

Contemporary American Fiction

Dr. Yael Maurer

Second semester, Tuesday 2-4

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Reception hours: By appointment

Course Description

In this course we will read short stories by prominent contemporary American writers. The short story in America has held a prominent place in the American literary tradition. It has become a "national form" around the 1820's and 1830's, when the Americans "virtually invented what has come to be called 'the short story', in its modern literary form" (*The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story*, 1).

The short story format allows for concise investigation into the human psyche. The short story writer's art "tries to convey the 'point' of a story: that moment of understanding or cognition to which we grasp not so much 'what the writer was getting at', as what the *story* may get at in its collaboration with the mind of the reader reading" (6).

The authors whose works we'll read are have mastered this form. We'll read texts by John Cheever and Raymond Carver who have perfected the form and hardly wrote any other forms of fiction. We'll also read stories by Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Dorothy Parker and Joyce Carol Oates to show in what ways women writers' grasp of the American psyche may differ from their male counterparts and in what ways they meet to create what might be termed an American mode of writing.

Stephen King, well known for his lengthy novels, will be represented here by a shorter piece of fiction, a novella which was adapted to one of the best loved movies of all time *The Shawshank Redemption*. As King humorously puts it, the novella is an odd "country" situated between the short story and the novel: "The borders of the country between these two more orderly regions are ill-defined, but at some point, the writer wakes up with alarm and realizes that he's come or is coming to a really terrible place, an anarchy-ridden literary banana republic called the 'novella'". King's *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* is a masterful example of the way this hybrid form can become a nuanced meditation on the themes that are at the heart of King's work and of the American literary tradition: masculinity, freedom, religious zeal and its harmful side effects, and the belief in the ability of the human spirit to triumph over overwhelming odds. This is why I chose to end with this piece and its filmic adaptation.

Texts:

First lesson: An introductory lesson. Read Stephen King's short story "Harvey's Dream". We'll discuss it in class:

http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/06/30/030630fi_fiction

I: Suburbia and Its Discontents: John Cheever and Raymond Carver

John Cheever

"The Enormous Radio"

<http://web.sbu.edu/english/faculty/mjackson/CLAR110/cheever.htm>

"The Swimmer" http://www.loa.org/images/pdf/Cheever_Swimmer.pdf

Raymond Carver

"A Small Good Thing"

http://www.scriptorpress.com/burningmanbooks/46_2006_carver.pdf

"Vitamins" <http://www.nbu.bg/webs/amb/american/6/carver/vitamins.htm>

"Why Don't You Dance?" <http://www2.gsu.edu/~libcla/carver.htm>

II Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates

Eudora Welty

"Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/w/welty-stories.html>

"A Worn Path" <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/issues/41feb/wornpath.htm>

Flannery O'Connor

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~drbr/goodman.html>

"Everything That Rises Must Converge"

Requirements:

Attendance and participation: 15%

In class midterm (date) 15%

Final paper (home): (date of submission) 70%

