

ENGLISH 496G: TONI MORRISON

Time: Tuesday & Thursday 11:00 a.m.–12:15 p.m.
 Classroom: Griffin 304
 Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday 12:30–2:30 p.m.
 Office: Griffin 250

Instructor: Professor Maria Seger
 Email: maria.seger@louisiana.edu
 Phone: 337-482-6970
 Mailbox: Griffin 221

COURSE OVERVIEW

This seminar will survey the body of work of the prolific African American author Toni Morrison, heralded upon her passing in August 2019 as the “last great American author.” From the 1970s through the 2010s, her oeuvre centered the many facets of the black experience across US history—from enslavement to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond—with “visionary force” and “poetic import,” in the words of her Nobel Prize announcement. As a scholar, Morrison indelibly changed the course of American literary studies in insisting that blackness was not marginal but rather fundamental to understanding the American cultural imaginary. In this seminar, we’ll read a selection of her novels, short stories, and critical works, perhaps including such texts as *Sula* (1973), “Recitatif” (1983), *Beloved* (1987), *Playing in the Dark* (1992), and *A Mercy* (2008). To facilitate critical reading of and writing about these works, this seminar will introduce a variety of methodological approaches to the field of African American literary studies, including methods from Afro-pessimism, critical race studies, black feminism, black Marxism, and queer of color critique.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Vintage, 2004. ISBN: 9781400033416.

---. *A Mercy*. 2008. New York: Vintage, 2009. ISBN: 9780307276766.

---. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. 1992. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print. ISBN: 9780679745426.

---. *Sula*. 1973. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print. ISBN: 9781400033430.

TEXTS PROVIDED ON MOODLE

Morrison, Toni. “Recitatif.” *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*. Ed. Amiri and Amina Baraka. New York: Morrow, 1983. Print.

McKittrick, Katherine. “I Lost an Arm on My Last Trip Home: Black Geographies.” *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. 1–36. Print.

Perry, Imani. “Excerpt from *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*.” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 56 (2018): 76–92. Print.

Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016. 102–34. Print.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64–81. Print.

Wynter, Sylvia. Excerpt from "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR* 3.3 (2003): 257–337. Print.

COURSE COMPONENTS

Reading Quizzes: Our texts will be both complex and challenging. Please read these texts carefully in order to be prepared to contribute to class discussion and to succeed on course assignments. I'll randomly check your attendance in class and reading comprehension of the assigned material in the form of reading quizzes given at five unannounced points across the course of the semester. Reading quizzes cannot be made up at a later date.

Research Essay Presentation: You'll complete a presentation aimed at developing your confidence in speaking about your academic work. During our final class, you'll briefly present the argument of your research essay to the class. You should plan to speak for roughly three minutes.

Writing: You'll undertake a variety of writing assignments over the course of the term aimed at developing your skills in academic writing. Please use Modern Language Association (MLA) guidelines and submit written assignments in hard copy. A prompt for each assignment will be distributed two weeks in advance of its due date.

Close Readings: You'll complete two short writing assignments of 1,000 words aimed at developing your skills of close reading theoretical texts and turning observations into arguments.

Abstract and Annotated Bibliography: You'll write a short abstract of roughly 250 words that identifies your research question (and potentially your tentative answer to that question), the critical conversation to which you're responding, and the stakes/implications of your project. You'll also compile an annotated bibliography with eight source entries of roughly 150 words each. For each source, list a complete citation as well as a summary of the source's argument, how its argument relates to your other sources' arguments, and how you plan to position your argument in response.

Research Essay: You'll submit a roughly 3,000-word research essay that employs a clear methodology, responds to a critical conversation in black literary studies, and performs a new and original close reading of a Toni Morrison text. Your previous assignments may serve as a foundation for this essay.

GRADE BREAKDOWN

Reading Quizzes	15%
Research Essay Presentation	10%
Close Readings	30%
Abstract and Annotated Bibliography	15%

Research Essay

30%

GRADE SCALE

A: 100%–90%

B: 89%–80%

C: 79%–70%

D: 69%–60%

F: 59%–0%

While individual assignments may receive half letter grades (pluses or minuses), final grades are calculated according to the above scale.

COURSE POLICIES

Cancellations/Weather: Please check your email regularly in case of class cancellations. If class is canceled, I'll send alternate directions via email.

Disabilities: I'm committed to ensuring that students have access to the conditions that they need to succeed in my course. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please contact me as well as the Office of Disability Services as soon as possible. More information can be found at <https://disability.louisiana.edu>.

Late Assignments: I don't generally accept late assignments. That being said, life happens. If you have a situation, please contact me as soon as possible so that we can make alternate arrangements.

Participation/Class Behavior: This course will be conducted in a seminar style, meaning that participation from each student will be vital to everyone's success. Class discussion is a collective enterprise from which we all grow and from which we individually benefit on class assignments, so please strive to be on time to and present in class, meaningfully contribute to our communal inquires and discussions, comport yourself with appropriate behavior and mutual respect for your classmates, and come to class with the assigned materials and having done the assigned reading. If electronic devices are fundamental to your learning process, please feel free to use them in seminar. That being said, please be mindful of your ability to distract yourself and others when using electronics for other purposes during class time.

Plagiarism: Because academic writing purports to create new knowledge, plagiarism is considered a serious ethical violation. For this reason, plagiarism of any kind will result in, at a minimum, a failing grade for the assignment, and, at a maximum, dismissal from the University. The University's official definition of plagiarism is as follows: "Plagiarism is a specific type of cheating. It occurs when a student claims originality for the ideas or words of another person, when the student presents as a new and original idea or product anything which in fact is derived from an existing work, or when the student makes use of any work or production already created by someone else without giving credit to the source. In short, plagiarism is the use of unacknowledged materials in the preparation of assignments." If you have any questions or concerns about plagiarism, please contact me.

Writing Center: The Writing Center employs tutors who can help students with their writing at any

stage of the process—from brainstorming to polishing their final drafts. This service is free, and I recommend it for even the most confident writers. More information can be found at <http://english.louisiana.edu/about-us/publications-centers/writing-center>.

COURSE SCHEDULE

DATE	READINGS	DEADLINES
Thursday 1/16	Syllabus and Morrison, “Recitatif” (Moodle)	
Tuesday 1/21	McKittrick, “I Lost an Arm on My Last Trip Home” (Moodle)	
Thursday 1/23	Morrison, <i>Playing in the Dark</i> (1–28)	
Tuesday 1/28	Morrison, <i>Playing in the Dark</i> (29–59)	
Thursday 1/30	Morrison, <i>Playing in the Dark</i> (60–91)	
Tuesday 2/4	Perry, “Excerpt from <i>Vexy Thing</i> ” (Moodle)	
Thursday 2/6	Morrison, <i>A Mercy</i> (3–41)	Close Reading #1
Tuesday 2/11	Morrison, <i>A Mercy</i> (42–83)	
Thursday 2/13	Morrison, <i>A Mercy</i> (84–118)	
Tuesday 2/18	Morrison, <i>A Mercy</i> (119–58)	
Thursday 2/20	Morrison, <i>A Mercy</i> (159–96)	
Thursday 2/27	Sharpe, “The Weather” (Moodle)	
Tuesday 3/3	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (1–33)	
Thursday 3/5	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (34–75)	Abstract and Annotated Bibliography
Tuesday 3/10	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (76–124)	
Thursday 3/12	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (125–58)	
Tuesday 3/17	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (159–95)	
Thursday 3/19	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (199–235)	
Tuesday 3/24	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (236–78)	
Thursday 3/26	Morrison, <i>Beloved</i> (281–324)	
Tuesday 3/31	Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (Moodle)	
Thursday 4/2	Morrison, <i>Sula</i> (3–29)	Close Reading #2
Tuesday 4/7	Morrison, <i>Sula</i> (30–66)	
Thursday 4/9	Morrison, <i>Sula</i> (67–111)	
Tuesday 4/21	Morrison, <i>Sula</i> (112–47)	
Thursday 4/23	Morrison, <i>Sula</i> (148–74)	
Tuesday 4/28	Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” (Moodle)	
Thursday 4/30		Research Essay Presentation
Monday 5/4 by 8 p.m.		Research Essay