

**GESM 120g Section 35333, Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry (GE-B)
Spring 2018 / T/TH 9:30-10:50 in GFS 229**

Tell Me A Story: American Novels that Made a Difference

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Note: This syllabus is subject change before the start of the semester, but will likely remain similar to what is below. There is no specific schedule for the readings (yet) but you should expect to do up to 200 pages of reading a week on heavy reading weeks, which compose about eight weeks of the semester. You should take this course if you look forward to reading the course texts and enjoy reading in general.

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.”

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 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 index card entries and class discussions will be focused on active and analytic reading and critical and creative thinking. The midterm exam, 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.

Course Texts and Materials*

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.

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

Toni Morrison, "Recitatif" (1983). [available on Blackboard]

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

"Men Explain *Lolita* to Me" by Rebecca Solnit (*Literary Hub*, Dec. 17, 2015) [available on Blackboard]

Viewings:

Philadelphia

KONY 2012

Additional texts determined by you (and perhaps by me based on class discussions)

One package of lined 4 x 6 index cards

A notebook and writing utensil for note taking

*Please always bring your texts to class on the days we'll be discussing them.

Course Requirements

- **Index Card Entries (ICE): 25%**

For each class period you will be expected to bring a 4 x 6 index card with a substantive response to the reading for that class period. The purpose of these cards is two-fold: to ensure that you've done and engaged deeply with the reading for the day, and to spur class discussion. Most of the time you will be able to decide how to use the card to engage with the text. Some options include: asking specific questions about the text, making connections between the texts and other readings or class discussions, evaluating the effectiveness of the text, analyzing your response to the text in the context of the text's ability to effect social change, indicating a problem you have with the text, identifying a relevant or important passage and interpreting it, or tying the text to its historical context; reflections will not receive credit if they simply summarize the reading. Other times I may provide a prompt at the end of the class period before and you'll respond to that prompt on the index card. ICEs will also sometimes be used as conversation starters in class – I may choose them at random to read out loud or you may swap them with your peers, so consider the audience for these cards me and the entire class.

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that you do the reading for this course; if I find that isn't happening, I reserve the right to institute pop quizzes on the reading that count toward this 25% of your grade.

ICEs will be graded on an exceptional (check plus/A), acceptable (check/B), and weak (check minus/C) basis. If you submit a response that proves that you have done the reading and engages actively with the text in some way (i.e. is not simply a summary) you will receive a check. If you go far above and beyond in your analysis or engagement, you will get a check plus, and if you simply summarize the reading or are obviously phoning it in, you'll get a check minus. If it's not clear from the ICE that you have read or thought about the reading, you won't receive credit.

- **Participation/Monday Musings: 5%**

This is a freshman SEMINAR, which means your attendance, participation, and preparation are vital components of the success of each class period and the course as a whole, not to mention your success as a student in the course. You should come to each class prepared and ready to actively participate. Active participation includes verbal contributions to discussions, engagement both with what I am saying and your classmates' comments, focused work in small group and partner activities, and thoughtful completion of in-class writing. We will often be discussing sensitive topics, so please be respectful when voicing your opinions. If you are ever uncomfortable about a class discussion, come and talk to me immediately.

Each Monday we'll start class with a specific student or two students sharing their "Monday musings" (i.e. thoughts) about the assigned readings. This can be an extension of your ICE entry or something else that you are just thinking about, but the point is to make sure that we are talking about things that are interesting to you, not just to me (or, more likely, in addition to me). You will sign up for your Monday Musing and you should come prepared not just with brief comments or ideas but also with a couple of questions or specific things (passages from the text, plot points, dialogue, new characters, etc.) you want to discuss with your peers.

- **Powerful Text Presentation/Discussion Leadership: 15%**

In the middle of the semester, you all will take over assigning the course readings. In pairs or groups of three you'll nominate a "powerful text" that you think has or could be influential in some way in the world. Your text doesn't have to be written, although of course it can be. It could be a photograph, a painting, a film, a tv show, a series of tweets, a tumblr post, a gif...use your imagination. If applicable, you'll assign an excerpt of said text to your classmates (around 10 pages or 30 minutes), or you'll simply share the entire text ahead of time, and then you'll lead the class discussion of that text. You should keep this search for powerful texts on your radar throughout the semester, as it will be much easier to do this if you have some authentic options to share with your group rather than having to scramble at the last minute.

- **In-Class Midterm Exam: 10%**
- **Take-Home Final Exam (Cumulative): 15%**

Both the midterm and the final exam will ask you to engage with the driving questions of the course, namely to what extent literature has the power to influence social change, how and why, by drawing on the course texts up to that point. It will serve you well, then, to be thinking about, and perhaps recording some ideas about, these questions as you read throughout the semester.

- **Final Project (8-10 pages): 30%**
 - **Proposal: 5%**
 - **Final Paper (6-8 pages): 25%**

In preparation for the final project, which will be due at the end of the semester, you will select a contemporary movement for social change (or social issue that you feel needs a movement to address it) and investigate the role fiction has or could play in its origins or development. Proposals will lay out your rationale for choosing this movement/issue, your research plan, and a preliminary bibliography. Final projects will draw from the discoveries of the research; you may write an analytical paper describing your findings or you can propose an alternate creative or critical project. For example, you could create or plan a work of art you think would be a productive addition to the contemporary social movement you researched. Creative final projects must be accompanied by critical commentary and analysis. Students can also move away from literature for this final project and apply some of the driving questions of the course to other forms of art, asking how visual, dramatic, public, musical or other arts have or might also make a difference (or not).