

BIG BOOKS

ENGL 625: Issues in Lit of the U.S.
Professor Jessica Pressman
Fall 2019

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Why go big? And, why is “super-size” an American convention? This course reads famous big books— novels whose ambitions are represented in their physical heft and formal experimentalism— from American literature. We focus on big experimental novels of the 19th, 20th, and 21st—centuries that engage scale as a thematic topic and formal device, and we do so from a position of a contemporary society obsessed with big-data, scaling up, and the seemingly infinite Web. The trend towards bigness is not new, but the digital age of big data offers an opportunity to consider how and why big-ness serves as an important critical category and historical genre for American literature. We use the precious opportunity of a graduate seminar to take the time needed to read long books carefully and collectively.

Learning Outcomes

- You will become acquainted with the American experimental literary tradition.
- You will be able to identify and explain central threads that connect American “epic” novels.
- You will be introduced to contemporary theories of scale, deep time, big data, and bigness in relation to literary criticism.
- You will hone your skills as a critical thinker and writer by focusing on the development of a thesis statement and the ability to prove it through explication.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

| | |
|---|--|
| Email: jpressman@sdsu.edu <i>*Do not expect a response within 24 hours</i> | Course Website: http://fall2019-eng625.jessicapressman.com/ |
| Office: AL 261 Office hours: Monday and Tuesday, 9-3 by appointment | Course Meeting: Tuesdays 3:30-6:10 Room: |
| English Subject Librarian: Markel Tumlin Special Collection Librarian: Anna Culbertson | mtumlin@rohan.sdsu.edu aculbertson@mail.sdsu.edu |

READING LIST

Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000)
Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind* (1986)
William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)
Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)
Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991)

ASSIGNMENTS

Participation 20%

Weekly Blog Posts 20%

2 Creative-Critical “Hacks” (15% each, 30% total)

Proposal and Annotated Bibliography for Final Project 5%

Final Project 25%

Participation 20%

This is *your* class, and your participation is vital to its success. You must attend *all* class meetings in order to receive full credit for participation. Come to class prepared to discuss the text in depth; this means having read the *entire* text *before* class. I expect you to speak and listen.

- **Your participation grade includes engaging in dialogue in class.** This means speaking and listening actively, attentively, and respectfully. (If you have fear of speaking in public, this seminar is a good place to learn to address that fear. Please come see me early in the term to discuss strategies for dealing with this fear).
- **Your participation grade includes an in-person meeting with the professor.**
- **You will give a 5-minute presentation on one of the texts.** This presentation should serve to start the class’s conversation for the day. You will point us to a question from the day’s reading and to the specific passage in the text that sparked that inquiry for you. You will get the discussion rolling. You should be able to direct the class to a passage for close reading and/or a series of questions for discussion.

Weekly Blog Posts (20%)

You will write (500 words) **blog responses to the reading and each provide a comment on a peer’s blog each week**, before the next week’s class meeting. The goal of the blog posts is to extend the conversation and coverage of the course by allowing you to 1) express, share, and comment upon interests, questions, and concerns related to the readings and also to 2) enable the professor to address and incorporate these topics in that week’s meeting. It is also a place to draft ideas and text for use in your essays.

--Blog posts are due on Monday at 6pm weekly; late posts will not receive credit.

-You will be given an *overall* grade for blog posts, based on completion and content, not a grade for each post. Rubric for grading is available on our website and below.

Your Blog Grade is based on 2-parts: 1) a completion grade, and 2) a content grade.

| The completion component of the blog grade requires you to have the following number of posts: | The content component of the blog grade is based on the following grading rubric |
|---|--|
| A= 11-13 posts B= 8-10 posts C= 6-7 posts D= 4-5 posts F= 3 or less | A= Post contains a focused thesis or question and close reading of a passage, B= Post contains a close reading of content but no focused question or thesis C= Post contains no analysis of text (no close reading), just summary and undirected ideas D=Post contains little substantive thinking as content |

2 Creative-Critical Hacks (15% each, total 30%)

You will complete 2 shorter, experimental assignments, each of which will invite you to engage with the novels in different ways using a variety of media and resources in order to explore form and format in media-specific ways. These assignments will be posted to the course blog.

Whatever their form, these assignments must include: 1) a thesis and 2) textual explication of a passage from the novel.

-If you choose to complete more than 2 of these assignments, I will take the best grades.

-You can revise these assignments for a better grade

-You can use one (or more) of these assignments as the foundation for your final essay.

Ideas for Creative Hacks:

- **Digital Annotation:** This assignment invites you to use digital technologies to engage with the novel. You might use a free tool like Diigo, MarkUp, GoogleDocs, or something else. You will close read a section of the text—a page, a paragraph, etc.—by carefully explicating the relationship between form and content in the text AND by using the digital tools to *how* and *where* you see what you see.
- **Annotated Bibliography:** This assignment allows you to practice scholarly research skills and prepares you to write a final essay by prompting you to do research on the novel and on its content. An annotated bibliography is list of sources about a topic in which each item of the list (each citation) is followed by a brief (usually about 150 words) descriptive and evaluative paragraph—this is the annotation. The purpose of the annotation is to inform the reader of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited; this is where you add your subjective opinion about the value of the source and its relevance for your own research. For more on annotated bibliographies,

see <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/03/>

-You should have *at least* 5 sources

- **Creative Response:** This assignment allows you to explore the novel and criticism about it in a creative way. You will *make* something-- a sculpture, bookart, painting, digital poem, etc.—that is inspired by the novel.
 - 1) Your creative piece should be documented so that it can be turned in online (e.g. if you create a sculpture, take photos that you can share on our website)
 - 2) You will write a short (1 page) explanation of *what and how* your creative piece shows us about the novel, citing passages that inspired you and explain your creative interpretation.
- **Explication/Close Reading:** Explication is close reading that moves past the level of summary to examine *how* the formal structures that enable the meaning of the prose. For this assignment, pick a passage or formal aspect of a particular section and explicate it deeply. Explain where and how it means what you think it means. Convince your reader to see it as you do by *using* the text.

Proposal/Annotated Bibliography (5%)

In preparation for your final essay project, you will write a short proposal (500-words) and an annotated bibliography of 5-8 centrally relevant sources for the essay. Information of proposal and bibliography are available on our website.

Final Essay (25%)

In this 10-12 page analytical essay, you will explore in-depth one research question raised by our course. You will propose your own essay topic and determine the best way to present, your argument and research. You will conduct and implement scholarly research, secondary sources (at least 3) not included on our syllabus, in your essay.

-Your essay must include **a thesis** that guides the analysis and **textual explication** (close reading) to support it. (We will discuss and practice these analytical skills throughout the semester; informative guides to thesis writing and explication are also available on our website).

-**You are welcome to pursue a creative presentation of the essay or do an archival project using Special Collections, based on one of your creative hacks.** If you do *make* something creative-- a sculpture, bookart, painting, poem, etc.—that expresses your argument, you will write an essay that explains *what and how* your creative piece demonstrates your argument about the novel or the larger research question you pursue.

-You must *meet with the professor* to discuss your plans for the final essay

-You will *briefly present* your project during the final week of class.

****Late essays are docked 1/3 of a grade for each day late**

In addition: you must attend at least 1 lecture outside of class and write a blog post about it.

READING SCHEDULE

****NOTE:** For *House of Leaves*: read all materials— appendices, footnotes, exhibits, etc.— when and as they are referred to in the text. Do not wait until the end to read them.

Week 1: Introduction to the course

August 27: Introduction to the ideas, texts, and people

Week 2: The Novel: History and Genre

September 3: excerpts from

-J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* [PDF]

- Edward Mendelson, “Encyclopedia Narrative: from Dante to Pynchon” [PDF]

Week 3: *Century of the Wind*

September 10: Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind* (1986): pp. 1-204

Week 4: *Century of the Wind*

September 17: Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind* (1986): pp. 205-279

-Wai Chee Dimock, “Planet and America, Set and Subset” introduction to *Shades of the Planet American Literature as World Literature*, eds Wai Chee Dimock & Lawrence Buell (Princeton University Press, 2007) [PDF]

Week 5: Special Collections with Pam Jackson

September 24: Meet in Special Collections to explore archive of materials related to our class.

-Read ahead

FIRST CREATIVE-CRITICAL HACK DUE-- Wednesday, September 25@ midnight, posted to blog

Week 6: No Class meeting.

October 1: *No Class meeting. Professor in Tbilisi, Georgia.* Read ahead.

Week 7: *Moby Dick*

October 8: Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851): Beginning (“Etymology,” “Extracts,” etc.) and Chapters 1-42 (pp. 1-212)

Week 8: *Moby Dick*

October 15: Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851): Chapters 43-90 (pp. 213-439)

Week 9: *Moby Dick*

October 22: Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851): Chapters 91-end (pp. 440-628)

Week 10: *Absalom, Absalom!*

October 29: William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936): Chapters 1-5, pp. 1-140

-N. Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes" (2007) [PDF]

SECOND CREATIVE-CRITICAL HACK DUE-- Wednesday, October 30@ midnight, posted to blog

Week 11: *Absalom, Absalom!*

November 5: William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936): Chapters 6-7, pp. 141-234

Week 12: *Almanac of the Dead*

November 12: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991): part 1-2, pp.1-346

Week 13: *Almanac of the Dead*

November 19: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991): part 3-6, pp. 347-763

PROPOSAL FOR FINAL ESSAY DUE-- post to blog and bring to class

Week 14: *No class meeting for Thanksgiving*

November 26: Read ahead

Week 15: *House of Leaves*

December 3: Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000): pp. 1-245

****NOTE:** For *House of Leaves*: read all materials— appendices, footnotes, exhibits, etc.—when and as they are referred to in the text. Do not wait until the end to read them.

Week 16: *House of Leaves & Conclusion*

December 10: Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000): pp. 245-463

Concluding Discussion & Student Presentations

**** Final Essay due: Wednesday, December 18 @ midnight, posted to the blog**

OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change.

SDSU as "safe space"

The CSU has affirmed its commitment to 'protecting access, affordability, intellectual freedom, inclusivity, and diversity for all students . . . including supporting DACA students.' Discrimination, harassment, or retaliation against students, faculty, and staff on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability, nationality, immigration status and other categories of identity is prohibited. If you have concerns about your status at the university, please visit <http://studentaffairs.sdsu.edu/EOP/> for information or contact the Dean of Students or the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs in your College."

ACADEMIC HONESTY

I take teaching seriously, and I expect you to take seriously your work as a student. That means that academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Academic dishonest includes, but is not limited to: (a) using assignments that you wrote for another class, (b) representing work done by someone else as your own (i.e., plagiarism), and (c) copying someone else's work on an assignment, basic cheating. Plagiarism and Cheating of any kind will result at least in an "F" for that assignment (and may, depending on the severity of the case, lead to an "F" for the entire course) and may be referred to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities for further action. If you have questions at all, you should consult me immediately.

DISABILITY STATEMENT

If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need accommodations for this class, it is your responsibility to contact Student Disability Services at [\(619\) 594-6473](tel:6195946473). To avoid any delay in the receipt of your accommodations, you should contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive, and that accommodations based upon disability cannot be provided until you have presented your instructor with an accommodation letter from Student Disability Services. Your cooperation is appreciated.