499-01 Senior Seminar: Modern American Poetry: Competing Modernisms

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Senior Seminar

Modern American Poetry: Competing Modernisms

Texts

Axelrod et al, *The New Anthology of American Poetry Vol. Two: Modernisms 1900-1950.* Texts on Canvas. Documents in Word or PDF are found in the “Files” page; links to online texts are found on the “Pages” page.

Resources

Two useful online resources for the study of modern American poetry are the Modern American Poetry website (MAPS) ([https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/index.htm](https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/index.htm)), and the Poetry Foundation website ([https://www.poetryfoundation.org/](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/)). The former is more academic, and is linked to an anthology (but not the one we’re using!); the latter is designed for a more general audience but provides useful overviews. Both are fully searchable.

Additionally, Cambridge University Press publishes a series of Companions to modern poetry, which include thorough chapters on numerous figures, movements, and topics connected to our studies. I have put the Xavier library copies on 24-hour reserve. I strongly encourage you to check these out, especially when you are beginning your research. The titles are:

*The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis & Lee M. Jenkins
*A History of Modernism Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis & Lee M. Jenkins

Description

The first half of the 20th century, especially the years from before World War I to World War II, witnessed unprecedented changes in literature, as well as in the other arts. These changes, many of them as abrupt and violent as the times in which they occurred, can be seen perhaps more clearly in the genre of poetry than in any other. Our seminar will explore American poetry of this era, considering its formal and thematic transformations, as a chapter in the cultural narrative to which we now give the name *modernism*. Modernism in turn may be understood as part of an ongoing historical dialectic, as indicated by our inevitable recourse to terms like *modernity* and *modernization* as well.
Modernism, however, takes many forms, claims many histories, and seeks to accomplish a variety of cultural tasks: hence the idea, that will be fundamental to our study, of competing modernisms. We will consider a number of modernist visions, including occult or esoteric modernism, everyday or ordinary modernism, linguistic or formal modernism, and the modernisms of difference (modernisms of race, class, and gender). We will quickly see how these competing visions intersect and contribute, sometimes jarringly, to the work of individual poets and to individual poems. In our study, rather than seek to comprehend the entire career of a few major figures, we will look at a relatively wide range of modern poets and specific poems which represent complex modernist formations and modes of poetic discourse. We will also consider some of the important statements on poetics by modern poets, in order to determine how they themselves conceived of their works.

The Senior Seminar: Format & Expectations*

The senior seminar serves as the culmination of your work as an English major, your capstone experience, and I encourage you to make the most of it. This means several things. Most importantly, the seminar is student-centered, and I hope you will make the effort to create a true learning community, which is to say that all participants are responsible to their fellow students. It is not a lecture course, in which the professor is the focal point of knowledge and information; rather, the goal of this seminar is to collectively produce knowledge through conversation, critical thinking, independent research, and challenging each other’s ideas. In this course, we regularly ask questions of each other with the goal of contributing to and expanding our understanding of the subject. You are expected to attend every class and be well prepared, with thoughtful responses to the readings and other assignments. You cannot pass this course without speaking regularly, and you are expected to contribute at an advanced level that reflects the close reading, research, and critical skills you’ve gleaned while studying English at Xavier.

This is a research seminar, and your main work for the course is your thesis, an extensive argumentative paper, supported by original research, and modeled partly on articles typically found in academic literary journals. In writing this paper, you will engage in a step-by-step process over many weeks. You will submit a proposal relatively early in the term, after dialogue with your instructor, your study partner (see below), and fellow students. Once your topic is approved, you will enter into your research, producing an annotated bibliography of significant sources. The final step will be the writing of a 15-20 page argumentative, thesis-driven research paper, as well as presenting a 5-minute oral presentation of your research.

While research and writing are at the heart of this course, speaking also plays an important part. In addition to the public oral presentation based on your research paper, and daily participation, you and your study partner will conduct a class on a modern poet. The two of you will talk about various aspects of the poet’s work, analyze a poem or two, and lead discussion, asking and responding to questions based on your acquired expertise.

* Some of the language of this section has been borrowed from the Senior Seminar syllabus of Dr. Kristen Renzi.
The Study Partner

When two scholars of Torah listen to one another, God hears their voices.
—Talmud (Shabbat 63a)

In Jewish tradition, one of the most basic ways of learning Talmud (the immense body of Jewish law) is with a study partner, a chavruta or chavrusa (Aramaic). Technically, the term refers to a pair of students, but one can conventionally use the term to refer to your partner. The word is derived from the Hebrew chaver, “friend,” and a chavruta can indeed be a friend, or become one—though it often helps not to be too close, so you can concentrate on the work! Unlike the student / teacher relationship, the students in a chavruta pair are equals, and often (but not always) at approximately the same level of knowledge and proficiency. As Rabbi Julian Sinclair writes, “Each checks and corrects the misconceptions of the other, questioning and sharpening the other's ideas, while the necessity of articulating one's thoughts to another person brings greater clarity than learning alone. Indeed, the Talmud goes so far as to say that one who learns Torah alone becomes stupid! (Berachot 63a).” More on the chavrusa can be found in the article by that name on Wikipedia.

On the first day of our seminar, each of you will select a chavrusa for the whole term. It could be someone you know, but not necessarily—there are benefits and liabilities in either case. The point is to have someone with whom to consult as you work on your thesis, someone to offer feedback, help you think through a problem, test a hypothesis, etc. You and your chavrusa will also teach a class on a modern poet of your choice. I’m not sure if God will hear your voices as you study modern poetry together (especially since a lot of modernists were also anti-Semites!), but I believe you will quickly come to appreciate that you have a fellow student on whom you can rely.

Course Work & Grading

Thesis (75%):
- Proposal: 15%
- Annotated bibliography: 10%
- Close reading extract: 10%
- Final draft: 30%
- Presentation: 10%

Leading class discussion: 15%

General participation: 10%

Course Policies

Attendance. Regular attendance is a requirement of this course. Barring unforeseen circumstances (illness, family emergencies, etc.), you are expected to come to every class session.

and verbally participate—we expect to hear from you. If a problem arises and you cannot attend, please inform me by email as soon as possible.

**Lateness.** Coming late to class is rude and disruptive, and indicates a lack of respect for your instructor and your fellow students. I expect you to arrive on time. If you must arrive late, please slip in unobtrusively. If I see that you are chronically late (that is, more than once), then we need to talk.

**Due dates.** All assignments are due at the start of class on their assigned date. Remember, nearly all your written work is part of step-by-step process, and must be presented on time. If you have a serious reason that prevents you from turning in your work on time, let me know as soon as possible by email and we will discuss the problem. Otherwise, you are still be expected to turn in your work as soon as possible. Work that is more than 48 hours past the due date will receive zero credit.

**Cell phones.** Cell phone use is forbidden. When class starts, please turn off your phone *immediately* and remove it from your desk. Don’t even think of texting during class—I will ask you to leave.

**Plagiarism.** *All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course.* Any paper with your name on it signifies that you are the author—that the work and ideas it contains are yours, with exceptions indicated by quotation marks and citations. Plagiarism, the unacknowledged use of others’ materials (words AND/OR ideas), is a serious offense, and considered so by the University. If I find that you have plagiarized on any part of an assignment, you will receive, at minimum, an F on the assignment and will potentially fail this course. If you have questions about citation or what constitutes plagiarism, please check with me, or see [https://www.xavier.edu/writingcenter/documents/CitingSourcesandAcademicIntegrity.pdf](https://www.xavier.edu/writingcenter/documents/CitingSourcesandAcademicIntegrity.pdf)
Calendar, August 20-October 9‡

(subject to change)


Aug. 22  Eliot, continued.

Aug. 27  Stein, 89-113 (plus material in Stein folder on Canvas)
Aug. 29  Stein, continued. Discussion: What makes a good thesis proposal?

Sept. 3  Pound, 260-295
Sept. 5  Pound, continued. Discussion: Research sources & strategies.

Sept. 10  Thesis Proposal Workshop
Sept. 12  Stevens, 146-169 (plus “from the Adagia,” on Canvas)

Sept. 17  Stevens, continued. Discussion: Leading class on a modern poet.
Sept. 19  Thesis Proposal due

Sept. 24  H. D., 304-328
Sept. 26  H. D., continued. Williams, 216-257

Oct. 1  Williams, continued. Discussion: Annotated bibliography
Oct. 3  NO CLASS (Fall Holiday)

Oct. 8  Final Thesis Proposal and Preliminary Bibliography due
Oct. 9  Loy, 188-206 (student-led class)

‡ All readings are in the anthology unless otherwise indicated.