English 741

**Approaches to the Modern II: The Voyage**

Spring Semester, 2024

Thursdays: 5:30 AM – 8.20 PM

Curtin Hall, B12

“Approaches to the Modern” explores the premise that the concepts of “modernity” and “the modern” have played a central role in the structure and evolution of our discipline, English Studies. Journals such as *Modernism/Modernity* and *Modern Fiction Studies* have integrated the terms into their name. Universities and high schools mobilize the phrase “modern” as a temporal marker for courses such as “Modern American Literature.

The discourse of the modern, in other words, along with all of its derivatives – modernism, postmodernism, modernization -- has played an outsized role in the development of literary and cultural studies.

Our course will trace and critique many of the ways that literary criticism and critical theory have deployed the discourse of the modern in order to promote cultural ideologies and initiate innovation. Modernist poetry, for example, revolves around the idea of “making it new.” But what did the new and the modern signify for modernist writers? What and who was to be swept aside?

Modernity is often conceptualized in evolutionary and developmental terms. Western liberal democracies celebrate the journey of progress. But progress to which destination? Secularism? Capitalism? Individualism?

Our class will explore the concept of the modern, contextualizing it against other temporal and generic constructions, such as the old, the traditional, the contemporary, and the yet-to-be.

It is not surprising that voyage literature (and travel literature and mobility, more generally) is so essential for establishing and critiquing the structures upon which nominally modern cultures rest. In literature, this class suggests, individual travelers (the sailor), the ship (the state), and the crew (society) embark at one moment in history and arrive at another. The shipwreck, for example, or the mutiny, or the desert island, are essential motifs in both modern and maritime literature. All of those obstacles throw the progress off course.

This course, the better to understand the debates around modern identity, will map three essential elements onto each text that we read. First, each narrative we “approach” will be a voyage, or a journey of some sort in space and time, and each story represents the path of an individual protagonist. But literature is symbolic, and that personal journey is also a communal one, of the society in which the individual lives. Second, each text we read, whether it be poetry, fiction, or theory will be discussed as representing an effort to experiment with aesthetic style. For example, the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” sought to shift literature toward romanticism and the Gothic. Third, each voyage we consider will not only be approached as symbolizing individual, cultural, and aesthetic change, but also representing technological change. A vessel of any kind is a technological product, a work of mediation and engineering. Approaching the modern asks us, therefore, also to think about the material changes in the mode of production that necessitate the calling forth of a new corresponding mode of representation. Why, for example, was the shift from “the age of sail” to that of steam power so emblematic of other industrial changes for Melville, Conrad, and others canonical modernists?

In short, this class looks at modern vessels as experiments. (The concept of a vessel is to be understood by each student in the class in broad terms. Each of you will bring your own set of interests, authors, and spatial coordinates to the class.)

Themes central to modern life and literature that we will examine include:

* Isolation, existentialism and the self (alone at sea)
* Society and labor ( the captain and the crew; the state and its subject)
* Piracy and legality (from buccaneers to hackers) (the lawful, the marginal, the subaltern)
* Mutiny (Revolution)
* Adventure (experimental poetics)
* Exploration and imperialism (the standardization of time and space)
* The aquatic metaphors of critical theory (from the “the sublime” to “streams of consciousness”)

Texts for this course are not finalized, but may include:

* *Sea of Poppies*, by Amitav Ghosh (the Indian Ocean) (postcolonial modernity)
* *The Employees*, by Olga Ravn (space ship, outer space) (postmodernism)
* *The Brendan Voyage* (mythical ship, the Atlantic Ocean) (premodernity)
* *A Sample of Polynesian Poetry* (indigenous vessels, Pacific Ocean) (peripheral modernity)
* *Robinson Crusoe* (the imperial ship, the Atlantic Ocean) (the modern, realism)
* *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea: One Refugee's Incredible Story of Love, Loss, and Survival*, by Melissa Fleming. (The refugee boat, the Mediterranean) (transnational modernity)
* *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus* Vassa, The African, by Olaudah Equiano (the slave ship, the Black Atlantic) (the Caribbean and the Atlantic)
* *Eels*, by Agnes Broome (the non-human voyage)
* Three modernist short stories: Mansfield, Joyce, Chekhov
* *Selection of Sea Poems* that represent a style or genre, for example, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” by Coleridge (Romanticism and the Gothic), “The Drunken Boat,” by Rimbaud “(symbolism and surrealism), “Exultation is the Going,” by Emily Dickinson (the turn to modernism)
* An episode of *Our Flag Means Death*. (The queer pirate ship). (Or an article or text about digital piracy.)