

Professor Michaela Bronstein (bronstein@stanford.ed)

What Was (Is?) Modernism?

English 389, Tuesdays, 9-11.50, Building 300, Room 303

Office Hours: Tuesday 3.30-5.15, Margaret Jacks Hall, Room 321

This class offers an introduction to the modernist novel, focusing on its formal experimentation and the lasting impact of the techniques developed by modernist authors. Few critics these days agree about just what the definition of “modernism” is, but most agree that studying the modernist novel requires looking beyond the traditional canonical names. We’ll read Conrad next to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, a postcolonial author inspired by him; Woolf and Joyce next to Zadie Smith’s homage to their works, and more.

Our critical discussion will focus on recent work that has expanded the boundaries of modernist studies beyond an Anglo-American 1890-1945 canon—breaking down the divisions between national literary histories, between literary periods, and between “high” and “low” forms of writing. We’ll look into the consequences of this expansion—is it a gesture of openness to a broader set of authors, or a colonial project that risks reducing those authors to an offshoot of the canon? What’s at stake when you cross temporal, national, or genre boundaries? What kinds of arguments are enabled by such comparative work, and what potential pitfalls arise?

Required books in these editions:

Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo*, ISBN: 0199555915

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Petals of Blood*, ISBN: 0143039172

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, ISBN: 0156030357

Zadie Smith, *NW*, ISBN: 0143123939

Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, ISBN: 0062073567

(Note: I expect you to use the specified editions or ones with identical pagination.)

Other texts will be available as PDFs. Criticism will be in the form of short excerpts.

### **Week 1:**

Class intro; “The New Modernist Studies,” Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *PMLA* *Nostromo*, 1-27; *Petals of Blood*, 1-16.

### **There and Elsewhere**

**Critical Excerpts:** Dimock, Gikandi, Jameson, Friedman

**Week 2:** Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* through 219.

Dimock; Friedman.

**Week 3:** *Nostromo*, complete; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Petals of Blood*, through 141.

Jameson.

**Week 4:** *Petals of Blood*, complete.

Said; Gikandi.

## **Now and Then**

**Critical excerpts:** Auerbach, James & Seshagiri

**Week 5:** Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*; excerpt, *Ulysses*. Auerbach.

**Week 6:** Zadie Smith, *NW*; excerpts, “Changing My Mind”  
James & Seshagiri.

## **Low and High**

**Critical Excerpts:** Hayot.

**Week 7:** Henry James, “The Next Time” (will be on Canvas); Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*  
Hayot.

Students must decide what they’ll read in Week 8 by classtime of Week 7.

**Week 8:** Criticism, to be determined

Students must decide what they’ll read in Week 9 by classtime of Week 8.

## **THANKSGIVING BREAK**

**Week 9:** Students’ choice(s): possibilities include traditional modernist works by Faulkner, Joyce, Barnes, or others; or more recent work: Cynthia Ozick, “Dictation”; Toni Morrison, *Jazz*; Colm Tóibín, *The Master*; Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

**Week 10:** **Class will not take place at the scheduled time;** our seminar will take place early the following week depending on scheduling.

**Thursday:** Seminar papers due.

**Friday or the following week:** MSA-style seminar, 2-3 hours. All students must have read every paper and be prepared to discuss them.

## **Procedures:**

This class will climax not in a classic research paper but in a position paper of the kind common at the Modernist Studies Association’s annual conference, which features “seminars” in which 8-12 participants precirculate papers of about 3000 words for discussion.<sup>1</sup> Position papers are most valuable and provoke the best discussion when they take a strong stance on a broad issue in the field. We will be rescheduling the last week’s class meeting for a week later in order to give you all time to complete your own paper and read those of your classmates. Note that due to the collective nature of the precirculation and discussion system, no incompletes or late submissions will be possible.

Depending on class size, each member will be responsible for either several reading responses or a brief presentation at some point during the quarter.

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of current seminars at MSA 2016, see <https://msa.press.jhu.edu/conferences/msa18/conf/Seminars.html>

Weeks 8 and 9 offer you a chance to do some independent reading—to look at criticism and primary sources beyond the syllabus. I'll offer suggestions of likely possibilities as the quarter goes on.

**Policies:**

No computers in class. Tablets without keyboards are OK.

We only have 9 regular meetings. Absences should not occur, barring documented emergencies.