

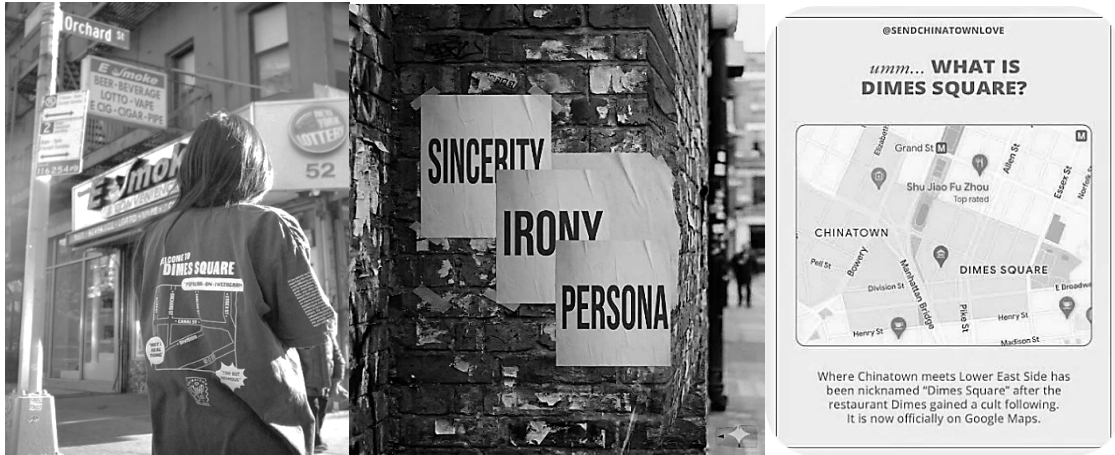
ENGL 3840.001: American Literature 1870 to the Present

M & W 12:45-2:05 / Lang 204

UNT Catalog: A broad survey of American literature from the late-19th century to the present; includes the study of a variety of literary genres, movements, and traditions.

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I WOULD WRITE A BOOK TOO IF I THOUGHT IT WOULD MAKE EVERYONE LOVE ME: CULTURAL REPORTS FROM THE FRONTLINES OF THE ZEITGEIST

But look, I made you some content.
Daddy made you your favorite —
Open wide. Here comes the content . . .
— Bo Burnham, *Inside*

Elvis is my daddy. Marilyn's my mother. Jesus is my bestest friend.
We don't need nobody 'cause we got each other, or at least I pretend.
— Lana Del Rey, "Body Electric"

COURSE DESCRIPTION: STRIKE A POSE

These epigraphs stage intimacy as a performance and performance as intimacy. Burnham offers *content* in place of an authority figure — a father — in the faux-chipper voice of a kids-show host: a joke or not joke? Lana fashions a traditional support network — a family — from old icons and ends with a phrase doing all the work — *or at least I pretend*. Is this sincerity wearing irony as armor . . . or irony wearing sincerity as armor? Who can say? Call the armor *persona*, and our course's line of inquiry begins. Our question is not whether there is ever an "authentic self" behind social performance, but whether the "self" is always already a fictional construct,

composed by one's family and culture, and all we ever do is social performance. That is, is what we call "the self" is a character, an actor, born in costume, who takes the stage with its role somehow already rehearsed, script innately memorized, before the curtain goes up?

This survey of American literature traces performances — of sincerity, irony, persona, and desire copied from models until models are all that's left — from the Gilded Age through modernity and postmodernity to the post-ironic, post-postmodern vibe shift of Dimes Square. We read our writers as if they are reporters on a beat, filing dispatches from cultures they inhabit and observe.

Every era has its own rules and codes about what counts as authentic or cringe, sincere or ironic, real or posed. The term for the mood and manners of a historical moment—for the things everyone takes for granted without anyone having decided on them—is *zeitgeist*. A zeitgeist sets boundaries on the imaginable and the sayable. It supplies an inherited vocabulary, a hierarchy of values and assumptions through which a culture makes sense of itself. Every writer on this syllabus is a product and promoter of a zeitgeist, whether they know it or not. Each reports on their moment. Some expose assumptions; others reveal them *because* they take them as givens. The work of this course is to learn how to read a zeitgeist by interpreting works of literature.

You'll read literature as cultural reports, and you'll write your own cultural reports. You learn the form by studying how our authors practice it. As a cultural reporter, you are investigating how literature gets entangled with economics, religion, pop culture, public figures, social media, political arguments, status objects, technologies, fashions, subcultures, and other everyday unconscious habits and prejudices to reveal values and sensibilities of particular cultural moments. As a cultural reporter, you're less interested in plot than in how literature reveals what a social moment believes, fears, admires, performs, or pretends not to notice. Your task is to uncover connections between private behavior and public life, historical circumstances and lived experience, artistic expression and the culture that produced it.



Because culture is complex, a cultural report is necessarily interpretive. It requires a well-read mind: broadly-educated cultural literacy, focused research, and critical judgment are needed to make sense of scattered signs and assemble them into a coherent account. A cultural report is less a traditional literary interpretation than an assessment of how a text reveals the spirit — the *Geist*— of its culture.

Zeitgeists, like scientific paradigms, shift. Over the semester, you'll track shifts in your book of cultural reports. There are competing political ways to describe the arc of these shifts. One sees the collapse of traditional authority as catastrophe; another as liberation. The course takes no side. Our task is to understand what each cultural regime makes possible and what it forecloses, what it valued and whom it elevated or excluded and to report on those codes. A recurring question is: what happens to desire, sincerity, and the self as inherited authorities lose power? Is there any real object of desire, or only imitations of somebody else's wanting? Is the self a copy, or a simulacrum with nothing behind it?



THE HUMANITIES & LITERARY STUDIES IN OUR ZEITGEIST

Two reports are being debated right now, and they bear on how this course is built. One is the Boghossian committee's "State of Scholarship" report, covering the humanities broadly. The other is Appiah's companion report, narrower, on "Literary Studies." Both find serious scholarship in the disciplines they studied. Both also raise criticisms worth considering.

The Boghossian report flags four concerns: 1) that some scholars treat contested questions — the biological and social dimensions of sex and gender, or the causes of disparities in crime, among others — as settled before debate has run its course; 2) that some scholarship treats all "truth" as a social or political construction, leaving no ground for objective evidence; 3) that some fields judge a writer's work by the writer's social identity or perceived politics rather than its craft, and treat identity as a credential for who may speak on a topic; and 4) that some research starts from a political conclusion and works backward to evidence, rather than the reverse.

The report argues that when scholars lose confidence in objective truth, political conviction fills the vacuum. Research shifts from "what is true" to "what social outcome should this advance?" The report is neither a brief for the right or against the left — it argues political advocacy trumps inquiry on both left and right, and that the fix for one ideological distortion isn't another.

Appiah's report raises similar concerns specific to literary studies: politicized scholarship, relativism about truth, identity-based restrictions on who can study, teach, or write about what, a preference for cancelling over engaging dissent, and a "sociological turn" that crowds out literary questions — form, genre, style — in favor of social-science ones. Appiah adds a caveat: identity-focused and political scholarship isn't itself the problem. Postcolonial, race, and gender scholarship produce real work. The problem is when politics displaces truth-seeking, not when it becomes a subject of it. Together, the live battle lines are: truth versus relativism, evidence

versus ideology of any stripe, who gets to speak on what, engagement versus cancellation, and whether departments should measure themselves by political outcomes or by rigor.

The pushback matters too. Critics — including scholars who accept the diagnosis — argue the reports move too fast from anecdote to indictment, treat fringe scholarship as representative, and risk handing legislators reasons to override disciplinary judgment. They say feminist, postcolonial, and queer scholarship’s real achievements get shortchanged. The reports have drawn support from across the political spectrum. The real divide runs between those who think politicization of scholarship is a serious, current problem and those who think the problem is real but overstated. Almost no one argues conclusions should precede evidence. The dispute is over how often it happens, and how well the reports prove it.



COURSE READING LIST

Required Texts to Possess: The Novels

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905)
Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)
Joan Didion, *Play It as It Lays* (1970)
Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (1985)
Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985)
Anika Jade Levy, *Flat Earth* (2025)
Madeline Cash, *Lost Lambs* (2026)

Poetry Anthology I (provided)

Emily Dickinson, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"
Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Richard Cory"
Stephen Crane, "In the Desert" & "A Man Said to the Universe"
Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"
Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice Cream"
William Carlos Williams, "To Elsie"
T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Poetry Anthology II (provided)

Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B"
W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts"
Theodore Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz"
Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room"
J. V. Cunningham, a couple of epigrams
Kenneth Patchen, "What is the Beautiful?"
Robert Lowell, "Fall 1961"
Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California"
Frank O'Hara, "Poem: Lana Turner"
John Ashbery, "The Short Answer"
Frederick Seidel, "Kill Poem"

Poetry Anthology III (provided)

Sharon Olds, "Satan Says," "I Go Back to May 1937"
Louise Glück, "The Untrustworthy Speaker," "Radium," "August," & "Summer at the Beach"
James Tate, "Goodtime Jesus"
Kim Addonizio, "What Do Women Want?"
A. E. Stallings, "First Love: A Quiz"
Melissa Broder, "I've Learned a Lot but Not Much"
Patricia Lockwood, "The Hypno-Domme Speaks"
Chen Chen, "Summer was Forever"
Franny Choi, "What a Cyborg Wants"
Heu-Minh Nguyen, "Of all the things I've tried to be"
Bronwen Brenner, "Performance Space"



Edith Wharton: "The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!"

What to Expect: A Note on Course Readings

Since a wise man can be mistaken, and a hundred men, and many nations,
what assurance have we that in this century we are not making a mistake?
— Michel de Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond” (1580)

It’s impossible to offend someone who isn’t interested in being offended.
— Friedrich Schlegel (1798)

Literary texts explore all aspects of the human condition. The heroic, shameful, admirable, decadent, lawful, and forbidden sit side by side on the page. A depiction of prejudice, violence, or questionable morals, however, is not an endorsement of it. It may be an accusation, a warning, satire, or an historical specimen useful for critical examination and intellectual discussion.

Our task as literary intellectuals is neither to condemn nor to put one’s own politics on display, but to think critically. We accompany writers into the complications and contradictions of their eras — the beliefs they took for granted, injustices they tolerated, biases endemic to their time, words they use that we no longer do. Our responsibility is not to agree with every voice. It is to report accurately, with a scholar’s perspective.

Several of our writers venture into difficult territory. Discomfort is often where critical reading begins. Franz Kafka overstates the case, deliberately, to make a point about difficulty:

I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book doesn’t shake us awake like a blow to the skull, why bother reading it? ... What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we’ve been banished to the woods, far from any human presence. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us.

The question is not whether a passage offends, but what an offense written down in an imaginative work reveals — about the text, its culture, or us. What do taboos disclose about a culture’s anxieties? What becomes visible when we examine a worldview instead of cancelling it? Words are neither sticks nor stones. They can only hurt you if you let them. You do not have to forgive characters for things that now might seem like “sins.” Reading closely means finding what a text observes and argues on its own terms — not policing it for a moral verdict and not deciding in advance what kinds of things get declared off-limits.

This Instructor’s Responsibilities: I aim to follow Stanley Fish’s advice in *Save the World on Your Own Time*: the job of someone teaching in a university is to

(1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry they didn’t know much about before, and (2) equip those students with the analytical skills to move confidently within those traditions and pursue independent research should they choose to. Teachers should show up for class, prepare lesson plans, teach what’s been advertised, stay current in the field, correct assignments promptly, hold office hours, and give academic — not political or moral — advice. That’s it. There’s nothing else, and nothing more.

Should any problematic issues arise, they do so in an academic context. We discuss them in academic terms: as objects of analysis, comparison, and historical placement, judged on craftsmanship — is it well made? does it hang together? A classroom is the site of “intellectual virtues,” not a stage for moral display. As Fish puts it: “opinion-sharing sessions are like junk food — they fill you up with starch and leave you sated and hungry at once. A sustained inquiry into the truth of a matter is an almost athletic experience. It may exhaust you, but it also improves you.”

A Note on Course Content and State Law: Texas Senate Bill 17 bars public universities from requiring students to adopt or affirm any ideological position on race, sex, or gender. Senate Bill 37 requires general education courses, which this one is not, to be free of partisan or political advocacy. This course was designed in keeping with both — not after the fact, but as the method Fish describes above, arrived at on its own intellectual terms.

Nothing assigned asks a student to adopt a position on any contested political question nor on matters of personal identity. We read our texts as period documents and works of craft: evidence of what a culture believed, feared, and performed, not templates for what any student should believe now. A text that depicts something like a phobia, racism, misogyny, religious hypocrisy, or addiction is analyzed for how it represents that thing and what the representation reveals about its historical moment — not to pronounce a verdict from a present-day position. That standard holds regardless of which direction a given text seems to lean, and it governs our discussion.

Discomfort with a passage is not evidence that the passage is political, any more than discomfort alone proves damage has been done. A text is not indoctrination merely for depicting something unfamiliar. This note makes explicit, for anyone weighing the syllabus against current law, that describing rather than advocating was this course’s method well before any statute asked it to be.

What Being in This Class and Staying Enrolled Means: These readings span from the 1860s to 2026. Several reach genuinely dark places and do not flinch. We’re tracing the American self across successive zeitgeists. You enrolled voluntarily. Your responsibility is to approach the material in good faith: engage the readings in scholarly, not solely personal, terms, discuss them civilly, and distinguish analysis from endorsement. Emotional reactions are normal. Intellectual work begins when we investigate them. If a text presents a concern specific to you, speak with me. But the general warning is simple: if you’d rather not spend a semester in sustained contact with challenging material, this is the time to choose another section.

You have likely been taught to lead with care. Flag harm before it happens. Hedge a claim — “no judgment,” “low key” — before someone else can. Treat sincerity and vulnerability as evidence of authenticity. Our writers offer different brands of authenticity. They don’t announce how they feel. This is discipline, not evasion. Their sentences are honest and ethically consistent: they withhold judgment on principle, even where the material seems to beg for outrage or sympathy. They may not be outraged by or squeamish about at things you might be. That isn’t a cue to read them as taking a side, or as writers inviting present-day cancellation. It makes them writers who think the least hypocritical thing descriptive, imaginative fiction can do is be true to

the book's voice and time. If withholding a moral verdict strikes you as fake, or as moral failure, that reaction is worth examining. Thus, *caveat emptor*.

Any student under 18 is encouraged to meet with the instructor during the first week of class to discuss course expectations and content.

Academic Freedom & Responsibility

UNT has a robust policy regarding academic freedom and academic responsibility. Crucially, this policy encompasses not only the rights of faculty members but also the rights “of the student to freedom in learning.” As a student in this classroom, therefore, you have the right to encounter and debate new ideas, diverse forms of knowledge, and unfamiliar or contrary points of view. According to UNT policy, “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.” At the same time, to encourage the free exchange of ideas, and to ensure that your right to learn is protected, the tone for such discussion must always be civil and respectful; hateful or discriminatory speech will not be tolerated. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-035>

Audio/Video Recording: Academic Freedom and Recording Policies

Although UNT is a publicly supported institution, our classroom is not a public space. Therefore, to protect the intellectual property and privacy rights of both faculty and students, video and audio recordings are prohibited during class. The exception is for students who have been granted explicit approval as an ODA accommodation. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access/faculty/faculty-guide/accommodations-explained/Audio-Recording-Faculty.html>

A NOTE ON AI: Do not use AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, or similar) to read assigned texts for you, summarize them, generate discussion responses, or write any portion of work for this course. This isn't a technophobic objection — it's that the premise of the class is your own encounter with texts. An AI summary cannot have that encounter for you any more than it can feel something on your behalf. Using AI defeats the work, which is you, reading, noticing what you notice. If you're ever unsure if a particular use crosses the line, ask first.



From the Gilded Age to Dimes Square

COURSE GRADES (100 POINTS TOTAL)

Attendance	30 points
The Book of Cultural Reports	not “graded” but essential for
Class Participation	30 points & for
The Recitation	40 points
Total	100 points



Ernest Hemingway: “There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.”

ON ASSIGNMENTS AS TRAINING

There is no try. There is do, or do not.
— Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

This course has no paper, no midterm, and no final exam. Instead, you keep a commonplace book of cultural reports, participate in cold-call mini-recitations, and complete a final recitation. As UNT reorients itself as a **National Service University**, this course’s pedagogy is organized around **Writing Across the Curriculum, Problem-Based Learning, and Work-Integrated Learning**. The assignments are designed not merely to assess what you know, but to train capacities you will need long after the semester ends.

The book of cultural reports is a form of **fieldwork**: sustained, dated observations of literary cultures and zeitgeists, revised as new evidence complicates old conclusions. It **trains a habit**: learning to see beyond what society says about itself to what it is doing and then recording observations carefully. Thus, the course treats **writing as inquiry** rather than display. Each report is a **provisional** explanation that must be **tested** against further evidence, **revised** when it fails, and **strengthened** when it holds.

The final recitation pushes that inquiry into a more demanding register. It asks you to file your report aloud, in real time, and submit it at a deadline. The course is structured as an **open-ended problem**. You cannot solve it in advance because you cannot see the target until the semester has unfolded. You will not know which era, question, or conceptual instrument your final recitation ultimately turns upon until you are in the room. As a result, the cultural reporting must be genuine throughout the semester rather than aimed at a predetermined conclusion.

Like problems outside the classroom, there is no answer key hidden in the back of the book, no formula that guarantees success. There is only the task of making sense of incomplete evidence, recognizing patterns, and defending interpretations you arrive at.

Defending a report you build from evidence, live, under unpredictable follow-up, in front of your “editor” who won’t tell you whether you’re right — that’s not a metaphor for a job interview or a presentation. It’s close to a literal description. There is no drafting an answer in advance. There is only what you’ve observed, over the semester, in the book — which is the reason the book must be conscientiously kept.



Joan Didion: “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see, and what it means.”

ASSIGNMENT 1: ATTENDANCE (30 POINTS)

Show up.
—UNT Office of Academic Success

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Please discuss any **ODA** accommodations (and provide ODA documentation) with the professor ASAP: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access>. For the **UNT attendance policy** (06.039, Student Attendance and Authorized Absences), see: <https://policy.unt.edu/sites/policy.unt.edu/files/06.039%20Student%20Attendance%20and%20Authorized%20Absences.pdf>

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This assignment is worth 30 points, all tied to attendance.

The first point of contact for all attendance questions is the professor. Absences that don’t fall under Title IX, required military service, or official university functions are a matter between

student and faculty. If an absence due to an **extenuating circumstance** exceeds five consecutive days, the faculty member may request documentation through the Dean of Students' office.

An absence is officially excused by the university for:

- ✓ A religious holy day, including travel for that purpose.
- ✓ Participation in an official university function.
- ✓ Required military service, including travel for that purpose.
- ✓ Pregnancy and parenting, under Title IX.

Make-up work will be a mini-recitation during office hours. A student is responsible for requesting — ASAP, in writing — that an absence be excused: deliver the request personally to the professor; provide satisfactory evidence; and **request a time to complete the make-up work**. A student won't be penalized for a university-excused absence if make-up work is completed within a reasonable period. If you don't request the excused absence and make-up work close to the day(s) missed, we won't revisit it for dates and topics long gone, and the potentially excused will count as unexcused.

Your professor **may or may not** excuse other absences due to short-term illness or other **extenuating circumstances**. Having "a note" does not excuse an absence. Email the professor the reason within 24 hours. Be honest and clear — you don't have to provide personal details, but you do have to say something. **Unexcused absences cannot be made up.**

Earning attendance points:

- 👉 Show up on time for and attend every class.
- 👉 There is no #2.

Things are kinds of things that **do not count as extenuating circumstances or as excusable**:

- 👉 "I feel sick" / "I felt sick."
- 👉 "Traffic."
- 👉 "My bus was late."
- 👉 A scheduled, non-emergency doctor, dentist, or advisor appointment.
- 👉 Anything else that could have been scheduled for a time other than class.

A student who is more than 20 minutes **late** is counted absent. A student 10–20 minutes late is counted **tardy**. Three tardies become one unexcused absence. **The bottom line**: be present, on time, and actively engaged — including, especially, days you're not called on. This course only works if the room is full of people willing to argue with whoever's reading.

These things may result in your being counted absent or dismissed from class:

- 👉 Consuming media on a phone, laptop, or any device, including wearing earbuds or headphones.
- 👉 Doing work for other classes during our time.

You're allowed **2 free absences**. Use them for any **extenuating circumstance** — but don't think of them as skip days. If you burn one as a skip and then have a real un-excusable circumstance later, you don't get to double-dip; you get two, total, no matter the reason. After your two free

unexcused absences, **5 points** are **deducted** for each additional unexcused absence. A student missing more than 6 classes (3 weeks) will need to meet with the professor and may fail the course due to absence, independent of further deductions. If allowed to remain with the hope of passing, the final grade will be no higher than a C. A student missing 7 times will fail. **Always contact your professor as soon as anything comes up that disrupts your attendance. I can only help if I know what's going on.**



Don DeLillo: "I want to immerse myself in American magic and dread."

ASSIGNMENT 2: CULTURAL REPORTS, OR, HOW TO READ A ZEITGEIST (not "graded," but essential)

We are so used to disguising ourselves from others
that we end by disguising ourselves from ourselves.
— La Rochefoucauld

We are all smooth-braining our way through life ... we are spiraling as we find
ourselves refracted and reflected by the many-sided mirror that is the internet.
— Will Harrison, "Escape from Dimes Square"

No one really knows. That's why they call it *meta-irony*.
— in Mikkel Rosengaard, "Age of the Femtroll"

Your task is to identify what each text reports about the culture that produced it and keep a reporter's notebook, **by hand**, throughout the semester. The central question is not *What happens in this text?* but *What does this text reveal about the age that produced it?*

Every writer on the syllabus does what you're doing: filing a report from inside a cultural, historical moment. Some file poems, some novels, but all are correspondents for a particular zeitgeist. Converse with each text as if it is a dispatch from the front lines of its culture. In turn, write your reports as a distinctively positioned correspondent from your own zeitgeist. Your unique perspective or identity is part of your reportorial style. Use it. Question it. It is neither a

flaw nor a final authority, only one perspective among many. The goal is not to erase your background or cultural point of view, but to become critically conscious of it as you consider other frames of references and lived experiences from other social positions. Keep your commonplace book current. Any day you may be asked to open it and read from it. A notebook kept in the field has a different texture than one assembled the night before deadline.

THE STYLE DESK RULES

You're filing field dispatches, not writing essays. Lead with what you noticed. Report on what is — don't scold from the ethics of your generation about what should be. Describe the culture; don't condemn it. If your report sounds moralistic or judgmental, you're not writing for the editor's desk. It's your ego writing for "the other" — someone you fear or want to impress. Cut things there just to make it sound like your own value system is superior. The voice you're after is concise, objective, flat, exact. Write it like you saw it that way on purpose.

WHAT GOES IN THE CULTURAL REPORTS:

- ✓ **Two dates in the margins:** the day you wrote the entry + the year the text was written.
- ✓ **Collect more evidence than you think you'll need:** A commonplace book is a *florilegium* — a copious gathering of flowers of reading. Readers have kept them for centuries: copying out beautiful passages, returning later to reread, letting a private collection of other people's best lines become raw material for their own thinking and writing. That's the deeper tradition you're working in, and it's older than journalism or the English major. As a faithful keeper of commonplace books that fed his essays, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, in "Nominalist and Realist," "I read for the lustres, as if one should use a fine picture in a chromatic experiment, for its rich colors." So, gather greedily. Don't clip one flower and call it a bouquet. Part of this assignment is about being a friend to your future self whose only script for the show will be this commonplace book. Gather too much. Wander around the whole garden. Take entire branching stems — lines, descriptions, scenes you may want again (who knows what exigencies the future will bring?) — and press them into the book even if you're not yet sure what they could be used for. Collect illustrious things that illuminate your mind. The recitations, especially the final one, will ask you to reach back into pages you wrote many weeks ago. A paltry *florilegium* is not the bouquet to bring to the occasion.
- ✓ **Then arrange what you've gathered for your dispatches:** Take a full handful of passages from a single reading and set them against the same or several different **tools**. Does the same passage change under a different tool's pressure? Do five buds from one text, read together, reveal a story that one blossom alone couldn't? A dispatch built from a serious intellectual's gathering — several passages, several tools — will serve you in the classroom and my office for the recitation far better than one mere quote, examined cursorily, as if that were a semblance of thinking.
- ✓ **Change your mind on the page:** A *florilegium*, like thinking itself, is never finished. The gardener keeps returning to nourish the beds. When a later reading proves an earlier entry wrongheaded — or casts it in a light you didn't have when you first pressed it into the book — return to it. Revise a new report underneath. Never erase. A blossom cut in September doesn't know yet what it will mean beside one cut in November. Part of keeping the book honestly is letting the later flower change how you smell the earlier one. When that happens, don't quietly update your notes in a persona of one who'd

always known better. Leave the old thought there and write the new one near it, so the record shows a willingness to always revise provisional conclusions. A *florilegium* with nothing crossed out and reconsidered isn't a gorgeous bouquet — it's decorative plastic flowers as a cheesy decoration.

1. THE HEADLINES

Write at least three newspaper-style headlines that report on the cultural story of the day's reading. These are what you'll read aloud first when you're called on in class.

MARRIAGE MARKET STRONG DESPITE HUMAN COSTS
SUPERMARKET REPLACES CHURCH AS SITE OF BELIEF
MAN CONFRONTS UNIVERSE, UNIVERSE UNMOVED
FATHER-SON DANCE LEAVES BRUISES, CALLED LOVE
CELEBRITY COLLAPSES, POET TAKES IT PERSONALLY
MAN ON THE HILL: CULT RUMORS SWIRL AROUND LOCAL TYCOON

2. THE TOOLS: USE WHAT WORKS ON EVIDENCE FROM EACH READING TO FILE THE BI-WEEKLY DISPATCH

Core Values, Desires, and Cultural Logic: What Matters to the Culture?

- What provides social value or self-worth? What status positions are aspired to? (*theme*)
- What is the culture's currency — its prized status objects? Does having it satisfy, or does it stand in for something else the person really wants? (*symbol*)
- What object, trait, or status marker signals power, no matter who holds it? (*symbol*)
- What does the culture worship? What does it fear? (*theme; symbolism; allegory*)
- Do characters want things because someone else wanted them first? Whose desire made the object desirable? Which rivals turn into mirror images of each other? What or who does a character fixate on, unable to look away from, even as it hurts them? (*foil, motif of mimetic desire*)

Social Structure, Inclusion, and Exclusion: Power, Belonging, and Hierarchy

- What does the culture treat as cringe or taboo? What does it forbid? (*conflict: character vs. society*)
- Who gets scapegoated when tensions rise, so the group can move on? Does the community ever admit the blamed person was innocent — or does peace depend on believing they weren't? Does blame get justified afterward as justice, tradition, or fate? (*scapegoat archetype; character vs. society conflict; dramatic irony; tragic irony*)
- Old authority is fading — the parent, the father, the family, the church, the rulebook. What replaces it? What enforces the rules now? (*theme*)
- What social role does the culture hand a person before they're old enough to choose for themselves? What does it train them to believe about who they are? (*flat character, characterization; social conditioning; archetype; stock character*)

Performance, Identity, and the Self: Masks, Personas, and Authenticity

- Who's performing? What mask do they wear? Does the culture believe there's a real face underneath, or is the mask all there is? (*round vs. flat character; characterization; persona; dramatic irony; appearance vs. reality*)
- What separates real trauma from performed trauma — does the culture believe there's a difference? (*unreliable narration; performance; theme; characterization*)
- Where does the story hit some trauma it can't explain or name, and just stop? (*narrative gap; omission; aporia; repression; conflict*)
- What story, or fantasy, does a character tell themselves to make their desire feel okay? (*self-deception; internal conflict; characterization; internal monologue*)

Language, Discourse, and Social Communication: How Meaning Circulates

- What words or phrases get so overused they wear out? Who still uses them, and what does that signal? (*diction*)
- What's the value of gossip? Who trades in it, what does it buy them, and what does the culture learn about itself through it? (*characterization; motif; discourse; exposition*)
- Who keeps demanding answers from authority — and exposing that authority doesn't have any? (*dramatic irony; Socratic questioning; satire; conflict*)

Media, Attention, and Collective Consciousness: How the Culture Sees Itself

- What invisible eye, audience, or gaze, do characters perform for— the imagined "They"? What screens does the culture watch itself on? (*point of view; dramatic irony; surveillance; characterization*) What happens if, or when, no one is watching? (*dramatic irony, characterization; theme*)
- What conspiracies intrigue or plague the characters? What do those theories explain that nothing else can? (*paranoia motif; theme; conflict; symbolism*)
- What's the culture's drug of choice, literal or otherwise? What does a character keep doing long after it stops feeling good? What does a character do compulsively, with no real goal, just to keep the loop going? (*motif*)

Failure, Consequences, and Imagination: Processing Suffering and Meaning

- How does the culture consider failure — narrate it as tragedy or comedy? (*tone; theme*)
- What's the reward for sincerity? For irony? Which one gets punished? (*tone; theme; irony*)
- What kind of end does the culture think its characters deserve? (*resolution; poetic justice*)
- What flaw or habit in a character is holding their life together? What would collapse without it? (*tragic flaw; paradox; characterization*)

Other Literary Concerns

- Characterization: How do other characters describe a person? What contradictions define them? What do they refuse to acknowledge about themselves?
- Narrative Perspective: Who gets to tell the story? Whose perspective is missing? What would the story look like from another character's viewpoint? (*point of view, focalization, unreliable narration*)
- Motif: What image, phrase, object, or action recurs? How does its meaning change?

- **Setting:** What kind of world makes these values seem reasonable? How does the physical environment enforce social rules?
- **Archetype:** Which roles recur: hero, scapegoat, outsider, trickster, prophet, martyr? Which archetypes are being subverted?
- **Appearance vs. Reality:** What does everyone pretend is true? What reality keeps breaking through?
- **Narrative Structure:** What events are omitted? What turning points reorganize meaning? What does the ending force us to reinterpret? (*plot, reversal (peripeteia), recognition (anagnorisis), resolution*)

3. BI-WEEKLY DISPATCHES TO THE STYLE DESK

After completing the assigned readings and Parts 1 and 2 above, write a **250-word field dispatch** from the culture you have been observing. For each M/W dispatch:

- **Choose 2-4 items** from your notes in 1 and 2. **Don't** cover every observation you made.
- **Anchor your dispatch in evidence** from the text. Refer to specific passages, scenes, objects, conversations, gestures, rumors, rituals, or other details.
- **Use at least one of this course's analytical tools** (for example: authority, taboo, gossip, masks, trauma, conspiracy, etc.) to interpret what you have observed.
- Move beyond description. Explain **what your evidence suggests about how the culture works, what it values, fears, rewards, or avoids.**
- Develop a distinctive reporter's voice. The dispatch may be formal, informal, serious, or playful, but it should make a clear argument about the culture you are studying.

End with **2-3 reflective sentences** connecting this dispatch to previous ones. Has your understanding of the culture changed? Does this week's evidence confirm an earlier pattern, complicate it, or reveal a new one? Use these closing sentences to identify questions or story lines you want to investigate in future dispatches.

Think less “reading summary” and more “cultural correspondent's report.” Your job is not to tell us everything but to explain what a few revealing details tell us about the world of the text.



Bret Easton Ellis: “Haven’t we outgrown all this tired irony?”

ASSIGNMENT 3: CLASS PARTICIPATION AS MINI-RECITATIONS (30 POINTS)

Contradictions of judgments neither offend nor alter me. They only rouse and exercise me. We evade correction. We ought to offer and present ourselves to it, especially when it appears in the form of conversation, and not of authority. At every opposition, we do not consider whether or not it is just, but, right or wrong, and how to disengage ourselves. Instead of extending our arms, we thrust out our claws. I could suffer myself to be rudely handled by my friend, so much as to tell me that I am a fool and talk of I know not what. I love stout expressions among friends, and for them to speak as they think. We must fortify and harden our hearing against this tenderness of the ceremonious sound of words. I love a strong familiarity and conversation, a friendship that pleases itself in the sharpness and vigor of its communication, like love in biting and scratching.

—Montaigne, “On the Art of Discussion”

No one leads discussion here in the prepared sense—not even me. Every class, I will call on several field reporters without warning to open their books, read from them aloud, and think through a text together. I may or may not join in from the editor’s desk. Each is a mini-recitation: a low-stakes rehearsal for the final recitation. This participation grade isn’t only for those days. It rewards active presence across the whole term — both the required mini-recitations and the everyday work of helping the room think. Brilliant reports on cold-call days are half the job. The rest is talking every day while keeping up a real book. The goal is to be a prepared, active field reporter, always ready to file a report.

Why cold calls, no warning: The final recitation is decided in the room, not in advance. There’s no pre-loading a performance, no way to rehearse. What the recitation tests is: can you report on your feet, from a book that’s authentically yours, about a topic you didn’t choose? Cold calling rehearses that. It also keeps the book honest: if any day could be your day, your entries have to stay current, filed across each text before class.

Why several at once: The most valuable thing that can happen is a reading discovered live against other readings. Being “next” isn’t about rehearsing your bit. Subsequent reporters must decide on the spot if their reporting agrees or cuts against it. Some reports converge; some contradict. Either way, each reporter discovers how their reading survives contact with competing accounts. This is the moment a dispatch has to survive being read out loud, to people who get to disagree about what it describes.

What called-on field reporters do:

1. **Read your three best headlines:** Your lede — the day’s cultural story in three lines.
2. **Then read key parts of the report:** Read passages that fascinated you, with its page number, and some sentences you connected to some tools. Or read your bi-weekly dispatch.
3. **Then think through it with other reporters on the beat,** repositioning, conceding, pushing back, following-up with whatever comes next.

The point isn't a polished assessment. It's to report out loud and revise in real time when a question challenges you, rather than restating a first claim more firmly. This isn't a quiz passed or failed. What we're all listening for is whether the reporter is diligent and the book is current, how you find your way around a specific entry, and if you keep observing, with grace under pressure, instead of freezing into an ego performance of confidence. A rough, honest, in-process sketch meets the filing deadline for a report from the field.

Four required mini-recitations, one per zeitgeist: Every student reporter is called at least once, at random, in each zeitgeist:

- Dispatches from the Golden Age
- Dispatches from Modernity
- Dispatches from the Postmodern Condition
- Dispatches from Dimes Square

Being called once in each means you'll have filed from all four points on the arc — the same span of the final recitation. Any day is fair game, including poetry days. Poetry days may feature the widest range of reporting. An unprepared reporter **may defer only once per zeitgeist**; I'll call on them later once, and only once. Defer twice and you get no credit for that part of class participation.

Everyday participation: On the days you're not called, you're still a live field reporter on the front lines of a zeitgeist, in three ways:

1. **Cultural monuments—Being in the know:** Your territory as a reporter extends into all aspects of a zeitgeist. **You are responsible for tracking down all cultural references that weave through a text** — literary and cultural allusions, people, quotes, publications, historical events, mythological references, political figures, brands names and products, films, TV shows, and songs, significant places, subcultures, institutions, and any of the assumptions the book expects its first readers to recognize. The cultural environment is part of the text's evidence. Noticing when a text situates itself in its moment, finding what it points to, and bringing that to the room is crucial work for all cultural reporters. An unexplored reference is a missed lead. A reporter who walks past a reference without investigating it isn't a reporter; they're a tourist.
2. **Ordinary discussion:** Join in, push back on another's reading, build on it, disagree, ask a real question. A room of people waiting silently for their cold-call day is not a newsroom.
3. **The volunteered report:** At any point, following the called-upon reporters, open your own book unprompted and use an entry to add a dimension the conversation is missing, or to put an observation on the table the day hasn't reached. This doesn't substitute for your cold-call day, but it's the cold-call move made voluntarily. It means you're reading the room, finding the gap, and reaching for your own fieldwork without being asked.

What I'm doing, as your editor: When I call on reporters from the field, I'm running the story meeting. I'm not there to tell you what an era means. The verdict belongs to the reporter who was in the field. I will:

- **Assign and curate.** I choose the reporters, set the order, decide when the exchange has run its course, and consider how the reports work together, or diverged. Naming the tension is the editor's move. Resolving it isn't.
- **Press.** I'm another voice, not a silent examiner — following up, sometimes floating my own reading for you to argue with. Whatever a report claims, I'll ask the question it raises but doesn't settle: is that your strongest evidence or your most comfortable; are you reading the text or its reputation; have you assumed the thing the report needs to prove? I'll find the edge of what you've observed and ask you to go one step past it, live. And sometimes: whether a text from 1905 would survive being filed on 2026
- **Withhold the verdict.** I won't say if a report "works," or pronounce "the right reading." Handing it over would be writing your story for you — performing, from the front of the room, a settled certainty over ground still moving. I may let silence sit after you finish — not as disapproval, but as the blank space on the page for you to fill better. It means there's more if you stay with the discomfort instead of rushing to fill it, which is the exact moment a rehearsed line runs out and something more honest takes over.
- The one exception is **context, not interpretation.** When an era needs something you can't get from the page — who someone was, what "Dimes Square" refers to and to whom, why a reader in 1926 heard a word the way a reader now doesn't — I'll supply it briefly. Facts about the world are fair to hand over. Readings of the culture are not.

What this has to do with the rest of the course: You spend the semester filing cold reports on the customs and conventions of one era after another — how sincerity, irony, and the performed self get organized and come apart across a hundred and fifty years of American writing. Being called without warning places you inside the thing you've been studying: filing a report aloud, in real time, with no edit pass and no settled copy in reserve. The mini-recitation isn't a break from the fieldwork but is the fieldwork on the culture under observation, performed by several reporters on a random class day.

What you're graded on.

1. **The real, current book:** When called — or volunteering — you work from a specific, evidence of the current dated entry. This isn't improvising a general impression of what the era was "like." Fluency with your own field notes, at daily scale, is the game.
2. **Report; don't perform:** Under follow-up, keep observing. Revise the field note out loud in response to questions and comments. Each time is your byline, not the house style.
3. **Cultural literacy as fieldwork:** Notice when a text assumes knowledge it doesn't explain. Track that knowledge down. The goal is building a working vocabulary of the zeitgeist a text inhabits, so what you file sounds like you know what you're talking about. A reporter should be increasingly hard to surprise with the world a text takes for granted.
4. **A live presence, every day:** Beyond the mini-recitations, show up as a real participant — answering colleagues' reports as readings worth a real answer, reaching into your own book unprompted to add what the day is missing. Consistency, not just brilliance on the scored days, carries this grade.

These are the same strengths the recitation tests. Every time you're called — or speak up — between now and then, you're doing the recitation in miniature, which is the only preparation for it that works.



Anika Jade Levy: “The definition of Americanness is incoherence.”

ASSIGNMENT 4: THE RECITATION (40 POINTS)

Maybe with good luck we'll find what eluded us in the places we once called home.
— Roebuck Wright, *The French Dispatch*

There is no midterm, final exam, or final paper in this course. Instead, the semester culminates in an individual recitation with me. The recitation lasts approximately 20–30 minutes and is based on the cultural reports you've accumulated in your commonplace book throughout the semester.

Your commonplace book is not a final product submitted for a grade. It is your field notebook: the record of observations, headlines, questions, and reports you've crafted all semester. The recitation tests your ability to work from that fieldwork in real time.

What happens during the recitation? You'll meet with me one-on-one, in my office. Bring your commonplace book and the syllabus (with the tools). For your meeting, I will choose one of four formats, and you will have 5 minutes to get ready, if you need it:

A. Cold Tool, Live Report: I'll open your notebook and pick one entry — but instead of asking about the observation you already made, I'll hand you one or two tools you didn't use on it. You will:

- Read the entry aloud.
- Apply the new tool(s) to build a fresh report, on the spot.
- Defend and develop that new report through follow-up questions.

B. Two Reports, Compared: I'll select two reports from different eras. You will:

- Compare them using a course concept or analytical tool.
- Explain how the same tool works differently in different zeitgeists.
- Discuss what that difference reveals about the overall historical arc of the course.

C. The Cold Era: This tests your reporting instincts rather than prepared notes. I'll provide a passage from a course text that may not appear in your notebook. You'll:

- Read the passage aloud.
- Analyze it on the spot, using the tools.
- File a cultural report in real time using whatever interpretive tools seem most useful.

D. The Reversal: This one lets you build your whole case first. Then I ask a new question, and you have to find where their case breaks. You'll select the report you're proudest of and I will read it aloud. You then:

- Build the fullest case for your interpretation. Use every tool that supports it.
- I'll ask what your reading can't explain.
- Find the loose thread yourself. Follow it.
- Say whether it changes your report, and how.

Why don't you know the format in advance? Because the course is designed to reward observation rather than rehearsal. A polished presentation prepared for a known prompt tells me very little. What I want to know is whether you can work from your own field notes, respond to new provocations, and think through a problem in real time. The recitation therefore asks you to do what you've practiced all semester: open the book, look at the evidence, and report. If you've kept an honest notebook, nothing about the recitation should feel unfamiliar.

What is my role? Think of me as your news editor. I'm not there to tell you the "correct" interpretation of an era. Instead, I'll ask questions:

- Is that your strongest evidence?
- Are you describing the text itself, its reputation, or a biased interpretation?
- Have you assumed the conclusion you've yet to prove?
- Would this interpretation still work in another era, for another text?
- Would it survive being applied to the present?

My job is to push the report further than its first draft.

What are you graded on?

1. Fluency with Your Fieldwork: Can you work from your notebook? The strongest recitations are grounded in specific entries, observations, and passages from throughout the semester.

2. Thinking in Real Time: Can you respond to questions by reconsidering the evidence? Strong reporters revise when necessary. Weak reporters repeat the original claim more loudly.

3. Honest Observation: Can you recognize when a conceptual tool fits awkwardly, when evidence complicates a conclusion, or when different eras resist being forced into the same story? Intellectual honesty matters more than neatness.

4. Reporting on Your Own Moment: The hardest task is turning the same analytical distance you applied to author back on your zeitgeist. Any format can test this — I may simply ask whether your interpretation would survive being applied to the present. The strongest recitations also show a comprehensive grasp of the reading list: not just fluency with one era or author, but the ability to place your era's report inside the arc the course has traced.

Why this isn't an ambush: You've done versions of this assignment all semester. Every mini-recitation was practice. The final recitation uses the same skills:

- observing,
- connecting evidence,
- explaining patterns,
- responding to questions,
- revising a claim when new evidence appears.

The only difference is it's a conversation that lasts longer, draws on the entire semester's work, and it's one-on-one. If the notebook is real, the recitation is rewarding challenge. If the notebook is not real, no amount of last-minute preparation can substitute for fifteen weeks of fieldwork.



Madeline Cash: "Everything is a perversion now. Which means nothing is."

SCHEDULE

(SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

DISPATCHES FROM THE GILDED AGE



Week 1

M 8/17 — Syllabus; The Future Will Think You're Weird. The Past, BTW, Does Too. Historicizing What Gen Z Calls "Normal"

W 8/19 — Read the Syllabus & Ask Questions about the course
& Poetry Anthology I

Week 2

M 8/24 — Wharton, the intro & *The House of Mirth*, Bk 1, Ch 1-7

W 8/26 — Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, Bk 1, Ch 8-14

Week 3

M 8/31 — Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, Bk 1, Ch 15-Bk 2, Ch 5

W 9/2 — Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, Bk 2, Ch 6-14

DISPATCHES FROM MODERNITY



Week 4

M 9/7 — LABOR DAY HOLIDAY

W 9/9 — Poetry Anthology II

Week 5

M 9/14 — Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, Bk. 1 Ch. 1-Bk. 2, Ch. 8

W 9/16 — Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, Bk. 2, Ch. 9-15

Week 6

M 9/21 — Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, Bk. 2, Ch. 16-Bk. 3, Ch. 19

W 9/23 — Didion, *Play It as It Lays*, “Maria”-Ch. 21

Week 7

M 9/28 — Didion, *Play It as It Lays*, Ch. 22-53

W 9/30 — Didion, *Play It as It Lays*, Ch. 54-84

DISPATCHES FROM THE POSTMODERN CONDITION



Week 8

M 10/5 — DeLillo, *White Noise*, I. Waves and Radiation

W 10/7 — DeLillo, *White Noise*, II. The Airborne Toxic Event Ch. 21-27

Week 9

M 10/12 — DeLillo, *White Noise*, Ch. 28-40

W 10/14 — Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, first third (9-75)

Week 10

M 10/19 — Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, middle third (75-141)

W 10/21 — Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, final third (142-208)

DISPATCHES FROM DIMES SQUARE



Week 11

M 10/26 — Poetry Anthology III

W 10/28 — Levy, *Flat Earth*, first third (3–69)

Week 12

M 11/2 — Levy, *Flat Earth*, middle third (71–129)

W 11/4 — Levy, *Flat Earth*, final third (131–206)

Week 13

M 11/9 — Cash, *Lost Lambs* (3–74)

W 11/11 — Cash, *Lost Lambs* (75–168)

Week 14

M 11/16 — Cash, *Lost Lambs* (169–255)

M 11/18 — Cash, *Lost Lambs* (256–320) — **Last full class meeting**

Week 15 — Thanksgiving Break (no class)

Week 16 through Final Week:

Recitations: T 12/1 – Th 12/11, by appointment.