

Sophister 5 ECTS Module Description Template 2026-27

Full Name: Reading Don DeLillo: *Underworld*

Short Name: Don DeLillo

Lecturer Name: Dr Margaret Robson

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ECTS Weighting: 5

Semester Taught: MT

Year: JS

Assessment Details: This module will be assessed with the submission of ONE 3,000 word essay.

Submission due: TBC

Module Content:

Don DeLillo is widely recognized as one of the greatest living novelists.

He has written 16 novels, and won numerous prizes as well as plaudits from critics and writers alike: his acclaimed 1997 novel *Underworld*, the topic of this module, is considered one of the great works of the late twentieth century.

From his first novel *Americana* (1971) to his most recent novel *The Silence*, (2020) DeLillo's work ranges widely from the small-town America of *White Noise* (1984) to the Middle East of *Mao II* (1991), or the Athens of *The Names* (1982). But his work returns always to contemporary America, especially New York, setting for *Players* (1977), *Cosmopolis*, (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *The Silence* (2020) and most importantly, *Underworld* (1997).

DeLillo has been described as 'prescient' by many critics. He has spent 50 years at the cutting edge of American culture and delineates it in prose that is both spare and resonant. In the Prelude to *Underworld* we witness the start of the nuclear arms race, which is counterpointed with a baseball game. Throughout the novel, our understanding of events both national and international is revealed through the search for this moment in history. The narrative moves over the years, following the ball's trajectory across the continent, through race relations, ghettos, immigrants, blackouts, success, failure, fall-out, advertising, art, rubbish, adultery, religion, recycling, memorabilia, towers, comedy, fatherhood, protest, murders, and the collapse of the competing ideologies which have shaped the world both within and outside America.

In 2018 DeLillo commented: 'The national memory lasts 48 hours at best. And there's always something else coming down the pipeline. You can't separate it all out. You get lost in the deluge'. DeLillo is preoccupied with history, but his works show 'history taking place, here, in their own remote and common streets' (781). In *Underworld*, he retrieves and shapes the histories of the

individual American, great and small, from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the lives of immigrant families in the Bronx. *Underworld* offers a painstaking view of what it is like to live in America in our times, and in so doing, offers the reader rescue from the deluge.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Prologue: 'The Triumph of Death, October 3rd 1951' (pp.11-60)

Week 3: 'Manx Martin: Part 1, October 3rd 1951' (pp.137-2720; 'Manx Martin Part 2, October 3rd 1951' (pp.349-366); 'Manx Martin Part 3: October 3rd 1951' (pp.641-656)

Week 4: Part 1: 'Long Tall Sally, Spring-summer 1992' (pp.63-134)

Week 5: Part 2: 'Elegy for Left Hand Alone, mid 1980s – early 1990s' (pp.155-272)

Week 6: Part 3: 'The Cloud of Unknowing, Spring 1978' (pp.275-345)

Week 7: Reading week

Week 8: Part 4: 'Cocksucker Blues, Summer 1974' (pp.371-498)

Week 9: Part 5: 'Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry, Selected Fragments Public and Private in The 1950s and 1960s' (pp.501-637)

Week 10: Part 6: 'Arrangement in Gray and Black, Fall 1951 – Summer 1952' (pp.661-781)

Week 11: Epilogue: 'Das Kapital' (pp.785- 827)

Week 12: Conclusion

Each week we will read a section of *Underworld* and discuss some of the themes and events appropriate.

The following is a list of some of the aspects we might cover:

cars; lost men; names; the artist; white spaces; Mr X and the witness protection programme; food; rubbish; race relations; black and white; twin towers; capital; connections; where are we now?; the census; shit; nuclear communities.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will be familiar with the text and able to negotiate it confidently
2. Students will be able to situate key political events and comment on the ways in which history is presented and elided in *Underworld*
3. Be able to identify themes and preoccupations common both in *Underworld* and in national and international consciousness
4. Understand the non-chronological structure of the novel
5. Demonstrate a competence with close reading, showing sensitivity to language and an appreciation of the linguistic complexity of DeLillo's prose
6. At the end of this module you should possess a knowledge and understanding of both *Underworld* and the historical forces that are at play in the novel, as well as with critical perspectives on contemporary fiction

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Learning Aims:

Students will engage in a detailed reading of *Underworld* which will enable them to comprehend the significance of the ways in which the fractured narrative is presented.

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Preliminary Reading List:

Students need only a copy of *Underworld*; further reading will be posted later.

For students wishing to read any of his other works, I suggest you might start with *White Noise*. There is an edition edited by Mark Osteen which includes a number of critical essays which you may find valuable. *White Noise* (ed. Mark Osteen), The Viking Critical Library (Penguin Books, London 1998).

Also helpful as an introduction to DeLillo's work is Frank Lentricchia's, *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham, North Carolina, 1991) and John N. Duvall's, *Don DeLillo's Underworld: A Reader's Guide* (New York, 2002).

See also *The Cambridge Companion to DeLillo* (ed. John N. Duvall) (Cambridge, 2008) and Thomas DePietro, (ed.) *Conversations with Don DeLillo* (Mississippi, University of Mississippi Press, 2005).

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