Modernism was a phenomenon spanning poetry, fiction, architecture, painting, and music. Like time, it’s something familiar but also something hard to define, and because it was applied to a baggy congeries of disparate works most statements about it (even from the manifestoes of some of its principal artists) come already supplied with counter-examples. We will see it as a response to cultural modernity, which is to say, to the experience of what Weber would call the disenchantment of the world, its routinization, alienation, rootlessness, and mechanization, its sense that the cultural forms it inherited from its Romantic and Victorian predecessors were exhausted. Under the pressure of modernity, modernism sought to “make it new” by adopting a new stance towards its governing values, a new stance toward feeling, and, most of all, a new habit of abstraction, which attempted both to ground private experience in a critical view of the public cultural world and to present that experience in an as it were “raw” form, before it has been retrospectively ordered and tidied up by reflection. Modernism was a movement that crossed national boundaries, gender lines, and racial lines. But its habits and practices were always disputed from within and without, and later generations located themselves by disputing its lessons.

One common feature of the modernist era was the long, ambitious poem which attempted to capture an entire aesthetic, cultural, and political world view. Modernism was the heyday of big, disorderly poems like T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, Wallace Stevens’ *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, William Carlos William’s *Paterson*. (We will be reading quite a few of these.) Even later modernists, or critics of modernism, like Louis Zukofsky and Charles Olson, sought a culminating statement of their poetic world-view in big, miscellaneous poems like *Maximus* and *A*. At the same time modernism also drew poets who sought a more granular and compact form, such as Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, and indeed even some of the authors of modernist mega-poems also distinguished themselves with poetry of extreme brevity, in such poems as Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” or Williams’ “So much depends.”

I have assigned many more poems than we can hope to discuss in class. My aim is to give you as broad a view of each poet’s oeuvre as possible (and to give you as many possible paper topics as possible too!). Because I want to give a sense of the breadth of these poets’ careers, I have chosen to assign many poems by a few poets rather than a few poems by many poets.
Texts
You are not bound to the anthology I have ordered, and are welcome to find these texts wherever you wish. I chose this Library of America collection because it is extremely inclusive (although it somewhat scants poetry from the 1950s and later), because it is very well edited (its companion volume on the Nineteenth Century revolutionized our current sense of that canon), and because it includes a number of long, ambitious poems in complete texts (unlike most other anthologies that treat this period). You will also notice that these beautiful volumes don’t present themselves as anthologies; the idea is that poetry is for all of life, not just for college. (It also cost half what competing anthologies did!)

- *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume 1: Henry Adams to Dorothy Parker*  

- *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume 2: E.E. Cummings to May Swenson*  

Class Sessions

Week 1
**Robert Frost**: Usually taken to be a non-modernist, or a defiant anti-modernist, Frost was, however, promoted by Ezra Pound, the patron and tutor of many other modernists. Until the 1970s his poetry was under-rated and non-canonical, until some of his subtleties of tone and take began to be appreciated.

Week 2
T. S. Eliot: Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is usually taken (with Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*) as the paradigmatic modernist work in English, and Eliot’s poetry and criticism are sometimes seen as the arbiters of modernist aesthetics, so much so that Eliot’s crochets are sometimes taken as principles and his vices are taken to be vices of modernism as a whole. However one feels about Eliot or his poems, *The Waste Land* made possible a great deal of subsequent poetry, and for several generations poets could be seen in terms of how they stood towards that poem.


Week 3
T. S. Eliot, continued:

Week 4
Gertrude Stein: Another of the founding voices of modernism, and like Pound and Eliot also a model, example, and patron of other modernists.

Texts: from *Tender Buttons*: Objects, Susie Asado, from *Lifting Belly*: Lifting Belly Is So Kind, Idem the Same: A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson, from *Stanzas in Meditation*, from *The World Is Round*

Week 5
H.D. (Hilda Doolittle): Seen (somewhat reductively) as an Imagist, she was also a modernist of the high modernist kind, with a particular take on the classical and archaic sources of poetic inspiration.


Week 6
Ezra Pound: The patron and tutor of many of the modernists, but because of his politics also a scandalous figure. Nevertheless a key shaper and inspirer of the movement.

**Week 7**

**Wallace Stevens**: A late bloomer among the modernists, but also probably the modernist who is most admired at the present time.

Texts: Sunday Morning, Peter Quince at the Clavier, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, Nomad Exquisite, Infanta Marina, Domination of Black, The Snow Man, Tea at the Palaz of Hoon, The Emperor of Ice-Cream, Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock, To the One of Fictive Music, The Death of a Soldier, Sea Surface Full of Clouds, The Idea of Order at Key West, The Sun This March, Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial, A Postcard from the Volcano, Autumn Refrain, Poetry Is a Destructive Force, The Poems of Our Climate, Study of Two Pears, The Man on the Dump, Landscape with Boat, Phosphor Reading by His Own Light

**Week 8**

**Wallace Stevens** ctd.


*Proposal Due*

**Week 9**

**Hart Crane**: An outlier among modernists because of his embrace of romanticism, his reputation, and particularly the reputation of his magnum opus *The Bridge*, has risen meteorically in the last thirty years.

Texts: Chaplinesque, For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen, Voyages, Repose of Rivers, The Wine Menagerie, At Melville’s Tomb, *The Bridge*, O Carib Isle!, The Broken Tower

**Week 10**

**Session 1:**

**Claude McKay** and **James Weldon Johnson**: Two African-American authors of the modernist era who embrace more traditional aesthetics.


**Session 2: Jean Toomer** and **Langston Hughes**: Two African-American Modernists.

Texts: Toomer: Reapers, Cotton Song, Georgia Dusk, Nullo, Evening Song, Portrait in Georgia, Seventh Street, Storm Ending, Her Lips Are Copper Wire, Gum, The Gods Are Here
Hughes: The Negro Speaks of Rivers, Aunt Sue’s Stories, When Sue Wears Red, Young Prostitute, My People, Dream Variations, Subway Face, I, Too, Suicide’s Note, Summer Night, Strange Hurt, A House in Taos, Railroad Avenue, Sea Calm, Drum, Cubes, Little Lyric (Of Great Importance), Evil, Songs, Luck, Curious, American Heartbreak, from *Montage of a Dream Deferred*

**Bibliography Due**

**Week 11**

**Session 1: Marianne Moore**: Known for the acuity of her observation of intensely seen particulars, and also for the development of syllabic verse, based on the number of syllables rather than the number of stresses.


**Session 2: Lorine Niedecker**: Along with Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, and George Oppen, a developer of *Objectivism*, a late Modernism descending from Williams and Pound.


**Week 12**

**Session 1: Elizabeth Bishop**: With Robert Lowell and Louise Bogan, a link between modernist poetry and the Confessional poetry of Plath, Sexton, and Berryman, but a poet who transcends those categories.


**Session 2: Louise Bogan**

Week 13
Session 1: Robert Penn Warren: Warren began publishing poetry before Eliot published The Waste Land, but fully came into his own as a poet after not only his generation but most of the next generation had died, in the 1970s and 1980s.

Session 2: J. V. Cunningham: A proudly anti-modern epigrammist and ironist. One of the first pillars of the Brandeis Department of English.
Texts: Dream Vision, A Moral Poem, For My Contemporaries, Montana Pastoral, Selected Epigrams, To What Strangers, What Welcome

Draft Due to Writing Groups

Requirements

1. Short papers There will be short (two pages or so) writing assignments due every Tuesday for 5 weeks You will pick a short poem, or a passage from a long one, from the reading for that day or the next and type it out. Be sure to pick a passage which strikes you as rich and interesting and full of a significance that might not be already obvious to every reader of that text. In other words, I don’t want you to pick a passage that will enable you to repeat some point I have already made in the lecture, but rather some passage which will enable you to bring a new reflection into our conversation, some passage that casts some new light upon the conversation we have already been having, some light that we might not have seen were it not for you. You will write a two page (or so) commentary on that passage, giving what you take its point to be, noting its context, and developing in cogent detail the claim it leads you to make about the text. Imagine that you are writing for someone who has some knowledge of the text but who does not know what precisely is your point of view about it—someone rather like the other members of this class, for instance. I will not give particular papers letter grades, but I will comment upon them and give them either a check, a check plus, or a check minus.

2. Research Paper The principal assignment for this class will be a research paper, of 12 pages minimum, concerned with one of the texts this course will examine. To prepare this paper you will need to start with an overarching paradigm from literary study. Some overarching studies of southern literature might give you a starting point. Literary theory might provide you with paradigms to discuss issues of racial conflict, cultural conflict, colonialism, or gender and sexuality issues. You should also make yourself familiar with the critical literature on your chosen novel, which you can access using The MLA International Bibliography or JSTOR Language and Literature.
You will develop the papers in stages, which will include

• A one-page research proposal, giving your topic, developing your take, and outlining the stakes of your project, due on March 13
• An annotated bibliography, outlining what is to be learned from your key sources, due on
• A conference with me, which will take place during the week of
• A rough draft, which will be due to a writing group of your peers on
• A completed research paper, due on

Learning Goals

1. Develop the habit of independent critique, intellectual self-reliance, and self-confidence from the perspective of attentive reading and collaborative discussion
2. Become conversant with the major questions, concepts, theories, traditions, and techniques of humanistic inquiry about the 20th Century American Poetry
3. Reflect on quality peer-to-peer interaction.
4. Develop and sharpen writing skills through rigorous assignments.

Policies

1. Disability If you are a student with a documented disability at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the course instructor immediately.

2. Attendance and Participation Attendance in this course is required. A student with more than two unexcused absences should expect to fail the course. Participation in the class discussion is required, so come to class prepared to speak. There may well be classes at Brandeis in which you can coast for much of the term and recover yourself by heroic efforts at the end, but this isn’t one of them. It’s best to plan to work steadily.

3. Extensions You must contact me no later than the class before a paper is due to receive an extension. I will not grant extensions on the due date of the paper. Late papers will be docked in proportion to their lateness.

4. Academic Honesty You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. The University policy on academic honesty is distributed annually as section 5 of the Rights and Responsibilities handbook. Instances of alleged dishonesty will be forwarded to the Office of Campus Life for possible referral to the Student Judicial System. Potential sanctions include failure in the course and suspension from the University. If you have any questions about my expectations, please ask.
5. **Electronics** You are not allowed to have an open laptop in this class. Please turn off your cell phones for the duration of the class.

6. **Four-Credit Course (with three hours of class-time per week)** Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

7. **Communications** The course will have a mailing list on LATTE. Information about snow days, changed deadlines, and so forth will be broadcast on that mailing list. We may make use of LATTE discussion forums as well.

**Assignment Weights**

I view calculations using these values with suspicion, and I will not accept arguments about your final grade based on calculations from this table, but I include this table to give you a rough idea of how much each assignment is worth.

- Short Papers 15 %
- Research Proposal 5 %
- Annotated Bibliography 10 %
- Research Paper First Draft 10 %
- Research Paper Final Draft 35 %
- Participation 25 %