

Modern Western Literature and Culture

COLT 151xg: Satisfies GE Category I Requirements

Fall 2007 Lectures: Tues & Thurs, 2 to 3:20 pm, THH 116

Select One Discussion Section: Fridays at 12 or 1

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This class will survey major developments in literature from the seventeenth century through the contemporary period. Our journey will take us from Neo-Classicism in Europe through the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism, and Existentialism. We will accompany our study of literature by considering various movements in the visual arts, particularly those of the twentieth century such as Cubism and Dada and Surrealism. We will also consider the works of women writers as they emerge in these periods, inquiring into the philosophical arguments that have resulted in their omission or inclusion in the canon and the analyses provided by pioneer feminists such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

As we trace the evolution of scientific knowledge and its influence on the transformation of society and literary genres, we will also study the emergence of the irrational and non-linear forms of knowledge and expression in the more modern forms of art. As Quantum Theory, Relativity, and Psychology open the realms of uncertainty, the dream, and non-ordinary states of consciousness to the creative imagination, artists and writers turn inwards towards interior models and towards new frontiers of discovery and experimentation. As we move further away from the foundations of Humanism and the Enlightenment, and as we approach the destabilizing concepts of the postmodern, we are obliged to question the roles of reason, humanism, “progress” and concepts such as identity, memory and gender as they are transformed over time and change the meaning of what we will interpret to be our own understanding of what is meant by the “western tradition in literature”, for this is the category of our inquiry.

Our readings will cover works by writers such as Moliere, Descartes, Voltaire, Mary Shelley, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Woolf, Freud, de Beauvoir, Ionesco and Beckett. We will view films and slide lectures to accompany our literary time-travel through the last three centuries of literary creation.