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## ENGLISH 823 / Spring 2006

### Fragmented Narratives in Contemporary U.S. Fiction

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**Class meetings:** Tuesdays, 7:00-9:30 p.m. BC 18

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#### The Class

Wallace Martin calls narrative "a fundamental mode of explanation" and Fredric Jameson describes it as "the central function . . . of the human mind." Narratives are deceptively complex things in which the interplay between content and form creates either satisfying suspension of disbelief or frustration and hyper-consciousness of the role of language and interpretation. So how does the narrative structure adopted by a writer change the way we read the story being told? Why do some writers seem to delight in challenging the assumptions of linearity that shape the traditional Western notion of story? And why are so many contemporary North American novels written in such a fragmented form?

The fragmented narrative is not a new phenomenon within the history of the novel--indeed the earliest novels adopted what we might call a fragmented form. Nor are theories of narrative new; however, Narrative Theory as such is still quite new, developing in Europe after World War II. As they shifted from interpretation of what texts "mean" to how they "work," as Jameson puts it, these theorists studied narrative structure in the hope of developing a model that could apply to all novels, and later to all forms of narrative in a multitude of disciplines. Others have developed and problematized those models, exploring narrative structure from a socio-cultural perspective and considering the role of social class and narratives of identity in story-telling structure. Yet others have explore the fragmented novel as a function of postmodernity.

According to Ramón Saldívar, the creation of fragmented narratives can be interpreted as "a strategy to enable readers to understand their real conditions of existence in postindustrial twentieth-century America." What we will do in this course is review some of these narrative theories through contemporary North American novels, exploring the ways they help us to read and the ways reading helps us to understand how narrative works — in short, we will develop theories of our own.

#### The Texts

##### Narrative Theory (in the order we will read it)

Martin Wallace, *Recent Theories of Narrative*

Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*

Gerald Vizenor, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern*

*Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*

\* Fredric Jameson, extract from *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.  
(the whole book is worth owning actually, but I will hand out the extract)

\*Available from the professor, not in the bookstore.

##### Fiction (in the order we will probably read it)

Robinson, Marilynne, *Gilead*

Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger & Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

Rolando Hinojosa, *The Valley*

Tomás Rivera's *And the Earth did not Part/Y no se lo tragó la tierra*

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Paul Auster, "City of Glass" (*The New York Trilogy*)

Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salteaters*.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*.

Toni Morrison, *Paradise*.

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

**Optional books to which I will probably refer (and which you may want to read!)**

John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (Book I of *USA*)

Toni Morrison, *Jazz*, *Beloved*

Don DeLillo *Underworld*, *Cosmopolis*

Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions*

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

Leslie Marmon Silko *Almanac of the Dead*

Oscar Zeta Acosta *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*

## **The Research Component**

This course is designated a "research emphasis" course. This means that as part of the course, members of the class will explore resources available through the library and practice using them in ways that will further their entry into the academic discipline of English and the professional life of an academic. For this class the research component will dovetail into the formal paper as follows:

### **Conference proposal:**

Each student will meet with Jody Caldwell, Reference Librarian, to explore the resources one might consult to learn what is happening in the field of narrative theory and/or American literature right now. Each student will select a text from the class, or a theory from the class and a text of his or her own choosing (in consultation with me) and do the following:

- 1) survey what has been published on narrative issues raised by that text;
- 2) identify a question or concern that has not been sufficiently addressed or that is "hot" and has not been resolved with regard to this text;
- 3) survey what has been said that is related to your question or concern;
- 4) develop an annotated bibliography of sources that could be used in further study of this question or concern;
- 5) write a conference proposal in which you summarize the work that has been done on narrative issues in your selected text, identify the question or concern that you believe still needs to be addressed, and then explain why your take on it will help us understand the text more fully.
- 6) research which conferences might be appropriate venues for your proposal, and revise it as necessary to relate to the theme of the conference.

Jody Caldwell will work with course members to identify topics and sources, as will other Library faculty. We will also discuss appropriate topics in class. I will provide lots of information about conference proposals and feedback on your topics along the way, and I urge everyone--especially those who have completed a year or more of coursework--to actually submit the conference proposal. The worst that can happen is that it gets accepted . . .

## **The Writing Projects**

### **Conference Proposal Due Dates:**

By March 28<sup>th</sup> you should have identified a conference to which you could send a paper (we will discuss this) and a copy of that CFP and the work/author you wish to discuss is due (you may revise this plan as you read later works).

By May 2<sup>nd</sup> a draft of the conference proposal package (the working bibliography, a draft of your conference proposal, and one or more calls for papers/conference descriptions for which it might be appropriate). You may submit it earlier if you decide to send your conference has an earlier deadline.

The final conference proposal package (the complete annotated bibliography, the conference proposal, and one or more calls for papers/conference descriptions for which it might be appropriate) is due no later than May 16 along with the final paper (see below).

### **The Final Paper:**

The final paper for the course will be the actual paper described in your conference proposal. I'd like you to submit a paper that would take 15-20 minutes to read aloud (a conference paper!). That is about 8 pages double spaced. Although we do not read aloud the page references, these should be included in the paper as in-text citations (follow MLA to the letter). Most people presenting papers at literature conferences do actually read the paper, although they might have a formal version of the paper to give to people who ask for one and an annotated/less formal version suitable for oral presentation (we will talk about delivery strategies). This is due no later than May 16th with the proposal package (see above).

### **The Annotated Bibliography**

Most professional organizations produce annual annotated bibliographies of sources in their field. Several journals also produce annotated bibliographies (including The National Council of Teachers of English and the Modern Language Association) and many scholars keep their own annotated bibliographies within their fields, at least for areas of particular interest. The annotated bibliographies you prepare for this class will help you develop and refine this habit. They will also help you to practice finding the most significant criticism on any given author. For this class, each student will compile an annotated bibliography of at least ten IMPORTANT sources on one author to be shared with the class on the day we discuss work by that author. Final bibliographies will be shared with all class members and will be used as a resource for the final paper.

### **Position papers**

In preparation for class you will write VERY BRIEF position papers on something of interest about the narrative structure of the work to be discussed in class. These should be no more than two paragraphs long (that is, approximately 200-300 words, and no more), and should be a way for you to practice identifying interesting or troublesome aspects of the text. I will collect these, but their major value is as a vehicle for you to explore ideas and as a stimulant for class discussion.

## **The Scholarly Community**

In order to practice your professional paper-giving skills, two students per week will present round-table position papers on that week's reading. The goal of these presentations is to BRIEFLY apply the theories we have read and discussed to the novel assigned for that week and raise questions of narrative and related issues (see above). Students reading position papers will deliver the presentation formally, and will then lead class discussion on the issue raised in that position paper. Following the assigned presentations, we will discuss other issues raised in other position papers and the works in general.

Class participation is your invitation to enter the academic community. Academics talk to each other at conferences, on listservs and discussion groups, and through books and articles. Thoughtful class participation helps to prepare you for full entrance into the academic community. Academics also share their ideas and texts as they are in development, and the dialogue that follows enriches our work (and our lives). For this reason, English 823 is a seminar; however, a seminar is only as strong as its weakest member. If you are to make this class a partnership in learning you will need to be prepared for class, you will need to participate thoughtfully, and you will need to respect the other students in the class.

## **The Final Grades**

Grades will be determined based on the conference proposal, the final paper, the annotated bibliography, presentations, and class participation, with the greatest weight placed on the final paper. I will be happy to discuss your progress at any point.

## Schedule

### Week 1: January 31st

Introduction: Martin Wallace, *Recent Theories of Narrative*

### Week 2: February 7th

Martin Wallace, *Recent Theories of Narrative*

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

### Week 3: February 14th

Gerald Vizenor, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*;

Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

### Week 4: February 21st

Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*

Tomás Rivera *And the Earth did not Part/Y no se lo tragó la tierra*

### Week 5: February 28th

Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*

Rolando Hinojosa, *The Valley*

### Week 6: March 7th

Frederic Jameson, an extract from *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.

**March 28th: conference call for papers due (find a relevant conference and print the details).**

Identify text you plan to write about (this can be revised as you read later works)

### Week 7: March 21<sup>st</sup>

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*.

### Week 8: March 28th

Paul Auster, "City of Glass" from *The New York Trilogy*.

March 28th: Draft conference proposal package due (find a relevant conference)

### Week 9: April 4th

Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salteaters*.

### Week 10: April 11th

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*.

### Week 11: April 18th

Toni Morrison, *Paradise*.

### Week 12: April 25<sup>th</sup>

Gerald Vizenor, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*;

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

### Week 13: May 2: Last class

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

**May 2nd: conference proposal due (follows guidelines for selected conference CFP).**

**May 16: Final conference paper, revised conference proposal, and annotated bibliography due**