20th-Century American Literature: Genres and Perspectives

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This course introduces students to fundamental questions in American literary history and canon formation in 20th Century. The objectives of the course is to place different genres of literary texts and some literary movements within their historical contexts and improve students’ abilities to read, write, speak publicly, and formulate analyses and arguments, as well as developing students’ humane attainments by reading aesthetically. Emphasis of this class will be placed on students’ analytical skills, close reading ability, verbal articulations of interdisciplinary scholarship, and critical thinking. The focus is depth rather than breadth.
Course Learning Outcomes

- **Course Outcome 1:**
  - Students will be able to interpret major writers/works of 20th Century American Literature in a historical and social context.

- **Course Outcome 2:**
  - Students will learn to appreciate literature by reading aesthetically and not just simply to glean information;

- **Course Outcome 3:**
  - Students will learn to analyze, compare and evaluate works of literature – read between the lines and become a professional reader.
Course Outcome 4:

Students will be able to improve their analytical skills by understanding rhetorical strategies: that form is related to function, that meaningful writing requires authors to choose the most effective voice and genre according to their purpose and audience;

Level of the students: Graduate students
Required Texts of Different Genres

- Poetry
- Short Story
- Drama
- Novel
- Film
Unit one: Elizabeth Bishop, 1911–1979

Poetry: “The Fish”, 1946
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6K89pZCIcDo

Required Readings[1]:
Unit Two: F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1896-1940

❖ Short Story: “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” 1922

❖ Required Readings:


Unit three: Arthur Miller, 1915-2005

- **Drama:** *Death of a Salesman*, 1949

- **Required Readings:**
Unit Four: J. D. Salinger, 1919-2010

- **Novel Study:** *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951
- **Key Points:** stream of consciousness narration, the hero’s journey archetype, universal themes, flashback, framing, symbolism
- **Writing Activity:** Comprehensive Exam
- In-class section covering symbols and analyzing the creation of meaning in the novel;
- Processed out-of-class section concerning universal themes
Required Readings

Rebel Without a Cause is a American drama film about emotionally confused suburban, middle-class teenagers filmed in CinemaScope.

Key Points: cinematography, camera angle, shot duration, close-up, literary elements, Hollywood Narrative Cinema
Film Review: Rebel Without a Cause

Packet of film reviews from the time of the film’s release in the 1950’s and its re-release to theaters in the 1990’s

Rebel Without a Cause - Trailer – YouTube
John Barth (1930- )
The Floating Opera, 1956

Required Readings:
Toni Morrison, 1931-

- Required Readings:
- **Love** (2003)
Spatiality and Somaesthetics: A Case Study on Joyce Carol Oates’s Fiction

Teaching-as-research

Question-motivation Mold of Teaching
Discovery, problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity are features shared by great research and inspiring learning environments, I integrate my approach to research and learning, so not only are our students engaged with the research our academics are undertaking, but also with inquiry-based approaches to research.
Lead-in:
1. What do you know about Joyce Carol Oates, and do you think Oates’ writing is too violent?
2. What is the root cause of the conflicts which frequently appear in Oates’s fiction?
3. Many of Joyce Carol Oates’s fiction disclose the discipline and punishment that individuals suffered by describing the injured body images; therefore, what is the author’s creative motivation of depicting such images?
Solving the Corresponding Problems:

1. Within the culture context of spatial turn, Joyce Carol Oates manifests her focus towards spatiality, specially the urban themes.

2. Power and Space: Foucault and Nietzsche’s theories applied to analyze Oates’ fiction.

Joyce Carol Oates (1938- ) is among one of the most prolific writers in the contemporary United States, whose work reveals her to be among the most sensitive recorders of the intellectual, social and the emotional dynamics of our time.
Oates’s literary career spans almost fifty years and her creation is so diversified and includes different aesthetic modes and genres. Such multi-perspective studies encompass psychoanalysis, feminism, tragic vision, violence and social criticism, etc. .
Required Texts: *Wonderland* (1971)

Required Readings:

1. Do you think Oates’s writing is violent?

- So frequently has Oates been asked “Why is Your Writing so Violent?” that in a 1981 essay she uses this question as its title and responded that this is an “insulting,” an “ignorant,” a “sexist” question (Oates 1981, 35). Oates holds the view that violence in her fiction is based on the even harder reality and her obligation as a writer is to depict them with authenticity. In her case, this dark reality becomes a potentially overwhelming convergence of forces—natural, social, psychological—against which her characters pit their human will to endure.
Professional Reading:

“Key words” searching:
We...have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time; but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason which tell us it is false.

---Borges, *Labyrinths*
**Time:** “the air looks as if it is coming apart—shredding into molecules of sand or grit. It is December 14, 1939.” (20)

时间之后蕴含的文化背景：美国经济大萧条

**Place:** It is more than thirty years ago and raining, a cold, fierce, driving rain, rushing across the streets of that town—Yewville, New York—out of a thick, boiling, December sky. (19)
His mother was going to have another baby. In this little house, all of them crowded together.(25)

All of them crowded into this house, this shanty, with its two back rooms and its “front room” and its kitchen.(26)
Each day he was away from home, consciously “away” from his home, and yearning to return. He felt himself gravitation toward that house, drawn to it as if by an actual, tangible force. (118)

Dr. Pederson: “But here, Jesse, look here,” he would say, pulling out a giant blueprint, “here are plans for my addition; you can see the operation theaters here, these large areas, and along this side private rooms for special patients….”(119)

Dr Pedersen: “…The destiny of man is to claim new territory, to pursue the infinite, to create maps and boundaries and lines of latitude and longitude with which to explain reality—the terrible darknesses and odors of reality, …”(124)
2. What is the root cause of the conflicts which frequently appear in Oates’s fiction?

Yet more than dramatizing the nightmares of the American society, Oates is delving deep into the psyche that lies under these nightmares. By pointing out repeatedly in her fiction the individual’s vulnerable position that his self-delusion and errors would likely bring him into and the limitations and frustration that his environment imposes upon him, Oates suggests her major thematic concern – the difficulty of the materialization of the romantic dream of absolute self and absolute freedom. And such theme is always showed in conflicts of plot in her fiction.
3. Many of Joyce Carol Oates’s fiction disclose the discipline and punishment that individuals suffered by describing the injured body images; therefore, what is the author’s creative motivation of depicting such images?

- For example, the novel *Wonderland* (1971), different from *them*, accommodates to some extent to a wish for transcendence from the obsessed personality and the extreme individualism as well as the distressing environments. By describing the injured body images, the novel reveals the implied ideology of overthrowing the body mechanism in the text and highlights the importance of body in the course of human cognition of self.
Since the influence of the trends of thought of Oates’s time have played a vital role in the growth of Oates as a writer, it is necessary to know about the social upheaval and the intellectual disturbance of her era. Over the past decade or so, a number of historians of science and historical geographers, alert to the situated nature of scientific knowledge production and reception and to the migratory patterns of science on the move, have called for more explicit treatment of the geographies of past scientific knowledge. Space and place have been marginalized for long periods of its history. In the twentieth century’s last years, however, space/place reflections have moved out from the margins to several sectors of sciences and the humanities in what has been summarized as “the spatial turn.” The methodology of this project will be illustrated from the following three aspects accordingly:
1. Within the culture context of spatial turn, Joyce Carol Oates manifests her focus towards spatiality, specially the urban themes.

- In the novel, Oates skillfully features the protagonist’s two extreme tendencies (violence and romance) with fire image to unfold modern man’s thirst to break through spatial boundary and find solution with the philosophy of irrationality. I tend to prove the homogeneity between “violence” and “the production of space” in Oates’s fiction hence induces Oates’s motivation of writing, that is, advocating irrationality and break through spatial restriction. In *them*, social environment is comprehensible only insofar as its ideational substructure (conceived space) corresponds to that which can be visually represented (perceived space).
1. Within the culture context of spatial turn, Joyce Carol Oates manifests her focus towards spatiality, specially the urban themes.

- Here I would apply Henri Lefebvre’s space theory as the foremost theoretical foundation. Lefebvre’s analysis of the spatial subtext of modern urban social reality, in particular, its conceptual, perceptual, and communal spheres of influence, helps reveal a pattern that cuts across the realist and modern text’s representations of space: the attempt to create or discover a cohesive spatial environment at a time of great social, cultural, and technological transformation in America. In all, this part will establish the principles and methods underlying the spatial practice of realism.
Spatiality and Somaesthetics: A Case Study on Joyce Carol Oates’s Fiction
Spatiality has risen to become a key concept in literary and cultural studies, with critical focus on the “spatial turn” presenting a new approach to the traditional literary analyses of time and history. The major theorists of spatiality includes Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, David Harvey, Edward Soja, Georg Lukacs, and Fredric Jameson.
David Harvey is the Distinguished Professor of anthropology and geography at the City University of New York (CUNY). Harvey authored many books and essays that have been prominent in the development of modern geography as a discipline. Time–space compression (also known as space–time compression and time–space distantiation), first articulated in 1989 by geographer David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, refers to any phenomenon that alters the qualities of and relationship between space and time.
Time-space compression refers to the set of processes that cause the relative distances between places (i.e., as measured in terms of travel time or cost) to contract, effectively making such places grow “closer.” The idea of a “shrinking world” is not new and, in the face of rapid advances in travel, such as the jet airplane, and communications (especially the Internet), has entered into the public geographical imagination.
In geography, the topic was long an integral part of the work of those who study transportation and communications systems. In the 1970s and 1980s, Marxists, led by David Harvey, recast the process as not simply a set of technological advancements but as part of the general process of capitalist commodity production and capital accumulation, particularly the reduction in the turnover time of capital. More recently, cultural theorists, historians, and others interested in the perception of space have invoked the notion to understand the sense of disorientation that often accompanies periods of major technological change.
Time-space compression often occurs as a result of technological innovations that condense or elide spatial and temporal distances, including technologies of communication, travel, and economics.

Plate 3.1 The shrinking map of the world through innovations in transport which ‘annihilate space through time’.
The modernist destruction of the ancient urban fabric

Plate 1.4 The boulevard art of Paris, attacking the modernist destruction of the ancient urban fabric: a cartoon by J. F. Batellier in ‘Sans Retour, Ni Consigne’
Here are some quotes of Albert Einstein which speak of the spirit and relate to Harvey’s text:

“A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. The true value of a human being is determined by the measure and the sense in which they have obtained liberation from the self. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive.”
2. Power and Space: Foucault, Nietzsche and Oates’ fiction

Foucault’s theory and methodology on power and discourse can cast light on the research of Oates’s fiction for the textual and theoretical coherence between Oates’s text and Foucault’s theory, we can see that Nietzsche has greatly influenced Oates’s writing. Plainly, then, there is a direct line from Nietzsche to Foucault. Therefore Foucault’s discourse theory and, in particular, his concept of spatial configuration will be a viable foundation for an in-depth look at Oates’s fiction *Angle of Light* and *Foxfire*. The relevance of Foucault’s discourse theory centers around two potential functions. First, it provides an expansive framework for describing the broad ideological and political influences impacting the individuals in Oates’s fiction. Second, Foucault’s mode of discourse inquiry provides a systematic analysis of the multiple, unparallel dimensions of Oates’s mode of narrative.
Joyce Carol Oates’s fiction *Wonderland* and *Mudwoman* disclose the discipline and punishment that individuals suffer by describing the injured body images, and then critically represents the management of the body politics in American society. By introducing the concept of Somaesthetics, this part will reveal the implied ideology of overthrowing the body mechanism in the text and highlights the importance of body in the course of human cognition of self, aiming at connecting opposites, such as theory and practice, Metaphysics and secular status, art and everyday life, etc, which in order to restore the original meaning of philosophy and aesthetics as the art of living, and achieve aesthetic contemplation and ethical care of philosophy and aesthetics to the body.
After that, a brand new “wonderland” of “Body without organs” is demonstrated. In Shusterman’s *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (2008), “the body is our basic medium of perception and action, but focused attention to its feelings and movements has long been criticized as a damaging distraction that also ethically corrupts through self-absorption.”(3) What is note speaking that “Shusterman reorients study of this crucial nexus toward a more fruitful, pragmatic direction that reinforces important but neglected connections between philosophy of mind, ethics, politics, and the pervasive aesthetic dimensions of everyday life,”(3) that is what Oates’s as a writer intentional want to realize in her fictional world as an ideal mode of society.
The significance of this project lies in the following two major theoretical contributions and innovations: Firstly, Space theory is adopted to analyze the textual conflicts in Oates’s fiction; Secondly, Building a bridge between Lefebvre and Foucault’s space theory.

Before discussing Oates’s fiction, two questions should be clarified. **Firstly, why do we choose spatiality as a pivotal perspective?** As Kirby remarks, “space helps us recognize that ‘subjects’ are determined by their anchoring within particular bodies or countries” (Kirby 1996, 7). More to the point, perhaps, is her argument that it is necessary “to view subjectivity as a place where we live, a space we are, on the one hand, compelled to occupy, and, on the other hand, as a space whose interiority affords a place for reaction and response” (35).
This suggests an explicit call for a spatially reconstituted subject in response to the need to address reflexivity, agency, and action without loosing sight of social determination. Kirby echoes this call in the following way: “Space provides precisely the substance we have been looking for to provide a multidimensional analysis of subjectivity, one that can be truly material without losing sight of the vitality of the inner life of individual subjects, that can incorporate ‘experience’ into broader categories such as global economic relations, while maintaining the flexibility and the fluidity for imagining ways of transforming future subjects” (150). While Kirby’s focus is more on the psychic mode of subject formation, her insights help inform a project of constituting the place-making subject, which is what Oates emphasized in her writing.
Secondly, why do we need to include these two philosophers’ thoughts in the project? Herein, the answer is: Both of them have predicted the coming of spatial era in 1970s and their theoretical systems are compatible in spatiality. Lefebvre is considered by many to be the patron saint of the study of space. His rescue of space from the scholarly, Cartesian shadows which it occupied in much of Western intellectual thought is celebrated as a landmark achievement by many scholars in geography, urban studies, architecture, and other “spatial” disciplines. Like Foucault, Lefebvre finds in modernity a world where representations presuppose one’s experience of the phenomenal world. Indeed, “representations of space” have become so central to modernity that they are capable of producing space.
In Mitchell’s terms, the space thus produced is the “world of exhibitions.” Representations of space are necessarily ideological, and are mobilized in the service of power, for they conceive an idealized space in which the needs of capital, of the state, and other forms of social power, are met. In the service of power, representations of space produce what Lefebvre terms “abstract space.” Abstract space “is characterized by both the fragmentation and homogenization of space, and both processes are the result of the commodification of space” (Stewart 1995, 614). In the 1970s, Michel Foucault and Lefebvre share their common view upon the matter of space. In 1974, Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* published, and Foucault also elaborated his spatial view in the essay “Text/Context of Other Spaces”, published in 1986. Both theorists happened to hold the similar view, and the theoretical systems of both of them are also consistent. We could say, Lefebvre and Foucault jointly proclaimed the coming of spatial age.
Thank you!
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