



## Historical English Department Courses

### American Misfits

As the canon of American literature grows ever more diverse, to understand what defines the “American Voice,” we must examine the works of those American authors who challenge readers to consider characters or themes that are outliers. Amidst the norm of what constitutes American literature stands a number of “misfits,” that is, outsiders or rebels whose ideals and/or literary styles challenge norms through fictional characters and themes. This year-long course will examine these “modern misfits,” characters in American literature whose difference creates and defines textual content—characters who push the boundaries of fiction or society and who, in some way, have caused shock—while also studying the canon of American literature. Theme-based units cover period literature including works from the Depression and the Harlem Renaissance, two key eras for “misfit” characters, as well as larger essential questions such as “What is the American voice?” and “How is American literature shaped by diverse perspectives?” In answering these questions, we will read and respond to a variety of novels, short stories, plays, and poetry from writers as diverse as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sherman Alexie. Additionally, students will examine a common theme in two works by an American author in a research paper, exploring one particular voice in the canon of American literature. Students will come to appreciate different literary styles of American authors, and will become familiar with key themes in American literature, including transcendentalism, the American Dream, oppression, protest, racism, rebellion versus conformity, sexuality, and loneliness. Ultimately, the goal is for students to see American literature as a diverse canon with a wide sampling of contributing voices, many of which are indeed “misfits.”

### “And Justice for All” in American Literature

How do we, as a nation, define justice? Whose definition are we using? How has this definition changed? What are the relationships among justice, race, gender roles, and socio-economic status? These are the questions this class will discuss using the works of Martin Luther King, Jr., Susan Glaspell, Herman Melville, Langston Hughes, Harper Lee, and Sherman Alexie. As well, we will explore questions of justice in the legal system as outlined in the writings of Benjamin Cardozo and as portrayed in Errol Morris’s documentary *The Thin Blue Line*. Students will respond to these issues through analytical essays and short critical reading papers, journal responses and online discussion posts, and personal essays. Opportunities for developing oral speaking skills include seminar style discussions, formal presentations, and speeches. Skill development will heavily focus on critical thinking,



close reading, and analysis. American Literature students will also continue their study of vocabulary and grammar.

### **Clashes and Conflicts in American Literature**

The conflicts in our modern world seem to mount on a nearly daily basis. And yet, many that confront us are conflicts that American literature has tackled head-on for a hundred years, if not more. Some occur outside of our borders while others exist as clashes between marginalized individuals. This year-long course will examine some of the conflicts essential to an understanding of the American psyche that resonate in our experiences today. Theme-based and period-based units, from the Roaring Twenties to Post-War America to the Vietnam era and beyond, will explore such questions as the following: How do we reconcile the past with the present? How do we maintain our humanity in the face of tragedy and grief? How do we ensure just outcomes in the face of conflicting values? How, in fact, do we define justice at all? In answering these questions, we will read novels, drama, short stories, and poetry from writers including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, Ken Kesey, Susan Glaspell, Anna Deavere Smith, and Tim O'Brien. By exploring these conflicts as expressed by authors and experienced by their characters, this course aims to provide a glimpse into major American time periods and literary styles. Students will also become familiar with key themes in American literature, including the pursuit of the American Dream, the lure of the past, the quest for truth, the struggle for power, the desire for justice, and the hope of belonging. Ultimately, the goal is for students to see the relevance of American literary themes in their own lives and perhaps to develop tools to understand some of the ever-growing conflicts mounting around them. Students will respond to these issues through formal literary analysis, informal journal responses, and online discussion posts. Opportunities for developing speaking skills include seminar-style discussions, formal presentations, dramatic monologues, and scene enactments. American Literature students will also continue their study of vocabulary and grammar.

### **Madmen/Madwomen: Psychological Approaches to American Literature**

In her astonishing eight-line poem, "Much Madness is Divinest Sense," the famous American poet Emily Dickinson radically flipped our understandings of "madness" and "sense": often what the majority perceives as "mad" in fact opens new avenues for vision and progress. Nowhere is this truer than in our study of American literature where some of our "craziest" characters have occasioned our greatest insights. In this course students will discuss and interpret major American literary texts through the lens of selected theories and principles of major psychological thinkers such as



Freud, Jung, Lacan, Skinner, and Piaget. Some of the questions we will ask include: How is madness related to creativity, to rebellion that brings about positive change, and to overcoming oppression? How can analysis of our perceptions of the gap between lucidity and insanity tell us about how we face issues of race, gender, and poverty? How does fiction resemble a dream, and how can both help us to better understand who we are? To explore these questions, students will read texts selected from authors such as Fitzgerald, Cather, Kesey, Dickinson, McKay, Miller, Wilson, Gilman, Williams, Plath, and Poe, which incorporate many of the essential themes of American literature. Our objective will be to broaden our awareness of ourselves in relation to society through fiction and non-fiction; our tools will be the formal literary essay, the in-class timed write, group presentations, the literary research paper, and the personal essay.

### **Northwest Voices in American Literature**

Regional literature has long been a source of study for literary scholars. Northwest Voices will focus on the work of writers and poets from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Northern California, and related areas to explore how the Northwest is imagined and represented as a region, either as the direct subject of works or as an influence in the writer's voice, theme(s), symbolism, or tone. This course will bring up bigger theoretical questions such as: What makes an area a "region"? What does it mean for writing to be anchored in specific places? In what ways do writers affiliate (or disaffiliate) themselves with regions and why? How are regional identities complicated by racial, gender, or class identities as well as by political and environmental concerns? How do these complications enrich the writing? All of the primary texts will be representative of Northwest writers and poets with the goal of introducing students to the rich literary culture of our region and to provide students with critical tools to examine literature of other regions. Students will write literary analysis papers in addition to writing creative short stories and poetry. A key component of this course is the research process. Each student will complete a formal research paper on an American author. After the research paper, the course reading will begin with Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, which will be accompanied by a number of short stories and poems from regional writers and poets.

### **Literary Revolutions**

This senior elective focuses on literary depictions of revolution and social change. In a world faced with increasingly complex environmental, social, and political problems, what should be our relationship to the world around us? Can literature



change the world? In the first semester, we will examine environmental literature and themes of social justice in works by Rachel Carson, Pablo Neruda, Italo Calvino, Upton Sinclair, and Kazuo Ishiguro, and ask questions about the relationship between humans and the environment. How does the way we *think* and *write* about the environment impact our actions and policy decisions? In the second semester, we will consider satire as a powerful rhetorical tool for illuminating social problems and inspiring change. We will examine satirical literature from a variety of historical periods and regions, including works by Jonathan Swift, Lu Xun, and George Orwell. In this part of the course, we will continue our exploration of revolutionary literature by asking questions about the role of satire: how do we define satire? What is the impact of satire? And how do we account for its prominence today, in parody news programs such as *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight*? Throughout the year, students will practice their critical reading, writing, and thinking skills in a range of writing assignments, from short in-class essays and brief reflections to analytical essays and the senior research paper. In both semesters, students will think about the possibility of literary revolutions and about how literature and art transform our world.

### **Bodies: Defining and Exploring the Limits of Humanity**

Not all bodies are created equally. Or so we are led to believe. Some bodies are viewed as sympathetic, others as valuable, and still others are viewed as pests; the sovereignty of certain humans is often exerted both over other humans and also nonhumans. This course will draw upon myth, speculative fiction, journalism, and graphic novels (with authors such as Ovid, Franz Kafka, Octavia Butler, Alan Moore, and Kazuo Ishiguro) in order to question the boundaries of the human body and its place “at the top of the food chain.” We will interrogate the role of bodies in fictional as well as actual societies and will consider how we define a body. Questions we will explore include: What are the limits of the human body? How are our notions of identity tied up in the idea of an independent, finite body? And who exerts power over human and nonhuman bodies? One of the goals of this course is to think intentionally about the spaces that bodies occupy within literature and within the world at large so that we can consider when and how our actions affect other bodies. We will attempt to make visible the hidden frameworks that prevent us from seeing systems of exploitation, violence, privilege, and profit.