

English 120: Introduction to Literature and Culture Detecting Cultural Crossroads

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In American culture, detective fiction is often viewed as a guilty pleasure—right up there with romance novels and westerns. We read it on the beach, not in school, where we read what we call “classic” literature to learn the values, ideas, and characteristics that make America “American.” In this course, I argue that understanding detective fiction is as effective a route to understanding American cultural beliefs as reading the so-called classics. The sheer popularity of the form indicates that the detective genre fulfills a cultural need and provides pleasurable reading experiences. Moreover, as a popular literary genre, detective fiction employs the tropes and conventions traditional to literature. Thus, as we examine the genre for what its themes tell us about American culture, or cultures, we will also learn how to talk about and analyze literature.

In this class, American culture is actually cultures: a heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting blend of different kinds of peoples, beliefs, and institutions. While we will discuss ideas that are identified with American-ness, such as independence, social mobility, the “American dream,” and freedom, we will also consider who gets to fulfill these ideals and how. Is the figure of the detective an idealized American? What happens when the detective isn’t white, male, and/or heterosexual? How do the plots of detective fiction engage with major American conflicts, and what does the resolution of the plot say about the possible solutions for these problems?

DIVERSITY POLICY: All students and views are welcome in this class. Any student requiring special assistance to complete the requirements for this class may speak to the instructor so that we can discuss appropriate accommodations.

Texts

Chandler, Raymond. "The Red Wind" (on reserve)

Glaspell, Susan. *Trifles* (handout)

King, Laurie. *With Child*

Legally Blonde

Massey, Sujata. *The Salaryman's Wife*

Mosley, Walter. *Devil in a Blue Dress* (CD, tape, or audible.com version available)

Occasional readings (reserve)

Course Objectives: **This course is writing intensive.**

- ◆ Develop critical reading strategies for comprehension of texts and synthesis of ideas.
- ◆ Analyze texts closely: practice in reading, discussing, and presenting ideas from a text
- ◆ Contribute to and participate in small and large group discussions and individual and group presentations.
- ◆ Write in a variety of modes and types, including reflective pieces, descriptive and informational pieces, analytical and persuasive pieces.
- ◆ Write and present structured interpretations that demonstrate topic development, organization, and the ability to write interpretive analysis.

Comment: Three comments: 1. One of the issues instructors may encounter in setting up this type of syllabus is the short shelf-life of many detective novels. I found many interesting texts that were out-of-print with little likelihood of returning. This issue is even more prominent when you try to find texts by international authors like Arjouni, whose detective is a German Turk. 2. I am toying with the idea of including a regional detective novel, either Sarah Strohmeier's *Bubbles Unbound* (set in the Lehigh Valley) or an early K. C. Constantine novel (set in Pittsburgh). I could envision accompanying these texts with short contextual readings about the area that engage students' personal experience with Pennsylvania history and culture. 3. In this version, there is no poetry unit: I have taught Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" in this class and could see using "close reading" as a model for detection in a series of poems about evil, mysteries, or crime.

Comment: This is my only text available commercially and easily in multiple formats. Students with reading or visual disabilities will benefit if texts are identified early (6 months at least) so that they can request from the appropriate agencies that a tape be made for their use.

Comment: These are the objectives for English 120 at Wilkes University; clearly these will vary from school to school.

- ◆ Identify major literary genres and basic literary terminology including characteristics of literary types, forms, elements, and devices.
- ◆ Apply technology to the writing process.
- ◆ Apply technology to enhance the study of language and literature using computers and media.
- ◆ Write competently according to the following criteria: content (originality, careful thought, clearly defined central idea or thesis, substantial and concrete support of the central idea), organization (clearly ordered plan of development, consistent development of central idea, unified and coherent paragraphs, effective transitions between ideas), expression (appropriate, clear, and accurate choice of language, complete, clear, and varied sentence structure), mechanics (consistent and correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage, correct citation and documentation form)

Assessment/Course Requirements

Exam (1 @ 100 points): This tests will allow you to demonstrate specific, practical knowledge of detective fiction and its conventions as well as ask you to use this knowledge to answer questions about texts we have read. In addition to showing me that you understand the course content, you must show that you can analyze the course material independently. Students who wish to take this exam in an alternative form to accommodate their learning style should discuss this option with the instructor early in the semester. This exam is designed to assure me that you have basic knowledge of terminology and genre before we proceed with the heftier course materials; you can expect few written comments on the exam itself.

Longer Essay (4-5 pages) (100 points): At the end of the semester you will write an essay on one of two topic areas: 1) a traditional literal critical paper on some of the texts studied, or 2) a proposal in which you develop a detective character and setting, justifying your choices based on your understanding of course materials. Students who wish to complete this assignment in a format more amenable to their learning style may make a proposal to the instructor. Further information about drafting and formatting essays is listed under "Other matters of interest" below.

Dialogic Notebooks and Response Papers (100 points: 10 points/collection): This requirement is a writing-to-learn assignment that will help you organize your thoughts about our readings and make connections amongst our various activities. A handout with guidelines for the DN will be distributed in class, and each assignment should fill between 3-4 pages of college-ruled notebook paper (there will be variations in length based on type of paper and handwriting). Your initial DNs and Response Papers will receive extensive instructor feedback designed to guide your completion of this assignment, but as the semester progresses you can expect to receive a grade only.

Class Participation (100 points): A vibrant classroom environment requires responsible completion of assignments (reading and writing), and intelligent, respectful participation in class activities and discussions. Please arrive promptly for class, ready to work, with all necessary materials. Showing up is not sufficient: you must contribute. It goes without saying that you cannot participate if you do not attend. This classroom is a learning environment: all ideas are welcome and there are no stupid questions.

Repeated absences will severely compromise your grade. You are allowed two (2) absences during the semester; a .5 reduction will be made from your final grade for each additional absence. Five (5) absences will result in course failure. This policy is intended to cover minor illnesses and injuries, immoveable personal commitments, religious holidays, and university-sanctioned events. *Use them wisely.* See below for information on handling make-up work or missed assignments.

Other Matters of Interest

Completion of Assignments: All assignments are due the date they are listed, and cover the material to be discussed that day. Without a reasonable excuse discussed beforehand with the instructor,

essays or response papers submitted after class on the date due will be considered one day late, and essays will drop a full grade for each class period they are late. If you must be absent due to a circumstance you control, you must turn in your work beforehand. No assignments will be accepted beyond a week late.

Essay Format and Drafting: The following directions may seem obvious, but clean presentation is essential to making a good impression with your paper.

- All papers and drafts should be typewritten or word-processed. Your name, the class number (English 120), my name, and the date should appear in the upper left corner of the first page of every paper, and your last name and the page number should appear in the upper right corner of each attached page.
- Papers should be double-spaced, use 12-point type, and carry one-inch margins all around. Staple papers longer than one page in length.
- All papers must have interesting, relevant titles.
- Errors of format, grammar, spelling, and punctuation detract from the effectiveness of your paper and will adversely affect your grade.
- We will use MLA format for documentation and citation in this class.

Cheating: Plagiarism and all other forms of cheating are grounds for course failure and breach all notions of academic honesty and fairness. The "English Department Statement on Intellectual Responsibility and Plagiarism" defines plagiarism, and the *Student Handbook* offers full definitions of all kinds of cheating. I expect that you understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, and that you are conversant with appropriate methods of quotation, citation, and documentation. If you have questions about these matters, please speak to the instructor for clarification.

Office Hours: I encourage all students to come by during office hours to discuss their work in this class. I will happily meet with you to discuss your essays or class content. If you are having difficulties, I hope you will come see me so that we can work on resolving any problems before they reach crisis proportions.

Schedule of Class Meetings, Readings, and Assignments

WEEK 1: "American" Ideas

Course Overview and Syllabus Review

Discussion Training and Self-inventory

Reading: Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"; Michel Crevecoeur, "Letter III: What is an American?"; Dudley Randall, "The Melting Pot" (poem), Gretel Ehrlich, "About Men"

Dialogic Notebook (1): 3-4 pages commenting on the readings, with particular attention to what American "ideals" are proposed and critiqued.

WEEK 2: The Detective as American Icon

Reading: Raymond Chandler, "The Red Wind"; George Grella, "Murder and the Mean Streets"

Response Paper (2): How does Chandler's detective embody American ideas about manliness and independence?

Discussion Topics: Chandler is a model of American hard-boiled detective fiction. What is "American" about his hero and what isn't? What conclusions can we draw from this about the pleasures offered to readers by this genre?

WEEK 3: Detective Fiction as Genre

Reading: Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Omnibus of Crime"; and Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder"; S. S. Van Dine, "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" (www.mtroyal.ab.ca/gaslight/vandine.htm)

Dialogic Notebook (3): 3-4 pages focusing on the proposed generic characteristics of detective fiction

Discussion Topic: How do the conventions of detective fiction interweave with qualities of American-ness?

WEEK 4: Critiquing the Generic "Truths": Women's Worlds

Reading: Susan Glaspell, *Trifles*

Response Paper (4): What assumptions about detective fiction does Glaspell's play critique?

Discussion Topic: Define knowledge and define reason in *Trifles*. Who is guilty in this text and why? How does the genre of this detective narrative—a play—change your role as spectator and fellow crime solver?

Examination on Terms and Conventions (100 points)

WEEK 5: Race and the American Detective

Reading: Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*

Discussion Topics: How does Easy Rawlins embody the American Dream? How does he use language? Who are the guilty parties in this novel, and what are they guilty of? How might we read the ending of the novel as the establishment of guilt?

WEEK 6: New Media: Transformation through Film

Showing: *Devil in a Blue Dress* (film)

Response Paper (5): Choose a major difference between the novel and the film and discuss the political implications.

Discussion Topic: Film, as a medium, tends to require the streamlining of plot and character when novels are transformed into film. What choices did the director/writer make that significantly alter the message of the film from that of the novel? What does the ending do? How is seeing violence and sex different than reading about it?

WEEK 7: History, Genre and Race

Reading: Mary Young, "Walter Mosley, Detective Fiction, and Black Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* (download from website); and Kevin Allen Leonard, "In the Interest of All Races" (on reserve)

Dialogic Notebook (6): 3-4 pages focusing on what generic and historical information about Mosley's novel adds to our comprehension of Mosley's critique of America.

Discussion Topics: Continued discussion of questions above. How does learning about the situation of African-Americans during World War II help us understand some of the characters and events in *Devil*? How do the figures of the trickster and the tragic mulatto meld into the conventions of detective fiction?

WEEK 8: A Japanese-American Abroad

Reading: Sujata Massey, *The Salaryman's Wife*

Discussion Topic: What does it mean to be "American" in this novel? What role do Americans play in Japanese history? What does Rei's struggle with her identity tell us about being "American"? How does race work in this novel, as compared with *Devil*?

WEEK 9: Cross-cultural Competence and the Use of Stereotype

Reading: Howard French, "The Pretenders" (handout); Smith, Patrick, "Fences in the Heart" in *Japan: A Reinterpretation* (on reserve)

Dialogic Notebook (7): 3-4 pages commenting on how elements of Japanese society are/are not reflected in the world of the novel.

Discussion Topics: Continue from above. Which characters disappear at the end of this novel? What does this ending imply about the solution to the problem of cross-cultural relationships and historical responsibility?

WEEK 10: An Apotheosis of Whiteness

Showing: *Legally Blonde*

Discussion Topics: What conventions of detective fiction does this film use, and what doesn't it use? Is it even part of the genre? How is race a factor in this film? How does it satire gender and class? Is there anything particularly American about this film? What and why?

WEEK 11: Satires of Race, Gender and Class

Discussion of *Legally Blonde*

Response Paper (8): How does *Legally Blonde* update and transform the critique of male rationality offered by Glaspell's *Trifles*?

Discussion Topics: Continue with above. What values constitute "success" in this film? Are they gendered? Has Elle's class changed? Is this film making a similar point to *Trifles*? In what way—and how is it different? Which is more radical a critique of American sex stereotyping?

WEEK 12: Sexuality and the Detective

Reading: Laurie R. King, *With Child*

Assignment: Identify your topic for the final essay.

Discussion Topics: Does the sexuality of the detective have anything to do with the plot in this novel? What does this novel tell us about the "American family"? Is class a factor here? How well does the detective fit in with the "conventions" of the detective-hero?

Comment: Starting this week, students will have conferences with the instructor about their essay topics.

WEEK 13: Sexuality and the Detective, part 2

Reading: Phyllis Betz, "Playing the Boys' Game" (on reserve)

Dialogic Notebook (9): 3-4 pages comparing the lesbian detective in *With Child* to other like manipulations of the genre.

Discussion Topics: Continue with above.

WEEK 14: Preparation for Final Essay

Conferences on Final Essay/In-class Peer-editing

WEEK 15: Final Essay Work & Course Conclusion

Response Paper (10): Choose a topic (race, gender, class, sexuality) and trace its role in three of our texts.

Discussion: How are "American Values" shaped by ideas about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation?

FINAL EXAM DATE: Essay Due (100 points)