

The Other Fifties

English 20503: Major American Writers | Spring 2020

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Course Overview

In his 1984 autobiography, Amiri Baraka, the poet and spokesman of the black arts movement, looked back on the mid-1950s as a moment of change. Dwight Eisenhower, born in 1890, had won a second term as president. John F. Kennedy, thirty years younger and soon to succeed him, had just arrived in the Senate. A young Baptist minister named Martin Luther King, new on the national stage, had led a successful movement to desegregate public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama. “This was, I think, a time of transition,” Baraka wrote. “From the cooled-out reactionary 50’s, the 50’s of the Cold War and McCarthyism and HUAC, to the late 50’s of the surging civil rights movement.”

This course is about that time of transition. The 1950s, though often remembered as a decade of conformity, also introduced the nation to a cast of rebels and outsiders: Holden Caulfield, James Dean, Alice Childress, the Beats, Nina Simone, and the characters of *Mad* magazine. The literature we will read this semester tells their stories and looks ahead to the tumultuous decade to come. We will witness a “slight rebellion” in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), encounter a different kind of sermon in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), catch a con man in Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), and achieve transcendence, or not, in Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* (1958). This course asks which decade we’re talking about when we say “the fifties” and how that decade imagined and created the future.

Required Texts

Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. 1953. Vintage, 2013.
Highsmith, Patricia. *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. 1955. Norton, 2008.
Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums*. 1958. Penguin, 1976.
Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. 1951. Back Bay, 2018.

Readings on Course Website

Baldwin, James. “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” *Notes of a Native Son*, Beacon, 1955. pp. 13–24.
Dinerstein, Joel. “The Origins of Cool.” Introduction. *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America*, U of Chicago P, 2017, pp. 7–36.
Ginsberg, Allen. “A Supermarket in California.” *Howl and Other Poems*, City Lights, 1956, pp. 23–24.

- Hale, Grace Elizabeth. "Outsiders and Rebels." Introduction. *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*, Oxford UP, 2011, pp. 1–7.
- . "Rebel Music: Minstrelsy, Rock and Roll, and Beat Writing." *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*, Oxford UP, 2011, pp. 49–72.
- Maurer, David W. "Looking toward the Future." *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Game*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1940, pp. 297–300.
- . "A Word about Confidence Men." *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Game*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1940, pp. 15–18.
- Medovoi, Leerom. "Identitarian Thought and the Cold War World." *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, Duke UP, 2005, pp. 1–14.
- "Our Country and Our Culture." *Partisan Review*, May–June 1952, pp. 282–86.
- Rebel without a Cause*. Directed by Nicholas Ray. Warner Bros., 1955.
- "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." *Mad Men*, created by Matthew Weiner, season 1, episode 1, Lionsgate, 2007.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon." *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, U of Chicago P, 2003, pp. 251–59.
- Whyte, William H., Jr. Introduction. *The Organization Man*, Simon and Schuster, 1956, pp. 3–14.

Assignments and Grading

Assignments:

Reading Quizzes	15%
Participation and Preparedness	15%
Presentation	20%
Midterm Paper	25%
Final Exam	25%

Grading Scale:

A	93–100%	C	73–76%
A-	90–92%	C-	70–72%
B+	87–89%	D+	67–69%
B	83–86%	D	63–66%
B-	80–82%	D-	60–62%
C+	77–79%	F	0–59%

Reading Schedule and Deadlines

Date	Readings	Deadlines
Week 1	Which Fifties?	
Tuesday, January 14	Syllabus Ginsberg, “A Supermarket in California”	
Thursday, January 16	“Our Country and Our Culture” Hale, “Outsiders and Rebels”	Presentation assigned
Week 2	Rebel Rebel	
Tuesday, January 21	Medovoi, “Identitarian Thought and the Cold War World”	
Thursday, January 23	Salinger, <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> (chapters 1–6)	
Week 3		
Tuesday, January 28	Salinger, <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> (chapters 7–14)	
Thursday, January 30	Salinger, <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> (chapters 15–20)	
Week 4		
Tuesday, February 4	Salinger, <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> (chapters 21–26)	Midterm paper assigned
Thursday, February 6	<i>Rebel without a Cause</i> (website)	Midterm paper proposal due Sunday, February 9 at 5 p.m.
Week 5		
Tuesday, February 11	Conferences	
Thursday, February 13	Conferences	
Week 6	Everybody’s Protest Novel	
Tuesday, February 18	Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”	
Thursday, February 20	Spillers, “Moving on Down the Line”	
Week 7		
Tuesday, February 25	Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> (“The Seventh Day”)	
Thursday, February 27	Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> (“Florence’s Prayer”)	Midterm paper due Friday, February 28 at 5 p.m.
Week 8		
Tuesday, March 3	Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> (“Gabriel’s Prayer,” Elizabeth’s	

	Prayer”)	
Thursday, March 5	Baldwin, <i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> (“The Threshing Floor”)	
Week 9		
Tuesday, March 10	No class (spring break)	
Thursday, March 12	No class (spring break)	
Week 10	Mad Men, Con Men	
Tuesday, March 17	Maurer, “A Word about Confidence Men” and “Looking toward the Future” Whyte, Introduction to <i>The Organization Man</i>	
Thursday, March 19	Highsmith, <i>The Talented Mr. Ripley</i> (chapters 1–9)	
Week 11		
Tuesday, March 24	Highsmith, <i>The Talented Mr. Ripley</i> (chapters 10–15)	
Thursday, March 26	Highsmith, <i>The Talented Mr. Ripley</i> (chapters 16–22)	
Week 12		
Tuesday, March 31	Highsmith, <i>The Talented Mr. Ripley</i> (chapters 23–30)	
Thursday, April 2	“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” (<i>Mad Men</i>)	
Week 13	Beats and Bums	
Tuesday, April 7	Dinerstein, “The Origins of Cool”	
Thursday, April 9	Hale, “Rebel Music”	
Week 14		
Tuesday, April 14	Kerouac, <i>The Dharma Bums</i> (chapters 1–8)	
Thursday, April 16	Kerouac, <i>The Dharma Bums</i> (chapters 9– 16)	
Week 15		
Tuesday, April 21	Kerouac, <i>The Dharma Bums</i> (chapters 17–26)	
Thursday, April 23	Kerouac, <i>The Dharma Bums</i> (chapters 27–34) SPOTs	
Week 16		
Tuesday, April 28	Final review	Final exam assigned

Thursday, April 30	No class (study days)	Final exam due Sunday, May 3 at 5 p.m.
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