The Great American Short Story

Junior Tutorial, Spring 2014

Martin Greenup

Course Description

This tutorial, organized chronologically according to author, traces the development and examines the significance of the short story in nineteenth-century American literature. We will begin with Washington Irving, in whose work “there was born the American short story, a new genre, something distinctively and unquestionably our own in the world of letters” (Fred Lewis Pattee). We will end by moving into the twentieth-century and considering Ernest Hemingway’s influential innovations in style. Reading a range of exemplary texts over the semester, we will ask what makes the short story such a characteristically American and perennially recurring genre – one that has flexibly served a range of literary, cultural, and commercial needs.

Form will be a central concern as we investigate the workings of plot, of narrative voice, of character, of place, of perspective, of time, of ending, and of prose style as just some of the elements that contribute to a successful short story. Another central concern will be context as we take into account historical and transnational perspectives on the short story, American theorists of the short story, literary and cultural influences, venues of publication (the magazine, the single-author collection, the multiple-author anthology), readership, aesthetic history (romanticism, the gothic, realism, modernism etc.), the relation between the short story and the novel, and the relation between the popular and the highbrow. Important themes that we will touch upon during the course include the role of the writer in society, the relation between art and life in nineteenth-century America, the emergence of American literature, religion, the supernatural, foreign settings, humor, war, race, dialect, regionalism, “local color,” and transatlanticism.

Each week we will read a number of stories by a given author, alongside which we will also read several critical essays (either on the author and work, or on the context, or on the genre of the short story).

Depending on your own needs and interests, there is the possibility for you to suggest American short stories and authors not listed on the syllabus which we will then discuss in class. These can be from the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, but you will be expected to situate your choices in the tradition of the American short story and make a case for their consideration. Accordingly, there is some flexibility in the syllabus in the second half of the semester. For your junior essay, you will be strongly encouraged to pursue your own interests.

Requirements

- 3 10-minute in-class presentations, occasional response-papers
- Consultation with Widener librarian Laura Farwell-Blake for training in scholarly research methods
- Individual visit to Houghton Library to look at primary sources
- 2-page prospectus, annotated bibliography, 2 drafts of junior essay
– 20-25 page junior essay

**Background Reading**

– *A Companion to the American Short Story*, ed. by Alfred Bendixen and James Nagel, 2010
– *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May, 1994
– *The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey*, Fred Lewis Pattee, 1923
– *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach, 1953

**Schedule**

**WEEK 1:** Washington Irving

selection from *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*

**Criticism:** Randall Jarrell, on stories; Alfred Bendixen, “The Emergence and Development of the American Short Story”; Kristie Hamilton, *America’s Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth Century Literary-Genre*

**WEEK 2:** Edgar Allan Poe


**Criticism:** Freud, “The Uncanny”; from David Reynold’s *Beneath the American Renaissance* (on humor); Eric Savoy, “The Rise of American Gothic”; Benjamin F. Fisher, “Poe and the American Short Story,” David Lodge, “The Uncanny”

**WEEK 3:** Nathaniel Hawthorne


**Criticism:** selection from the Norton critical edition, including James, Borges, John P. McWilliams, Michael J. Colacurcio, Robert B. Heilman, Sharon Cameron, Nina Baym

**WEEK 4:** Herman Melville
“Hawthorne and his Mosses,” “Benito Cereno,” “Bartelby, the Scrivener,” “The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles,” “The Bell Tower”


WEEK 5: Mark Twain

Thomas Bangs Thorpe
“The Big Bear of Arkansas”


WEEK 6: WIDENER VISIT
Ambrose Bierce
“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” “Chickamauga,” “A Watcher by the Dead,” “A Horseman in the Sky”

Robert Enrico (producer)
“La Rivière du Hibou”


WEEK 7: Charles W. Chesnutt
selection from The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales, “Superstition and Folk-Lore of the South”

Joel Chandler Harris
selection from Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings
**Criticism:** Daniel Worden, “Charles W. Chesnutt and the Problem of Racial Identity”; Tynes Cowan, “Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Joel Chandler Harris: An Anxiety of Influence”

**WEEK 8:** PROSPECTUS PRESENTATION MINI-CONFERENCE

**WEEK 9:** Kate Chopin
“Desiree’s Baby,” “At the ‘Cadian Ball,” “The Story of an Hour,” “The Storm,” “La Belle Zoraïde”
Sarah Orne Jewett
“A White Heron,” selection from the Dunnet Landing stories

**WEEK 10:** Henry James
selection from the prefaces to the New York Edition, “The Altar of the Dead,” “The Figure in the Carpet,” “The Beast in the Jungle,” “The Lesson of the Master”

**WEEK 11:** Ernest Hemingway
selection from *In Our Time*, “The Killers,” “Hills Like White Elephants,” “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” “The Sea Change,” “God Rest You Merry, Gentleman,” “Now I Lay Me”

**Criticism:** *The Paris Review* interview with George Plimpton, 1958; Frank O’Connor, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”; Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why*

**WEEK 12:** WORKSHOP OF 20-PAGE JUNIOR ESSAY DRAFTS

---JUNIOR ESSAY DUE---