

Politics and Literature (The American Political Novel)

Professor M. Nichols

Course explores how classic American novelists understood and responded to the fundamental principles of American politics: equality, consent, liberty, and individual rights, and the relation between political life and the pursuit of happiness in a liberal regime.

Required Books:

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Scarlet Letter* (Penguin)
2. Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno* (Dover Thrift edition)
3. Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* (Bantam)
4. Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (Bantam)
5. Ernest Hemingway *In Our Time* (Collier)
6. William Faulkner *Go Down Moses* (Vintage)
7. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (Vintage)
8. Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (Viking)

The principal aims of this course are

1. to appreciate how literary masterpieces do not simply entertain but also treat fundamental questions of human and political life and why political theorists might benefit from studying literature
2. to understand how American novelists have reflected on questions raised by the American experience and American liberal regime, questions about the state of nature and civil society, individual rights, human freedom, equality, and self-government
3. to develop the ability to read, analyze, and write about novels from such perspectives

Course requirements:

1. A midterm (20%) and final exam (30%).
2. A paper 8-10 pages (30%, on questions that arise from our discussion of these novels.
3. (20%). Quizzes, announced and unannounced, will help you to stay prepared for class and to read consistently and well.
4. Participation and attendance: As the fruits of this course will come largely by way of classroom lecture and discussion—for which you must come thoroughly familiar with the assignments, and with questions and observations that will aid class discussion, attendance is crucial. Exceptional class participation could raise a student's grade by half a letter point.

Requirements for Graduate Credit:

A midterm paper of 7-8 pages (35%), a final paper of 10-12 pages (55%), and quizzes and participation (10%).

Attendance:

In accordance with Baylor's attendance policy, a student who misses more than 25% of the scheduled classes, will fail the course. Moreover, students who accumulate more than three absences can expect to see their grade substantially affected.

Assignments:

1. Introduction to course, and *Scarlet Letter*

Discussion Questions: Is Puritan New England, where “religion and law were almost identical,” as an antithesis of liberal society? What are Hawthorne’s reservations about such a society? Are there any considerations that recommend it? Contrast the Puritan society that punishes Hester with the society that Hawthorne describes in “The Custom House.” Are there any similarities between these so apparently different societies? What does Hawthorne conceive to be the relationship between Puritan New England and his own society more generally? Is the latter rooted in the former, and if so how? What effects do both societies have on art and human creativity? To what extent is art and the artist a theme of the novel?

2. *Benito Cereno*

Discussion Questions : If all are “created equal,” as our Declaration asserts, do not the Africans enslaved aboard the *San Dominick* have a right to rebel? Does their assertion of independence follow the principles of the Declaration of Independence? Is Babo’s punishment and execution just? Contrast Captain Delano, Benito Cereno, and Babo in their capacities for leadership. Why does Melville tell us the story from Delano’s perspective? To what extent is he Melville’s reflection on American virtues and vices? Does Melville uncover “malign evil in man”? Where does Melville stand in the exchange between Delano and Benito concerning forgetting and remembering the past? Insofar as Melville writes stories about the past, could he endorse Delano’s position? How does he overcome the debility of Don Benito?

3. *Huckleberry Finn*

Discussion Questions: Is Huckleberry Finn an American hero, a democratic hero? What are his democratic virtues? To what extent is the novel a comment on American democracy, and its ability or inability to deal with the injustice of slavery? What do Huck’s adventures on the raft, the various episodes that occur on his trip on the river, reveal about Huck? About the society in which they take place? For example, is the con man (such as the Duke or the Dauphin) a particularly American type? Why? Is this novel a criticism of conventional society and an appeal to nature and natural rights? Can any society live up to natural standards? Should we ever “light out for the territory,” when, and how?

4. *Custom of the Country*

Discussion Questions: What is the “custom of the country” to which the title refers (see p. 131)? Is there any “custom” of the country, or does Wharton show us different customs followed by different social strata of American society? Does Undine represent “homo sapiens, Americanus”? Is Undine Spragg bound by customs that prevent her from achieving happiness? Is American society, in Wharton’s view, a “custom house” as constricting as Puritan New England? Or is Undine free of customs,

“fiercely independent,” as she is described? Is this the cause of her restlessness and dissatisfaction? Compare Undine’s journey through different social and cultural milieu to Huck’s journey on the Mississippi River. Are there ways in which Undine resembles Huck Finn, or is she more like Tom Sawyer? Contrast Claude Washington Popple and Ralph Marvel as artists/poets.

5. *In Our Time*

Discussion Questions: Is Nick Adams’s confronting his own death a source of his despair about life, or is this confrontation necessary for any understanding of life’s goodness? How does Nick’s experience in the war help to free him from his society, and its past? Does Hemingway present this as a good thing? Why is the river “two-hearted”? Is Twain’s Mississippi “two-hearted”? Do Nick’s feelings of contentment in nature provide any foundation for a commitment to politics, society, family, or even friendship? Is Nick really content in nature?

6. *Go Down Moses*

Discussion Questions: Do Ike McCaslin’s annual hunting trips to the wilderness make him a better human being? Are they analogous to Huck Finn’s “lighting out for the territory”? Do Ike’s hunting trips serve the same purposes as Nick Adams’s fishing trips? Why does Ike want to relinquish the land he was to inherit? What is the meaning of ownership or possession? Does his decision to relinquish the land provide him with happiness? What is the relation between slavery and incest? How do the stories in this book present a view of human life that modifies or deepens the Declaration’s understanding of individualism and natural rights? Does the South, as interpreted by Faulkner, have anything to teach to America? Does Faulkner present a view of human progress, or human decline? Does the latest generation, for example, Roth Edmonds, hold any signs of hope? Does Faulkner’s novel?

7. *The Moviegoer*

Discussion Questions: Is Binx an ordinary man? Is he crazy? Is he trying to recover something by rejecting conventional society? Is his spending time in movie theaters rather than, for example, in nature such as Huck Finn, Ike McCaslin, or Nick Adams, a sign of his escapism and evasion of life, or does his activity find a way to attain what they were looking for? Is Binx a self-conscious Huck? If so, is this an improvement? Is Binx more like Ike or his cousin Cass? Does Binx’s quest and whatever answers he attains isolate him from the society of others, or are other human beings necessary to his search and fulfillment?

8. *Ravelstein*

Discussion Questions: Why does the novel open in Paris? Why does Europe appeal to an American? Compare Ravelstein’s interest in Europe, especially France, with Undine Spragg’s. Is Ravelstein more of a democratic or an aristocratic type? Is Undine Spragg? Do Ravelstein’s life and preferences resemble those of Binx more than those of typically American heroes like Huck, Ike, or Nick Adams? Yet, what do Ravelstein’s teaching, writing, and befriending Chick indicate about his own quest? What is the role of Judaism in the novel? In Ravelstein’s life? To what extent does Ravelstein’s emphasis on Jerusalem over Athens near the end of his life connect him with Binx (religion), and with Faulkner (history)?