Topics in Literature: American Gileads

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Western Illinois University, Fall 2019, Thursdays 12:30-3
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General Catalog Description & Prerequisites

A study of a special theme or topic in literature. Prerequisite: ENG 299 with a grade of C or better, or consent of instructor.

Specific Description & Goals

To many of my 2016 students, Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States came as a shock. How could so many of their fellow citizens choose a candidate whose concern with working people seemed so superficial? Whose rhetoric was so full of disdain for those of other races, nationalities, abilities, religions, and sexualities? Whose behavior so repeatedly denigrated women?

This course addresses such questions by reexaminining the origin myths of both America and the nomads-turned-nation after which our founders sometimes styled themselves, the ancient Israelites. Beginning with selections from the Hebrew Bible (Genesis & Exodus), we will ask how the signers of the Constitution repurposed these stories for their own promised land. With that foundation in place, we will wrestle with the more recent prophetic work of three major fiction writers: Margaret Atwood, Flannery O’Connor, and Marilynne Robinson. Using the recent Hulu adaptation of Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale as a preface for her sequel, The Testaments (available Sept. 10), we will ponder the evolution of Christian nationalism in the U.S. Through O’Connor’s short stories and Jonathan M. Metzl’s 2019 book Dying of Whiteness, we will then consider that ideology’s imbrication with white supremacism, particularly as reflected in attitudes toward guns, health care, and education. And finally with Robinson’s Lila, we will turn from the biblical Gilead and Atwood’s dystopian nation to a more welcoming but still imperfect version, this time a small town in Iowa. In her novels and her essays, Robinson offers fresh takes on books like Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, suggesting how a land with such a soiled reputation might yet cultivate habits of generosity toward all.

This course will be co-created by its students, with its instructor planning to learn as much as anyone, but here is an initial hypothesis: America is not the New Jerusalem it has so often imagined itself, but a neighboring land capable of both enormous horrors and tremendous grace. To embody the latter, we must learn to recognize and resist the deterministic, blame-hungry, racist, market-rigging elements of our inheritance in favor of a more broadly justice-seeking, uncoerced, open-ended freedom.

As an advanced undergraduate and graduate class fulfilling the English major’s pre-1800 requirement, this course features relatively heavy reading, three quizzes, and two major argumentative research papers, the second of which may or may not prove an expansion upon the first. Keep in mind that especially with such dynamic material and advanced students, our plan may be adjusted (with group consultation) as we proceed through the semester.
Reading & Assignment Schedule

PLEASE NOTE:
~“READING,” “VIEWING,” or “WRITING” = read, watch, or complete in full BEFORE class
~“IN CLASS” = no preparation required

PART ONE: MYTHOLOGIES OF AMERICAN GENESIS

1st WEEK, AUG 22nd: THE GARDEN & THE CITY

IN CLASS: ~America as Promised Land, New Jerusalem … or Gilead? (And which Gilead?)
~Syllabus review and discussion of goals and assignments

2nd WEEK, AUG 29th: AMERICA AS PROMISED LAND?

~More selections from Genesis (NRSV, NKJV, Message Bible versions recommended)
~Ch. 12: Receiving a promise & scaring a politician
~Ch. 17-19: Amusing your wife, arguing with God, & (not) welcoming guests
~Ch. 22: (Almost) killing your kid
~Ch. 27: Tricking your dad & screwing your brother
~Exodus ch. 1-7, 11-14: getting out of Dodge
~Marcus Borg, Reading the Bible for the First Time (ch. 4-5)


IN CLASS: ~Genesis 29-34: a jerk of a father-in-law & toxic masculinity, Ancient Near Eastern style
~Exodus ch. 19-23: law as morality & the Promised Land to come

3rd WEEK, SEPT 5th: AMERICA AS NEW JERUSALEM?

READING: ~Your chapter (to be assigned week 2) from Steven Waldman’s Founding Faith and / or John Fea’s Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?
~Kevin Kruse, One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America (introduction)

VIEWING: ~Begin The Handmaid’s Tale, Season 1, esp. episodes 1-3, 9-10 (Hulu has a 7-day free trial)

IN CLASS: ~Presentation: your chapter in ~150 words (paste into W.O. thread) & 2-3 min (spoken)
~Andrew L. Whitehead et al., “Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism And Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election”
**PART TWO: ENVISIONING CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM**

TU 9/10 Optional event: “Margaret Atwood, Live in Cinemas” (Cinemark in Davenport, 7 pm, $12.50)

### 4th WEEK, SEPT 12th: GILEAD AS THEOCRACY

**VIEWING:** ~Finish *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Season 1, esp. episodes 1-3, 9-10  
**READING:** ~Heather Hendershot, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* as Utopian Allegory: ‘Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby’”  
**IN CLASS:** ~Adapting *The Handmaid’s Tale*; Atwood’s postures toward religion and politics  
~Short Paper: assignment sheet & discussion

### 5th WEEK, SEPT 19th: OFFRED’S FATE REVEALED

**READING:** ~Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*, first half  
**IN CLASS:** ~Short Paper: invention work

### 6th WEEK, SEPT 26th: FROM TALE TO TESTAMENTS

**READING:** ~Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*, second half  
~Several literary critical essays (TBA)  
**IN CLASS:** ~Quiz #1 (covers material since start of course)  
~Short Paper: exploring connections between Atwood & part 1 of the course

### 7th WEEK, OCT 3rd: MIDTERM PAPER MEETINGS & WORKSHOPPING

**WRITING:** ~Short Paper: draft due on W.O. (“Discussions”) before class  
final version due on W.O. (“Assignments”) by Mon 10/7  
**IN CLASS:** ~Short Paper: peer workshopping
# PART THREE: THE ENDURANCE OF WHITE SUPREMACISM

## 8th WEEK, OCT 10th: GUNS & WHITE MASCULINITY

**READING:**  
~Jonathan M. Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness* (introduction & part 1, guns in Missouri)  
~Flannery O’Connor, “The Geranium” & “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

**IN CLASS:**  
~O’Connor, “The Church and the Fiction Writer”  
~Grade yourself: Where have you learned the most so far? Where do you want to grow?

## 9th WEEK, OCT 17th: HEALTH FOR WHOM? AT WHAT COST?

**READING:**  
~Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness* (part 2, health care in Tennessee)  
~O’Connor, “The Displaced Person” & “Everything that Rises Must Converge”

**IN CLASS:**  
~Literary/cultural criticism (TBA)

SAT 10/19: EGO/ΣΤ∆ (English Graduate Organization/Sigma Tau Delta) Conference in Macomb

## 10th WEEK, OCT 24th: THROWING BOOKS & THROWING SHADE

**READING:**  
~Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness* (part 3, education in Kansas & conclusion)  
~O’Connor, “Good Country People” & “Revelation”

**IN CLASS:**  
~Literary/cultural criticism (TBA)

## 11th WEEK, OCT 31st: WHAT’S CHANGED ABOUT WHITENESS – AND WHAT HASN’T?

**VIEWING:**  
~*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) (~$3-4 via Youtube, Amazon, Google, Apple, etc.; as of 8/13, on Hulu with free trial available; 19 copies in local library system)

**WRITING:**  
~Long Paper: 1 page on potential expansion texts and angles due on W.O. before class

**IN CLASS:**  
~Quiz #2 (covers material since previous quiz)  
~Good, but too easy? How come, *Three Billboards*?  
~An introduction to Marilynne Robinson via Barack Obama  
~Taking stock: preliminary course conclusions and lingering questions
### PART FOUR: POSTSECULAR ALTERNATIVES

#### 12th WEEK, NOV 7th: BEYOND THE RELIGIOUS-SECULAR BINARY

**READING:**
- Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (pp. 3-70, up to “Mrs. Graham wanted help” new paragraph)
- Selections from Ezekiel

**IN CLASS:**
~Gilead from the outside

#### 13th WEEK, NOV 14th: POSTSECULAR THINKING ABOUT TRAGICOMIC ROMANCE

**READING:**
- Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (pp. 70-166, up to “The next morning” new paragraph)
- Song of Songs

**WRITING:**
~Long Paper: half-draft due on W.O. (“Discussions”) before class

**IN CLASS:**
~Gilead from within

**TH 11/21:** NO CLASS (THANKSGIVING BREAK)

#### 14th WEEK, NOV 28th: REIMAGINING READING

**READING:**
- Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (pp. 166-261, through end)
- Ecclesiastes

**WRITING:**
~Long Paper: full draft A due on W.O. (“Discussions”) before class

**IN CLASS:**
~Quiz #3 (covers material since previous quiz)
~Ancient existential wisdom, wherever you are with Gilead
~Long Paper: reverse outlining

#### 15th WEEK, DEC 5th: FINAL PAPER MEETINGS & WORKSHOPPING

**WRITING:**
~Long Paper: full draft B due on W.O. (“Discussions”) before class

**IN CLASS:**
~Long Paper: peer workshop

#### FINALS WEEK, DEC 12th: PAPER PRESENTATIONS

**WRITING:**
~Long Paper: final version due on W.O. by Fri 12/13

**IN CLASS:**
~Long Paper: presentations
~Grade yourself: Where did you learn the most this fall? How did you show that?
Course Texts

PLEASE NOTE:
*Prices below are rounded from recent new online prices. In many cases, used copies can be purchased less expensively (try bookfinder.com).
*I am happy for students to use complete electronic versions of texts so long as they use appropriate citation methods when writing papers and can accept occasional challenges in finding a given passage.


Recommended Reading/Viewing (ask me for more titles that may apply particularly to your project)

FILMS (AMONG MANY!)

The Apostle
The Shawshank Redemption
Jesus of Montreal
American Beauty
Stranger than Fiction
The Matrix trilogy
Higher Ground

The Big Kahuna
The Last Temptation of Christ
Doubt
The Truman Show
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Pleasantville
The Sunset Limited

The Fountain
Pay It Forward
The Final Forward
The Beach
A Serious Man
The Invention of Lying
BlacKkKlansman

NOVELS & NOVELLAS

Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry
Flannery O’Connor, The Complete Stories
Walter M. Miller, A Canticle for Liebowitz
Barbara Kingsolver, The Poisonwood Bible
Octavia Butler, Lilith’s Brood, the Parable novels
Toni Morrison, Paradise
Neil Stephenson, Anathem
Barack Obama, Dreams from My Father
J.D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye
Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony
David James Duncan, The Brothers K
Ursula K. Le Guin, “Paradises Lost,” The Telling

John Steinbeck, East of Eden
Ralph Ellison, Juneteenth
Walker Percy, The Second Coming
Graham Greene, The Power and the Glory
Ana Castillo, So Far From God
Mary Doria Russell, The Sparrow & Children of God
Philip K. Dick, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch
David James Duncan, The Brothers K
Manuel Muñoz, The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue
James Morrow, Towing Jehovah (& sequels)

CRITICAL THEORY AND LITERARY/CINEMATIC ANALYSIS (in chronological order)

Tracy Fessenden, Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature. 2006.
Charles Taylor, A Secular Age. 2007.
Mark Knight, An Introduction to Religion & Literature. 2009.
Michael Warner et al., Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age. 2010.
Justin Neuman, Fiction Beyond Secularism. 2014.

HISTORICAL ANGLES

James Turner, Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America
Mark A. Noll, A History of Christianity in the United State and Canada
George Marsden, Fundamentalism & American Culture, new ed.
Patrick Allitt, Religion in America Since 1945
Paul Harvey & Philip Goff, The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in American since 1945
Frances FitzGerald, The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America
John Fea, Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump
Lyz Lenz, God Land: A Story of Faith, Loss, and Renewal in Middle America

Grading Criteria

I will figure final grades using the university scale (A, B, C, D, or F, with pluses/minus) and the values below (with minor adjustments as needed). Please note the “My Grades” function on the course website, which lets you track assignment grades and estimate your current overall grade at any point.

30% Quizzes (3 x 10% each)
30% Short Paper
40% Long Paper (for grad students, 30%; their other 10% = discussion leadership)

Assignment Descriptions

Quizzes: These will neither be picky, insignificant-detail interrogations, nor such easy affairs that one could prepare sufficiently by reading summaries. The idea is that most people who recently covered all assigned reading and viewing with good comprehension will average 70-80% of the points available (i.e., earn a “B” or better). Please keep in mind that each quiz only covers material since the previous one. My students sometimes worry about the quizzes initially, but most agree in post-class surveys that they result in higher-quality discussions. My advice is to finish reading and viewing well in advance, then go back over it and relevant in-class materials. If you do all of this and still struggle, please see me.

Short Paper: A carefully polished argumentative paper that grows out of our course materials and conversations; think about how you can take up something that matters enormously to you personally while demonstrating most effectively your learning during the course to this point. Remember too that the most powerful writing often is very selective about the particular portion of a text it engages; it is often more effective to zoom in on a single scene, chapter, or episode and thoroughly assess its larger significance than to bite off a larger portion than is chewable in a relatively short essay. Undergrads should plan to submit 1500+ words (6+ pp.); grad students should work toward 2000+ words (8+ pp.). Each paper should (a) directly engage at least one primary course text; (b) include at least two pages of very close reading/analysis; (c) reflect attention to the course’s questions about biblical and American origins, Christian nationalism, and/or white supremacism; and (c) dialogue substantially with at least two appropriate secondary texts (undergrads, or 4+ for graduate students).

Long Paper: A major revision and expansion upon the Short Paper that takes up at least one additional primary text. Undergrads should submit 2250+ words (9+ pp.), now engaging 3+ secondary texts; grad students should submit 3000+ words (12+ pp.), now engaging 6+ secondary texts.
PLEASE NOTE: The following is part of all of my syllabi. Please read it carefully while keeping its generality in mind.

What goals do I care about most?

1) Intense thinking. I will regularly ask questions to which I do not have “the” answer. My job is not to fill you with information nor to train you like a lab animal. Expect open-ended, improvisational conversations that leave room for everyone to learn and grow.

2) Personal maturation. I want every student to leave my courses a little wiser, and wisdom involves action, not just theory. I want you to want to be a better version of yourself: more generous with others, better able to endure hardship, more determined to live with integrity.

3) Genuine community. This does not mean warm fuzzies, nor does it require wholesale agreement. It does mean building trust, pushing beyond superficial identities toward real understanding, and authentic curiosity about others’ lives.

What priorities will make these things possible?

4) Regular presence. Rather than rules about numbers of classes missed or use of electronic devices, I will just say this: I want you to want to be present – wholeheartedly – as much as possible. When we recognize barriers to that, let’s figure out how to overcome them.

5) Productive disagreement. I’m not here to clone myself, and none of us should be here to “win” arguments. We’ll talk regularly about controversial topics, and we’ll get better at being frank but not blunt, tactful but not wishy-washy. Our culture needs more gracious candor.

6) Process above outcomes. Grades matter, but how you get them matters more. Think back across the best classes you’ve ever taken. What memories made them special? It’s not the label that the registrar puts on your transcript, but the stories that you, your peers, and your faculty can tell.

What can you count on from me?

7) Availability (during regular business hours). In some ways, tuition is like a gym membership. My job is to make regular spaces ready for you to grow, both in classes and in office hours, and your job is to take advantage of them – and not just when deadlines are approaching.

8) Honest, encouraging feedback. A good coach both competes alongside you and holds you accountable concerning the steps required by your goals. A grade reflects your work’s status relative to peer benchmarks, but what matters most is your growth across our weeks together.

9) Fairness and consistency. I won’t change syllabus expectations without class discussion and solid majority approval, and never in ways that worsen your workload. I will assign grades with an eye to all concerned, including peers past and present, and will discuss them as desired.

A few technical notes about my grading system & policies

➢ You can always find your current grade on Western Online, and it may be higher than you think. W.O. will compute it using my formula, but it’s simple to do yourself. Divide your points total by the points available so far, then multiply by 4 to translate to a 4.0 scale (and the corresponding letter grade). The same process works for any single assignment. E.g. if you earned 8 out of 10 points on a quiz, you would divide 8 by 10 (=.80), multiply by 4 (=3.20), and that would be between a B and a B+. At the course’s end, when healthy attendance, paper draft effort, and other course contributions warrant, I sometimes bump up borderline grades.
I usually allow late quizzes and assignments without grade penalties. Still, there is a strong tie between students who keep up with deadlines and those who get the most out of the class.

I handle all paper submissions via Western Online, which uses Turn It In plagiarism detection. (Please know that representing others’ work as your own seriously damages the trust we need to build. I penalize those rare choices with F grades in hopes of ending such a habit quickly.)

- Assignment drafts go under “Discussions” (which is under “Communication”), which allows you and peers to benefit from feedback on each others’ work.
- Assignment final versions go under “Assignments” (which is under “Assessments”), which allows for private access to brief final comments and grades.

**WIU Policies & Resources**

**University Writing Center:** “The University Writing Center is available to assist you with general and specific questions on writing assigned in any discipline and at any academic level. The one-on-one assistance available at the University Writing Center is valuable for generating ideas, talking about global-level issues such as organization, and even working through grammatical problems. The University Writing Center is located in the U.S. Bank Writing Center, QC Complex 2219. We also have online tutoring available. Call (309)–762–9841 ext. 64534 to schedule an appointment, or schedule yourself at [wiu.edu/uwc](http://wiu.edu/uwc). Be sure to bring along a copy of your assignment sheet to your appointment.”

**Counseling Services:** “Confidential counseling services are available for WIU-QC students. Time management, stress management, balancing work and family, study skills, low self-esteem, relationship problems, depression, and anxiety are some examples of issues that students may address in personal counseling. Students may call 309/762-1988 to make an appointment with Counseling and Career Services.”

**Accommodations:** “Students with disabilities: In accordance with University values and disability law, students with disabilities may request academic accommodations where there are aspects of a course that result in barriers to inclusion or accurate assessment of achievement. To file an official request for disability-related accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center at 309-298-2512, disability@wiu.edu or in 143 Memorial Hall. Please notify the instructor as soon as possible to ensure that this course is accessible to you in a timely manner.”

**Sex Discrimination/Title IX:** “University values, Title IX, and other federal and state laws prohibit sex discrimination, including sexual assault/misconduct, dating/domestic violence, and stalking. If you, or someone you know, has been the victim of any of these offenses, we encourage you to report this to the Title IX Coordinator at 309-298-1977 or anonymously online at: [http://www.wiu.edu/equal_opportunity_and_access/request_form/index.php](http://www.wiu.edu/equal_opportunity_and_access/request_form/index.php). If you disclose an incident to a faculty member, the faculty member must notify the Title IX Coordinator. The complete Title IX policy is available at: [http://www.wiu.edu/vpas/policies/titleIX.php](http://www.wiu.edu/vpas/policies/titleIX.php).”

**Food Insecurity Resources:** “Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to contact The Pantry at WIU-QC for support: 309-762-3999 (x68041); Quad Cities Complex, Building C, Room 2412. Furthermore, please notify your professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable your professor to help connect you with confidential support resources on campus. For more information about The Pantry at WIU-QC please visit: [http://www.wiu.edu/qc/student_life/pantry/](http://www.wiu.edu/qc/student_life/pantry/).”

**Academic Integrity Policy:** For further information on what constitutes plagiarism and other violations of academic integrity, please see [http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php](http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php).

**Student Rights & Responsibilities:** For further information on expectations for both students and university personnel, please see [http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php](http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php).
Dr. Hamner’s Revision Checklist (especially for argumentative essays, but largely applicable to other genres)

The Introduction

1. **Hook:** Does your introduction (including the first sentence) efficiently grab readers’ attention without being silly, exaggerated, or disconnected? Is the shift from it to the paper’s thesis natural or abrupt?

2. **Thesis:** Is it clear what sentence(s) convey the paper’s central claim? Ask yourself these questions, too:
   - Is your claim obvious or subtle? Boring or daring? Outlandish or plausible?
   - Is your claim vague or specific? General or precise?
   - Is something significant clearly at stake in your argument? Have you provided a sense of why it matters whether your reader buys or dismisses your claim?

3. **Map:** Does the introduction preview the order in which the paper will examine the evidence?

The Body

4. **Main Points:** Can you summarize in a quick phrase the main point and/or task of each body paragraph, or are some paragraphs’ goals or relevance to the thesis unclear?

5. **Topic Sentences and Concluding Sentences:** Within a given paragraph, do the topic sentence and concluding sentence fit without being identical? Do they provide meaningful links between paragraphs?

6. **Organization:** Are there any paragraphs that don’t make logical sense in the organization of the essay—e.g. too-short/disconnected “lonely” paragraphs or too-long/repetitive “bullying” paragraphs? Should any be removed or integrated elsewhere? Can you reorder so the argument’s force grows more naturally?

7. **Textual Evidence/Quotation:** Is there sufficient evidence from specific texts (at least one quotation per body paragraph, as a general rule) to back up the argument’s main points? Are there appropriate page number citations? Does the paper introduce quotations with a sense of their original context? After quotations, do you offer interpretations of their meaning or just expect readers to hear them as you do?

8. **Minimal Summary, Maximum Analysis:** Except in briefly introducing unfamiliar key text(s), does the paper avoid plot summaries? Does your interpretive and analytical work remain the focus?

9. **Reasonable Specifics, Not Generalities or Overreaches:** Does your unique argument reach beyond back-cover or Wikipedia descriptions? Or does it resort to clichés anyone might say, or that could describe any text? (“The author uses lots of description to help readers understand.”) Does it make reasoned claims? Or does it rely on overstated claims that cost you credence? (“In this story everything is about death.”)

The Conclusion

10. **Closure:** Does the conclusion bring the essay to a meaningful close or end abruptly? Does it avoid exact restatement of the introduction, but still reinforce your main points? Does it suggest how the essay’s main ideas might be expanded into other contexts and why it matters that your reader take them seriously?

Mechanics & Style

11. **Grammatical & other mechanical issues:** Has at least one strong writer proofread your paper?
    - Among the most common problems (beyond spelling, capitalization, basic punctuation):
      - Run-on sentences and fragments: is each of your sentences a single, complete thought?
      - Pronoun reference: are the referents of your pronouns clear? Do they agree in number?

12. **Stylistic issues:** Have you presented your work in the most professional, attractive manner possible?
    - Among the most common problems, especially for less experienced writers:
      - Verbal “fluff”: is every word and phrase doing real work toward demonstrating your thesis? Have you eliminated as much repetition as possible? You want the “impact per word ratio” as high as possible.
      - Have you stayed in the present tense while writing about literature, film, or other artistic texts?
      - Have you provided an accurate, unique, provocative, inviting title?
      - Does your paper fit the length and formatting requirements?