **Grade B / Good: SUBSTANTIAL performance on all learning outcomes, OR SUBSTANTIAL performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.**

Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a MORE COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

### **Grade B- / Good (Minus): GOOD performance on all learning outcomes, OR GOOD performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.**

Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

### **Grade C+ / Fair (Plus): VERY SATISFACTORY performance on the majority of learning outcomes.**

Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a SOMEWHAT SUSTAINED manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

### **Grade C / Fair: SATISFACTORY performance on the majority of learning outcomes.**

Demonstrates the ability to partially apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

**Grade C- / Fair (Minus): SOMEWHAT SATISFACTORY performance on A NUMBER OF learning outcomes.**

Demonstrates the ability to SOMEWHAT apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the BARE basic requirement at this level.

**Grade D+ / Pass (Plus): BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on A FEW learning outcomes.**

Addresses the course inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in some areas while responding minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

**Grade D / Pass: ALMOST BARELY satisfactory performance on VERY FEW learning outcomes.**

Addresses the course inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in very few areas while responding very minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

**Grade F / Failure: Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.**

Fails to address the course and likely does not understand what the course requires. In other words, the work completely misses the point.