

Fall 2016

25222 ENGL 300.001M

Professor Kevin Bell

Writing the End of “the World” in English: Critical Literature Beyond “Man.”

T/Th 9:05-10:20, 216 McAllister.

This course fulfills the English Department’s multicultural requirement.

This course fulfills the English Department’s 20th century requirement.

Contact English honors adviser, Marcy North, to enroll. mln14@psu.edu

This course will involve the close interrogation of several literary works of the 20th and 21st centuries, all of which are composed in English, in different parts of the world. Sharply informed by works of critical literary and cultural theory (a few of which will be read and discussed), each of the works we read investigates and troubles the premise of “the human”—or what several critical traditions consider the anthropo-centrism at the basis of prevailing Western systems of thought and knowledge in modernity. The extensive history by which certain of these systems either negated or plunged into severe doubt the human status of women and non-white populations across centuries is only a partial consequence of this conceptual tendency. Thematic and figural challenges to the dominance of these cultural routines in the West are waged by each of our texts. A few of the literary works, such as Conrad’s or Joyce’s, are considered central to the formation of a certain “canon” of modern fiction; others, such as Armah’s or Reed’s are customarily received as being “radical” or “subversive,” not only in terms of whatever ideological insistences they may appear to make thematically; but in terms of the figural/formal challenges they pose to the ideological and aesthetic traditions upon which they openly meditate and which they, in all cases, can be said to eviscerate.

Our emphasis then will be on intervening in certain theoretical habits installing stable notions of the meaning of humanity in the reading and analysis of literature of the last century. By way of reflecting on what it means to study “literatures in English” we will necessarily examine living inter-penetrations not only between art and experience, history and futurity — but between capitalist imperialism/colonialism and an acutely responsive modernist intellectual consciousness and radicalization; between impositions of racialized/gendered social assignation and the surprising richness of “non-identity.” Moving between the contexts of early 20th century British colonialism, postwar postcolonial literature, and 21st century hyper-capitalism, we will track different ways in which our literary works all work in exposition of the radical anxieties, contradictions and uncertainties that such easily assumed categories as “identity,” “nation” or “history” tend to repress or silence in the process of establishing themselves as regulatory bodies governing social, aesthetic and psychic experience.

Primary Texts: *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, *Dubliners*, James Joyce; *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West; (“A Party Down at the Square” Ralph Ellison; “Sonny’s Blues,” James Baldwin; “A Night of New Roses,” Chester Himes; *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ceremony, Leslie Marmon Silko, Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, *The People of Paper*, Salvador Plascencia; Two works of short fiction from Gayl Jones