

American Fiction in the Twentieth Century
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This survey will address the most important developments in 20th-century American fiction. We will discuss basic thematic concerns and formal methods as well as the respective sociopolitical contexts of the texts, attempting to give a broad overview over a set of fictions that could hardly contain any more differences.

Starting with canonical Modernist novels by writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, we will address the radical break with earlier literary movements and seek to characterize just what Ezra Pound could have meant when he told Modernists to "Make it new!" Building on this discussion, we will then move to the second half of the 20th century and to Postmodernism, with its radical experiments in fiction as carried out by Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, Vladimir Nabokov, Kathy Acker and John Barth. We will take in the Beat Generation and Jack Kerouac along the way, and speak about some of those that fall through the meshes of these broad categories, such as Sylvia Plath.

Special emphasis will be placed on African-American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison; we will also address the role of the ethnic novel by discussing Maxine Hong Kingston and N. Scott Momaday. Genres such as science fiction (Philip K. Dick) and horror (Stephen King) that have been unduly ignored by literary scholars for a long time are included as well. The overview ends with an outlook on contemporary fiction, exemplified by writers like Richard Powers or Mark Z. Danielewski.

The class is intended as a broad introductory survey in order to provide an audience that is not familiar with any or most of these texts with basic information about the major developments in American fiction in the last century. While we will therefore have to cover a lot of ground, we will nevertheless take our time to read selected samples from the texts in order to illustrate their characteristics and make them more accessible and memorable.