

**English 461: Utopias, Dystopias, Realisms: Representation as (Inter)National Politics**  
**Instructor: Dan Colson**

**Texts**

Agee, James. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).  
Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward* (1888).  
Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecotopia* (1975).  
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland* (1915).  
Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World* (1932).  
Koestler, Arthur. *Darkness at Noon* (1940).  
Olsen, Tillie. *Yonnonddio: From the Thirties* (1930s/1974).  
Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

**Course Description**

This class will explore some ways in which literature represents political and cultural formations. We will read examples of utopian novels (which imagine idyllic, perfected nations or worlds), dystopian novels (which depict nightmarish nations or worlds), and realistic literature (which implicitly claim to reflect or capture a slice of present reality). In addition, we will read supplementary texts about utopias, dystopias, and realism. We will spend most of each class period discussing the works, our responses to them, and some guiding questions: How do these alternate representative modalities function as political acts? How do they interact with each other and with their historical moments? What political implications arise from texts that consider the future and how do they differ from those that consider the present? And what ultimately is the role of “representation” in literature so obviously concerned with “politics”?

Perhaps most importantly, this class is designed to improve students’ ability to “read.” Through close analysis of these texts—their words, their contexts, their meanings past and present—we will explore strategies for understanding the world around us. We read situations all the time, bringing information from various sources to bear on the person, place, decision or dilemma with which we are confronted to help us better understand and act appropriately. In this course, students will bring their life experiences and intellectual interests to the texts: each week will be the meeting of an academic community. Ultimately this class seeks to reveal the “reading” skills students already have, further hone these skills, and blur the line between texts and contexts, between the subject of literature and the subjects who read it.

**Requirements**

In this class, you will be expected to read, write, and participate in class discussions on a regular basis. We will do a large amount of reading in this class, so be sure to keep up. While I will lecture some, this class is primarily a discussion class: you should complete all readings before class and be prepared to discuss them in class. In other words, you should come to class prepared to contribute comments and/or questions (questions are often the best way to begin a class discussion)—we are free to talk about these texts in any way you want, so everyone will have *something* to say. More detailed explanations of the course’s exams and writing assignments can be found below.

**Grading and Assignments**

Participation: 40%  
Mini-Essay: 10%  
Revised Essay: 20%  
Project: 20%  
Self-Evaluation: 10%

Grading Scale: 93% and above = A, 90-92% = A-, 87-89% = B+, 83-86% = B, 80-82% = B-, 77-79% = C+, 73-76% = C, 70-72% = C-, 67-69% = D+, 63-66% = D, 60-62% = D-, 59% and below = F.

*Participation:* As noted above, students should come to class prepared to ask questions about the text, share any insight, and generally contribute to our learning community. I do not anticipate any problems (I believe you will all want to talk!), but I still want to encourage you all to think about the text before class: don't just read the text, think of elements or themes you'd like to talk about in our discussion. In fact, **I urge all students to write out and bring to class several questions about the day's reading.** We may not get to all the questions, but preparing these questions will force you to think critically about the texts and will provide multiple starting points for our class discussions. A student-directed conversation is typically far more interesting than one guided entirely by the instructor. Participation grades will be based on the quality of your overall contribution to the class: quantity is wonderful, but mostly I look for the thoughtfulness of your comments. I will update you on your participation grade approximately halfway through the semester.

*Mini-Essay:* A 1000-1500 word essay offering a "close reading" of one of our primary texts. A "close reading" is an interpretive reading of a text that pays particular attention to the details (the language choices, the form, etc.) of a text. For this assignment, you will write a formal essay that offers an interpretive reading of a text or an element of a text that does not rely on outside material (historical information, secondary sources, etc.). This narrowing of focus will allow you to practice the core techniques of literary analysis. Ultimately, the goal is to present a thoughtful and creative reading; your close attention to detail will help make this essay unique. Keep in mind that all academic writing requires an argument: what can **you** say about the text? I should be able to see your argument (your thesis) and see the evidence (textual analysis) you use to support it. The mini-essay is due February 26.

*Final Essay:* A 2500-3000 word essay offering a substantial reading of one of our primary course readings. You may choose to revise your mini-essay or write an entirely new paper. Like the mini-essay, this essay must have an argument: what can **you** say about the novel, its relationship to its historical context, its relationship to another text, and/or its relationship to the author's life and other works? Unlike the mini-essay, this assignment requires you to engage with secondary materials (which will be found in the resource room) as well as your primary text. How can other scholars help you make your argument? We will discuss this essay at some length before the midpoint of the semester.

Please keep two things in mind: 1) You shouldn't stress too much about the final essay. Yes, it is 20% of your grade, but I'm looking for your ideas—your ability to closely analyze a text

and come up with something interesting to say—not your writing ability. Some of the tutors will be able to help you with prose, organization, etc., but the quality of your writing is secondary to the quality of your ideas. 2) You will need to plan ahead for this paper. You know about it now and we will talk about it more soon, so you should anticipate going to the resource room, looking at secondary sources, and taking time to type the paper before the end of the semester. We will discuss these requirements and paper-writing strategies throughout the term. The final essay is due May 7.

*Project:* Each student—individually or in a small group—must develop and complete a project that is relevant to the course. You will not receive strict guidelines for this project: it is designed to prompt creative and interesting ideas. The project is due April 2. On April 2, we will have time in class for you to present your project (in whatever form) to the class if you choose.

*Self-Evaluation:* The good news about the project is that you decide your own grade! Each student will write a 400-600 word explanation of the work he has done for the final project. This short narrative should include: a brief summary of the work completed, an academic rationale for the project (why is it relevant to the course?), a grade, an explanation of the grade (why do you deserve the grade you gave yourself?), and any other information you consider important. Yes, **you** decide your grade on the project: I will not change the grade you give yourself. I, however, will evaluate your self-evaluation, taking into account the quality of your academic rationale, the amount of work you've done, and the thoughtfulness of your grade/explanation. The self-evaluation is due the same day as the project, April 2.

## **Attendance**

Students are expected to attend every scheduled class session.

## **Late Work**

You are expected to turn in all assignments on the assigned due date. Late work will not be accepted.

## **Classroom Conduct**

All students are expected to behave with civility, courtesy, and respect toward other members of the class. In keeping with broader standards in the academic community of reasonable people, students are especially counseled to avoid derogatory, discriminatory, and insulting language. Such language will not be tolerated. As your instructor, I expect all students to treat each other with respect—disagreement is acceptable, but **DO NOT** attack your peers for their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc.. Attack positions, not people.

## **Plagiarism**

The University of Illinois addresses Plagiarism under Article 1, Part 4 of the University Student Code. Plagiarism, intentional or otherwise, will not be tolerated in this course. The correct use of sources and documentation in your papers is ultimately the responsibility of the student, not the instructor. We will discuss proper source usage and citation during the semester.

## **Changes**

I reserve the right to alter the schedule or vary course material as necessary, including adding and subtracting assignments (before they are assigned), and adjusting the flow of the course based upon what I feel will best benefit the needs of the class. You will be notified as soon as any changes are made.

## **Student Policy Agreement**

By choosing to remain enrolled in this course, you agree to abide by the above policies and procedures.

## **Tentative Schedule** (Subject to Change)

January 22:

Introductions.  
Syllabus/Requirements  
What are Utopia, dystopia, and realism?

January 29:

*Looking Backward* p. 1-73  
“Utopia and America” and “Sources of Utopian Thought,” from *Dreams and Visions: A Study of American Utopias, 1865-1917* by Charles J. Rooney, Jr.

February 5:

*Looking Backward* p. 73-165

February 12:

*Brave New World*  
“The Anti-Utopia: The Necessity of History,” from *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias* by Peter Ruppert

February 19:

*Brave New World*

February 26:

*Yonnonadio*

Mini-Essay due

March 5:

*Herland* p. 1-52

“‘Realism’: Toward a Definition,” from *The Light of Common Day: Realism in American Fiction* by Edwin H. Cady

March 12:

*Herland* p. 53-124

March 19:

*Slaughterhouse-Five*

“Introduction: Utopia, Dystopia, and Social Critique,” from *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* by M. Keith Booker

March 26:

*Slaughterhouse-Five*

April 2:

Project due

Self-Evaluation due

April 9:

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

“Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*” by T. V. Reed.

April 16:

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

April 23:

*Darkness at Noon*

“Utopia and Anti-Utopia in the Twentieth Century,” from *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* by Krishan Kumar

April 30:

*Darkness at Noon*

May 7:

*Ecotopia*  
Essay due