

Lloyd Michaels  
Odd Fellows 225  
Email: [lloyd.michaels@allegheny.edu](mailto:lloyd.michaels@allegheny.edu)

OfficeHours: MWF 10:00-11:30;  
TTh 4:15-5:00; and by appointment  
phone: x 4333

English 550: Seminar in Jewish American Fiction  
Fall 2011

What is it, then, that serves to keep a semblance of unity in the Jewish community? To reply to this question, we must come back to the idea of *situation*. It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond...it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews.

Jean-Paul Sartre

In the Western imagination the Jew had always played a special role as wizard, magical, possessor of secret knowledge, but never before, until Auschwitz and Buchenwald, had such moral authority been conferred upon him. From hated, feared, or ridiculed because lurking on the fringes of the culture, he was transformed in the Man Who Suffered, Everyman.

Sheldon Norman Grebstein

The recurring question for modern Jewish American writers persists from Abraham Cahan at the beginning of the twentieth century to Philip Roth at mid-century to Nicole Krauss at the beginning of the twenty-first: what does it mean to be a Jew in America? In attempting to define the nature of Jewish consciousness in its interchange with American values and culture, the syllabus begins with three archetypal responses by European Jewish writers to the condition of alienation: the apocalyptic angst of Kafka's Georg in "The Judgment," the ironic shrug of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, the comic transcendence of Singer's Gimpel the Fool. The contrasting *tones* of these classic writers—melodramatic versus comic, earnest versus skeptical, or black humor versus folk humor—will be felt throughout the course. We proceed by exploring several recurrent figures (oppressive fathers, Wandering Jews, would-be artists, Christ figures, schlemiels) and themes (displacement, assimilation, suffering, chosen-ness) as they obsessively reappear throughout a century of Jewish writing in America. Our method will be both historical and comparative, as we work backwards from a contemporary novel to its literary and historical sources. At the heart of the course, we will examine the variety and achievement of postwar fiction (1945--) that reflects the emergence of the modern archetypal Jew as suggestively described by Grebstein.

A seminar is designed to promote independent learning (which requires both listening to each other and thinking for yourself) and to prepare English majors for the senior project by suggesting possible topics and critical approaches, developing advanced research skills, and encouraging in-depth study of particular historical, cultural, and literary issues. Rather than lecturing, I expect to moderate class discussion. **Your most important responsibility is to keep up with the reading for the course, so that you can participate in informed discussion.** The formal course requirements are as follows:

1. two or three short essays (2-4 pp.), assigned throughout the term designed to emphasize literary problem solving through close reading.

2. a study guide to one of the primary texts, including an annotated bibliography, designed to inform and shape class discussion.
3. a term paper prospectus
4. a term paper of approximately 4500 words (15 pages)

**Grading Criteria:**

I am a holistic grader; that is, the final grade is based on a comprehensive assessment of your performance throughout the semester. Subjective factors such as *curiosity*, *commitment*, and *consistency* aside, I anticipate weighting your final grade as follows:

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| 1. class performance, which includes regular attendance, informed participation, general interest, and consistent responsiveness | 25% |
| 2. short essays  | 20% |
| 3. study guide and bibliography  | 20% |
| 4. prospectus  | 10% |
| 5. term paper  | 25% |

**Attendance:**

The success of a seminar truly depends upon every student’s preparedness and willingness to contribute to discussion. This is a small class that meets but twice a week; obviously, regular attendance is imperative. (A great Jewish writer/filmmaker, Woody Allen, once observed that “80% of success is just showing up.”) *Therefore, no more than two unexcused absences will be allowed without grade penalty.* Whenever possible, students should notify me in advance if they plan to miss class.

**Plagiarism:**

I assume that English majors and minors taking the seminar are fully informed about issues relating to using secondary sources and have mastered the skill of citing others’ ideas without plagiarism. As a reminder, plagiarism occurs when you use another author’s language, images, or specific ideas (as opposed to generally acknowledged facts)—whether from print, website, or other source—without giving proper credit. It is, in short, intellectual theft. Please review the College’s honor code and address any concerns regarding source materials to me. See the Learning Commons link <http://library.duke.edu/research/citing/> for more about citing sources and avoiding plagiarism.) Plagiarism will not be tolerated.

**Late Papers:**

Submitting essays on time seems a matter of self-presentation and discipline; that is, on-time papers naturally tend to be initially regarded as having been carefully prepared. Nevertheless, I can be flexible in the face of conflicting deadlines or last-minute problems. I would rather read the best possible representation of your work than a rushed version that might be improved with more thought and polish. *Try your best to submit papers when they are due.* I will allow you a 48-hour extension on *one* assignment—not including the term paper.

**Students with Disabilities:**

Any student who feels the need for an accommodation based on a documented disability should contact me as well as John Mangine in the Learning Commons

([john.mangine@allegheny.edu](mailto:john.mangine@allegheny.edu), 332-2898). The Learning Commons arranges reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities.

## Tentative Syllabus:

*I have organized the semester around four cultural issues that seem to pervade Jewish American literature: 1) Diaspora—the dispersal of Jews since the destruction of the Second Temple; 2) Assimilation—the uneasy process by which Jews adapt to and accommodate the majority culture; 3) Holocaust—the seminal event of the Twentieth Century and the culmination of Jewish suffering; 4) Chosen-ness—the consciousness, derived from the Bible, of having inherited a special position in the world. The following schedule should be regarded as flexible; we may adjust the content and pace of the seminar according to the interests and abilities of the students.*

### I. Touchstones of Modern Jewish American Fiction

*What are the theological principles, historical circumstances, and cultural experiences that distinguish Jews from Christians? How do these differences find their way into literature? In this initial phase of the course, we examine three important European writers—Kafka, Sholem Aleichem, and Singer—who continue to influence many Jewish American authors.*

9/1-9/8	Waiting for the End: The Apocalyptic Imagination and Comic Forbearance	Kafka, “The Judgment” Sholem Aleichem, “On Account of a Hat” Singer, “Gimpel the Fool”
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### II. Diaspora: Jews in Modern America

*The term “diaspora” encompasses both the historical fact of the dispersal of the Jewish people and, as a consequence, their symbolic ubiquity. “A wonderful thing,” Malamud’s beleaguered protagonist tells his wife at the end of one story, “there are Jews everywhere.” In this section we work backwards from the intricate plotting of Nicole Krauss’ *The History of Love*, in which the mystery of identity is crucial, to the archetypal immigrant experience reflected in two important early twentieth century American writers, Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yesierska.*

9/13-9/15	Contemporary Jewish American The Search for Roots and the Construction of Identity	Krauss, <i>The History of Love</i>
9/20	Two Archetypes, One Story: Job and The Messiah	Malamud, “Angel Levine”
9/22	The Pseudo-Messiah	Malamud, “The Magic Barrel”
9/27-9/29	From Greenie to Yankee: Two Case Studies in Cultural Assimilation	Riis, from <i>How the Other Half Lives</i> Cahan, “The Imported Bridegroom” Yeziarska, <i>Bread Givers</i>

### III. Assimilation: The Next Generations

*The three decades following World War II (1945-75) witnessed a remarkable profusion of new Jewish American voices—Salinger, Mailer, Bellow, Malamud, Schwartz, Roth, Doctorow, Ozick—too numerous to cover in a single course. With the possible exception of Ozick, they all thought of themselves as American writers with varying interests in their own Jewish backgrounds. However different their literary intentions, however, their fiction consistently confirms a truism from earlier generations that haunts one of Malamud’s assimilated Americans: “If you ever forget you are a Jew, a goy will remind you.”*

10/4	Jewish Bildungsroman (1)	Schwartz, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”
10/6	The Schlemiel	Malamud, “Black Is My Favorite Color”
10/11-10/13	Sycophancy and the Self-Hating Jew	Roth, “Defender of the Faith” Roth, “Writing About Jews”

#### FALL BREAK

10/20-10/25	Varieties of Suffering	Malamud, <i>The Assistant</i>
10/27-11/1	Jewish Bildungsroman (2)	Roth, <i>Portnoy’s Complaint</i> Roth, “Pictures of Malamud”

### IV. American Literary Responses to the Holocaust

*As was also true in Europe, a generation of artists generally avoided direct depictions of the Holocaust, although postwar Jewish American writing certainly reflected a new sense of identity shaped by victimhood, survival, and (survivor’s) guilt. What is an appropriate aesthetic response to the previously unimaginable experience of European genocide? How are the children of concentration camp survivors to live in America? Cynthia Ozick and Art Spiegelman develop radically different forms of storytelling to address these questions.*

11/3-11/8	The Messiah of the Laundromat	Ozick, <i>The Shawl</i>
11/10	Allegory	Malamud, “The Jewbird”
11/15	Realism	Malamud, “The German Refugee” Cappell, “Reflecting the World: Malamud’s Post-Holocaust Judaism”
11/17-11/22	Of Mice or Men	Spiegelman, <i>Maus</i>

#### THANKSGIVING

#### IV: The Paradox of Chosen-ness

*What does it mean to be the Chosen People? This designation, originally intended as a blessing, has more often—and most horrifically in the concentration camps—seemed more like a curse. We again work backwards from a contemporary novel about a seemingly divinely gifted child to earlier portraits of Christ figures, prodigies, and other agents with a special mission. In Jewish American fiction, these protagonists tend to be heroes of thought rather than action.*

11/29	The Jewish Hero of Thought	Allen, “The Whore of Mensa” Allen, “The Kugelmass Episode”
12/1	Too Good for This World	Salinger, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”
12/6-12/8	The Jewish American Bildungsroman (3 and 4)	Doctorow, “The Writer in the Family” Salinger, “The Laughing Man”

#### Appendix: Suggestions for Further Reading

*If this were a two-semester seminar, I would have included the following stories and novels, each of which have been part of the course in previous iterations.*

Saul Bellow, *Herzog*  
E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, *The Book of Daniel*  
Norman Mailer, “The Man Who Studied Yoga”  
Cynthia Ozick, “The Pagan Rabbi”  
Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*  
Amy Bloom, *Away*  
Myla Goldberg, *Bee Season*  
Allegra Goodman, *Kaaterskill Falls*, *The Family Markowitz*  
Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*

**ENGLISH 550**

**SEMINAR IN JEWISH-AMERICAN FICTION**

**Professor Lloyd Michaels**

**Fall 2011**