

GESM 120, Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry (GE-B)
Tell Me A Story: American Novels that Made a Difference
Jessica Wells Cantiello, Ph.D.

Course Description

Legend has it that when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe he exclaimed, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!” This story about a story has helped make *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) the paradigmatic example of the novel that changed the world. In this course we will explore this and other novels that had an impact on the world around them. We will try to determine how to tell if a novel can, did, or will make a difference and map the relationship between fiction writing and social change. We will also explore if novels do political work in our era – what historian Robert Darnton has called the fourth great information age – or if the proliferation of other types of text has rendered them insolvent. In other words, can (or should) the novel-as-change-agent survive in the face of Twitter?

The course will focus primarily on close reading, a hallmark of reading critically in a college context. However, we will depend on contemporary reviews to assess the reception of each text in its historical moment. Because we are exploring how art affects society, we will also move outside of the humanities into the sciences and social sciences. Scholars in a wide range of fields are increasingly exploring how fiction has played a role in human development. Researchers are studying how literary devices, like metaphors and other figurative language, affect the brain, and psychologists have found that reading fiction makes people more empathetic, an idea with obvious implications for social movements. Perhaps, as the subtitle of literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall’s book *The Storytelling Animal*, puts it, “stories make us human.”

Course Texts and Materials (Subject to Change)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Norton Critical 2nd Edition.

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906). Norton Critical Edition.

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957). Penguin Modern Classics.

Excerpts from Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). [available on eReserve]

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (1973). Penguin 40th Anniversary Edition.

Excerpts from Rachel Carson, *The Silent Spring* (1972) [available on eReserve]

Toni Morrison, “Recitatif” (1983). [available on eReserve]

Excerpts from Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (1995). [available on eReserve]

Louis Menand, “Books as Bombs.” (*The New Yorker*, Jan. 24, 2011) [available on eReserve]

Please note: Some of these texts include explicit scenes depicting violence and/or sex. Others include racist, sexist and/or profane language. If you aren’t comfortable reading and discussing these types of representations, you should not take this course.

Learning Objectives

USC’s Humanistic Inquiry program will introduce you to a broad range of courses and ways of thinking that will take you beyond the specialization of your major and significantly extend your ability to understand the human world and your place in it. The program will help you achieve six principal learning objectives, which are bulleted below. The italicized sentences under each

bullet explain how our specific course will help you to meet these more general objectives.

- Reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures

In our course this will include studying influential stories and how they reflect and/or shape human experience, mostly, but not exclusively, in the United States since the mid-nineteenth century.

- Cultivate a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression, including literature, language, philosophy, and the arts, as well as develop an understanding of the contexts from which these forms emerge

In our course we will critically engage with literary texts and their historical contexts in order to explore their influence. There will be opportunities to expand our analyses and hypotheses beyond literature to the visual and performing arts.

- Engage with lasting ideas and values that have animated humanity throughout the centuries for a more purposeful, more ethical, and intellectually richer life

In our course we will discuss the power, privilege, and responsibility of the writer and examine what values, if any, can be translated or taught through fiction.

- Learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively

You will be encouraged throughout the semester to make and defend arguments about the course texts. All of the blog reflections and responses and class discussions will be focused on active and analytic reading and critical and creative thinking. The midterm essay, the final exam, and the final project will all require persuasive responses.

- Learn to evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives and to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world

This course specifically asks you to begin to think about how social change happens and the role that art has, can, and should play in that change. If you are a producer and/or consumer of art in any form, this should be of interest and importance to you. The multiple perspectives in this course will be from your classmates and from critical responses to texts, both from when they were published and more recently. Your final project will ask you to choose a complex issue of critical importance and develop a hypothesis about fiction's potential to address it.