

The bomb and the word: Crisis, containment and chaos in American Cold War literature

Catherine Turner
caturner@upenn.edu

What happens when literature becomes a front in a global contest over national and ideological superiority? In the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union called the Cold War, literature was often co-opted to show the ways in which the US was more free and more supportive of artistic and personal expression than literature of the USSR. As a result, literature both became part of a national strategy of containment of Communism. Beginning with texts and films that represented American's anxieties and fears about Communism and the atomic bomb, this course will show the ways in which the sense of crisis and anxiety drove literary experimentation and increasingly personal forms of poetry and prose. Alongside that experimentation, this course will examine works like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* to begin to see how freedom of expression reflected and resisted social and state efforts to contain demands for freedom from women and racial minorities. Finally, the course will end by looking at a range of experimental novels which worked to defy assumptions about cultural superiority and freedom of expression including Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Each week, students will read novels, short stories, non-fiction and essays. Short in class lectures will place the works they read into context. Class discussion will focus on connecting Cold War pressures in the US and abroad to literary production and defining the ways that literature responded to conflicts over foreign and domestic policy in the US as well as international conflicts.

Objectives

Students in this class will

- Consider the ways in which the Cold War shaped American culture and the ways in which American literature came to be read
- Connect historical events, objects, art and actors to the literary and popular culture of the time.
- Define Cold War culture using artifacts and literary production.
- Examine the ways in which historical pressures changed literary styles and tastes.

Reading List

Novels

John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (1946)

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, *Ugly American* (1958)

Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963)

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965)

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)

Short Stories

Ray Bradbury, "There Will Come Soft Rains"
Phillip Roth, "The Conversion of the Jews"
Flannery O'Connor, "A good man is hard to find"
Joan Didion, "The White Album"
Donald Barthelme, "The School"
Kim Yong-ik, "They Won't Crack It Open"
Lydia Davis, "What She Knew" "The Brother In-Law"
Bharati Mukherjee, "A Wife's Story"

Grading

Short connection papers every other week connecting Cold War artifacts to the reading	30%
Short posts on Canvas (weekly)	25%
Final paper or project	15%
Participation	20%
Steps in the final paper or project	10%

Description of Assignments

Short Canvas posts: Every week (with some exceptions when we have holidays on Monday) students will post something on Monday and then respond to two of their peers on Wednesday. These posts will be graded on a 10 point scale. Students get 4 points for an initial post and three for each response. (So students should get 10 points each week. Students can respond to more than one post to earn additional points if there are times you can't post.)

There are two different types of posts:

1. **Short Text Discussion:** Every other week students will post a passage from one of the texts under discussion (just the passage, nothing else.). Those posts will be the focus of discussion on Tuesday. After class students will respond with a 200 to 300 word response to the passages of other students by Wednesday.
 - You can skip one of these without penalty.
2. **Short Connection Discussion:** Every other week students will post a thing that they want to connect to the texts we are discussing. These posts will include a 200-300 word description of the thing and a short connection. Then students will respond to two other student's things with short 200-300 word connections.
 - You can skip one of these without penalty.

Short bi-weekly connection papers (500 to 750 words or about 1 or 1.5 pages) – every other week students will find something connected to the text, time period or issues under discussion and describe the connection they find and explain why that connection matters to understanding the Cold War.

Here's the format for connection papers:

- What? Describe your object in a paragraph in some detail. You may need to do a little research to understand what you have.
- How is it connected and to what? The next paragraph should make a connection between the object and what we've been reading about.
- So what? Finally conclude with a sentence or two that explains why this connection matters to understanding the culture of the Cold War.
 - You can skip one of these assignments without penalty.

Class participation Being in class is a first step in getting full credit for class participation but will not be enough to get an A or a B. Instead I ask that when you are in class you

- Do the readings and take notes on them so you are prepared to talk about the texts.
- Listen to other people's ideas in class and respond to them.
- Ask questions to clarify
- Interact with your peers around the group activities (and ask questions for clarification.)

You will be able to miss class twice without penalty. You can earn extra class participation points on the discussion boards. Each class is worth 6 points (so two extra responses and you can do those responses anytime on any board.)

Final project you will pull together your connection objects, your colleagues' connection objects, the works we read and watch, the events of the timeline and anything you else you are interested in adding to answer the question: how would you characterize the culture of the Cold War?

This is a huge question so I'll help you to your analysis on a topic of interest to you (and manageable). I'll work with you in the second week of class to consider ways to focus your work. Then, at two additional points in the semester (before spring break and in mid-April), you will turn in a draft of your analysis. I'll meet with y'all to talk about your drafts and help you prepare for the final.

The final project will knit together work you've already done so should be around 7-10 pages.

Policies:

Late policies:

- You can turn in one discussion post text and one connection post text late. (I count late for these posts as 7 am the morning after they are due.) This is so I can finish reading them before class and use them to prepare.
- Everyone had two late passes for your connection papers. That means you can turn in one paper two days late or two papers one day late.

- Rough drafts have to be done when they are due. Even if your rough draft is terrible turn it in because the grading is complete/not complete.

If you work is regularly late, let's talk. I can reset dates but you do have to turn things in close to when they are due. The work in this class builds and once you start to slip behind you'll have trouble catching up.

Regrade

You should always ask if you have a question about your grades. I've tried to make my grading as transparent as possible but I'm happy to explain grades further.

Class attendance:

- You must attend class in a N95 or KN95 mask or having a cloth mask and a surgical mask (that is double masked) and wearing the mask(s) properly over the nose and mouth. Reach out to me if you don't have a mask (my office has extras and I can get them to you!)
- Do not come to class if you feel sick. We will miss you – a lot – but I'd rather we all stay healthy.
- You can miss two classes without excuse.
- You can make up any additional classes you have to miss through extra participation on the discussion boards (two additional responses (6 points) per class)

Electronic Devices

- I know there are going to be times when you need to get texts and/or answer your phone. I've been there! If you do need to be on your phone, please step out of the classroom so that you don't distract your peers.
- You'll be using your laptops for class regularly. I ask that you focus on the materials for my class and not spend time in class on things outside the class. Again, if it is urgent, please step out of class.