

Sophister 5 ECTS Module Description Template 2025-26

Full Name: Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism: American Prose Literature in the 1960s

Short Name: 1960s American Prose

Lecturer Name and Email Address: Dr. Kevin Power powerk9@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 5

Semester Taught: MT/HT ?

Year: JS/SS JS

Module Content:

The 1960s saw enormous transformations in both the matter and the forms of American prose writing. Writers and artists battled for new freedoms, and sex and sexuality began to feature in books published by mainstream publishers for the first time. Accompanying the famous revolutionary political movements that marked the decade, and responding to many of the same cultural and political pressures, were various revolutions of the word: the 1960s saw a widespread reaction against a now-institutionalised modernism, and the first great statements of what would come to be thought of as literary postmodernism (Thomas Pynchon, John Barth). At the same time, critics like Susan Sontag argued for the continued validity of the modernist project, and for the need to extend it; and novelists like Saul Bellow and Mary McCarthy sought to extend the traditions of realism and modernism in novels like *Herzog* (1964) and *The Group* (1963). American prose writing of the 1960s was also shaped and informed by the sexual revolutions that marked the decade, and writers such as Ursula Le Guin began to use the tools of imaginative writing to interrogate embedded cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, patriarchy, and power. In many ways, all of the key streams of 20th century American literature converge in the 1960s; the decade and its key texts allow us to approach issues central to any approach to American studies more generally: American exceptionalism, the utopian promise underwriting the American experiment, the legacies of modernism, the meaning(s) of postmodernity, the political transformations of the postwar era, and the “hangover” of the early 1970s.

Week 1: Introduction – America in the 1960s

Week 2: Selfhood, Authorship/Authority, Mass Media: Norman Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself* (1960)

Week 3: Looking at the White Boy, Looking at the Black Boy: James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961)

Week 4: Modernism Lives!: Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962)

Week 5: Realism and Feminism: Mary McCarthy, *The Group* (1963)

Week 6: Modernism Lives?: Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964)

Week 7: Postmodernism, Perhaps: Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965)

Week 8: The “New Sensibility”: Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1966)

Week 9: What was Metafiction?: John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968)

Week 10: Pulp Feminism?: Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

Week 11: The End of the Sixties: Joan Didion, *Play it as it Lays* (1970)

Week 12: The Hangover: Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971)

Learning Aims:

On successful completion of this module students should be able to:

- To develop an awareness of the various intertwined currents of literary thought and practice in the United States in the 1960s
- To gain knowledge of the cultural, social, and political background(s) that informed American prose writing of the 1960s
- To situate key works in context and to examine them as both representing and subverting/interrogating the traditions of American literary and intellectual history
- To relate key texts of the 1960s to larger issues of American history/American studies

Assessment Details:

- Number of Components:
- Name/Type of Component(s):
- Word Count of Component(s):
- Percentage Value of Component(s):

Preliminary Reading List:

- Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (1960)
- Mary McCarthy, *The Group* (1963)
- Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964)
- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965)
- Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966)
- John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968)
- Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)
- Joan Didion, *Play it as it Lays* (1970)

Please note:

- Curricular information is subject to change.
- Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.