

Brescia University College

English 3667G

American Cold War Literature and Culture, 1945-1989

Tuesday 4:30-5:20 and Thursday 3:30-5:20, rm. 302

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From the end of World War II until the fall of the Berlin Wall, global alliances were shaped by a continual conflict between two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and their allies. The resulting Cold War shaped not only the era's political and military events, but, in the West at least, affected almost every area of life. Because the conflict was ideologically, literature and other modes of cultural expression were crucial arenas within which debates about freedom, identity, religion, politics, and economics were played out. Shadowing the Cold War was always the threat of nuclear conflict, but Cold War studies go well beyond the nuclear issue to explore a culture obsessed with boundaries, most explicitly evident in the notion of "containment", and a world of binaries. As Eisenhower claimed in his first inaugural address: "We sense with all our faculties that forces of good and evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history. . . . Freedom is pitted against slavery; lightness against the dark." In the United States, the presence of the Soviet enemy compelled an examination and recreation of all things "American".

This special topics course will look at selected texts and authors to explore the literary and cultural effects and intricacies of the Cold War conflict. It is, of course, impossible to cover every aspect of the period's conflict; consequently, we will focus on particular issues that are pertinent to the subject. Such things as the bomb, the policy of containment, McCarthyism and the "home front", and espionage are possible areas for further probing.

Students will be asked to read novels and poems by authors such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Arthur Miller, and others, as well as short essays by people such as John Hersey and George Kennan that will help frame the context for discussion. You will also be expected to read some essays by contemporary critics as well.

Assignments:

- a presentation in class (including a self-assessment) (20%)
- a major term essay (25%)

--four short (no more than 300 words), reflective commentaries (some of which will be the basis of class discussion). Each one can be handed in at any time throughout the term; you are encouraged to space them out. (10% in total)

--participation (10%)

--final exam (35%)

### **Expectations, Assignments, and Objectives:**

The presentation will be on a topic or text(s) selected by you and held on the scheduled date. You are responsible for about 25-30 minutes of class time. You are free to do what you want with the time so long as you deal with the topic or text and the academic nature of the course. You can talk, read, ask questions, lead discussion, use electronic resources, puppets or partners, etc. After the presentation, you should submit a brief outline of your main points (no more than a page) and your bibliography. You will also submit, after some time for reflection (a week after the presentation), a self-assessment of your presentation. The essay will be between 8 and 10 pages on a topic of your choosing from suggestions I will offer. You will be able to make passing use of the material you did your presentation on, but it cannot be a main part of the essay. On the other hand, any framing, criticism, or theory you may have used in your presentation can be used in your essay. It goes without saying that clear and grammatically correct composition is expected by you and me. Improvement in this area is never ending. The essay should use secondary material and follow the MLA format for presentation and citation.

By the end of the term, successful students will have written clearly argued and grammatically correct essays that probe the ways in which the Cold War affected culture and literature in America. Students will have become familiar with many important historical events that shaped the later half of the twentieth century, and they will see how these events are dealt with by American writers. Students will hone their presentation skills and develop their critical thinking through class work and written assignments. Students will deepen their understanding of literature's place in a cultural milieu.

Texts:

Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (on-line)

Hersey, Hiroshima (on-line)

Plath, The Bell Jar (Faber); selected poems

Lowell, "Life Studies" and "For the Union Dead"

Ginsberg, selected poems (on-line)

Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" (on-line)

Didion, Democracy (Vintage)

Miller, The Crucible (Penguin)

Poems by Denise Levertov, Elizabeth Bishop

Condon, Manchurian Candidate

Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle (Dial)

films: Kubrick Dr. Strangelove

Siegel, Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

Blessing, Lee, A Walk in the Woods