

English 475/A01: Special Studies in Ethnic American Literature  
Spring 2012: Fictions of Jewish Identity in North America

TWF: 12:30 PM - 1:20 PM  
Clearihue D126  
CRN 23934

Dr. Lincoln Shlensky  
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### **Course description**

The subject of this course is a transition in Jewish North American culture in the twentieth century from an early identification with, and social commitment to, universalist ideals of political solidarity and a commonly shared culture towards, in the later part of the century, an increasing focus on a particularist or nationalist cultural identity. My working hypothesis is that the 1960s are an intellectual and cultural turning point, for a number of identifiable reasons, including: the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, the 1967 "Six Day" war, the rise of an increasingly polarized American Kulturkampf, and the economic shift among North American Jews from predominantly working-class to middle-class social status. This shift is reflected and, it should become increasingly evident during the term, partly produced within North American literary and film texts and their contexts. These texts, as we shall see, become increasingly circumscribed by the two major discourses of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century: the defense of Israel and the endowing of unique moral authority to Holocaust commemoration. These two concerns become the twin, complementary gravitational centers of North American

Jewish identity and literary culture, and they frame a radically new understanding of Jewish collective identity.

### **Learning objectives and assessment**

At the end of this course, I expect that you will be able to do the following things you were not able to do before enrolling: 1) identify and distinguish a range of authors and texts associated with North American Jewish literary culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; 2) recognize and distinguish some of the signal themes and aesthetic qualities of modern Jewish texts; 3) evaluate some of the ethical implications of thematic and aesthetic choices in texts with a Jewish motif; 4) enjoy participating in discussion and debate of Jewish cultural and political ideals using these texts as examples.

During the semester, you will write four in-class short essays, produce a research essay, and take a final exam. I intend each of these exercises to help you think more deeply about the texts we are reading. I will also use these assignments to assess your progress in developing ways to interpret the assigned texts, to compare them thematically and formally with each other, and to relate them to the course theme.

### **Required texts**

Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934)  
Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)  
Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007)

### **Course pack**

I will make some required materials available online. Please bring printed copies of these materials to class on the due dates.

### **Google Group**

I have created a Google Group to help facilitate communications among us. If you have not already received an invitation,

please go to <http://groups.google.com/group/475-2012> to apply for membership. Important communications from me will be sent to this group, so please be sure to join.

### Course grades

Final course grades will be determined as follows (as a percent of the final grade):

- 1) Four in-class short essays: 40% (if you are absent on one of these days, I will assign a longer make-up essay for you to complete at home within a week)
- 2) Research essay: 35% (instructions and submission guidelines below)
- 3) Final exam: 25%

Grades will be assigned according to the following English Department guidelines:

A+	90-100	B-	65-69
A	85-89	C+	60-64
A-	80-84	C	55-59
B+	75-79	D	50-54
B	70-74	F	0-49

I will give you ample notice of any changes to the syllabus. If you have a disability, please let me know so I can help to accommodate you.

### Research essay assignment

A 2000-word ( $\pm$  250 words; apx. 8 pages) research essay, due Friday, March 9, is intended to help you develop an argument about the themes and forms that North American Jewish fictional works employ to grapple with issues of identity, memory, and cultural politics. The assigned essay topic is particularism and universalism in fiction and/or films about the North American Jewish experience. The essay should be comparative – that is, you should choose at least two works assigned for the course (optionally, you may substitute a text not assigned, so long as you compare it with at least one text that has been assigned). You should refer to at least

two critical academic secondary sources for each text you write about; that is, you will make reference to at least four (and more, if desired) secondary sources. I recommend that you start to plan this essay in early February.

### Essay submission

Please email me your assignments to me at <[shlensky@uvic.ca](mailto:shlensky@uvic.ca)>, with your name and “English 475” in the subject line of your message. The electronic text file you send must be a .docx, .doc, .rtf, or .pages file (*not* .odt or .pdf), and you must include your last name as part of the document’s file name (e.g., “yourname-475-essay1.doc”). I may also request a hard copy of your essay. Be sure to keep a copy of all the written work you submit.

### Late submission

I know that completing your work on time requires self-discipline, and I want to reward students who meet their responsibility to turn in assignments when they are due. To be fair to these students, I will deduct credit for assignments turned in late:  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a letter grade per day. I will grant submission extensions under some circumstances, if you let me know at least a week in advance. Please give me documentation if there is a medical or other emergency situation for which you are requesting an exception to this policy.

### Writing improvement

To help you improve your performance on writing assignments, I may request that you seek tutoring at The Writing Centre, located in the McPherson Library. If I request this of you, please supply documentation of your visit there.

### Course participation and attendance

Your active participation in class discussions represents an important contribution to your

own development of ideas. When you ask a question or answer one, you are contributing to the intellectual growth of all the students in the class. I greatly value the efforts of students who enrich discussion by offering their own views in class. Attendance is a vital part of participation, and so I ask that you attend all classes for this course. I understand, however, that there will be rare occasions when you cannot attend class for personal reasons. More than three absences during the semester will compromise your participation and will affect your final grade. If you must be absent for more than three classes due to medical reasons, please bring documentation of these issues.

### **Learning environment**

The University of Victoria is committed to promoting, providing, and protecting a positive, supportive, and safe working and learning environment for all its members. We, students and faculty members, are all expected to adhere to the UVic human rights policy. Please let me know if something is going on in the classroom that makes you feel personally uncomfortable.

### **Academic integrity**

Academic integrity is a sign of your interest in helping to build and support an intellectual community. Please be aware of and adhere to the UVic academic integrity policy (<http://bit.ly/plisla>). Using someone else's ideas or writing without attribution (plagiarism), cheating, multiple submission, or other forms of academic dishonesty may result in a student's receiving a failing grade for the course and further sanctions by the University. You can easily avoid plagiarism by putting any material taken from another person's writing in quotation marks and by acknowledging the source of any ideas or information you are paraphrasing. I may submit student writing assignments to TurnItIn.com for an originality review.

### **Computers in the classroom**

I have found that computer use during class is often a source of distraction. If you feel you must use a computer in class, please use it only for activity directly related to class discussion, and please refrain from online activities such as checking mail or visiting social sites during class.

### **About me**

It may be helpful for you to know a little about me. I am American-born and did my graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley, in Comparative Literature. My MA focused on the Enlightenment French philosophes, Rousseau and Diderot. My PhD dissertation was a comparison of the writing of two late-modernist/postmodernist writers, Aharon Appelfeld, an Israeli author who writes in Hebrew, and Edouard Glissant, a francophone writer from Martinique. I have since continued to work in both Caribbean and Jewish studies, writing about the francophone and, increasingly, the anglophone Caribbean, as well as about Hebrew literature and Middle Eastern topics. I am currently working on a research project on Glissant, and I am gathering materials for a prospective project on a young Jamaican poet, Millicent Graham. I teach and have research interests in film and semiotic theory, which was the focus of my undergraduate degree at Brown University. Just so you'll know, I have a one-year-old toddler, our first child, who I expect will someday understand why I must spend so much time at the university during his infancy!

## Schedule of assignments

*Please read the assigned material before the due date and be prepared to discuss it.*

Wednesday, January 4

Introduction.

Screening: *The Jazz Singer* (1927 USA 88 mins), dir. Alan Crosland; starring Al Jolson

Friday, January 6

Continue screening *The Jazz Singer*

Tuesday, January 10

Discuss *The Jazz Singer*

Wednesday, January 11

Discuss Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934 441 pp)

Friday, January 13

Discuss Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep*

Tuesday, January 17

### **I. In-class short essay on *Call It Sleep* passage**

Discuss Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep*

Wednesday, January 18

Discuss Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep*

Friday, January 20

Discuss Elaine Kauvar, "Warring Desires: The Future of Jewish-American Literature" (2009 15 pp)

Tuesday, January 24

Discuss Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool" (1944 9 pp.) and "A Crown of Feathers" (10 pp)

Wednesday, January 25

Discuss Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America" (1943 7 pp)

Friday, January 27

Discuss Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" (1969 50 pp)

Tuesday, January 31

### **II. In-class short essay on Ozick passage**

Discuss Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" (1969 50 pp)

Wednesday, February 1

Discuss Bernard Malamud, "The Loan" (1958 7 pp) and "Black is My Favorite Color" (1963 9 pp)

Friday, February 3

Screen *The Pawnbroker* (1964 USA 116 mins), dir. Sidney Lumet

Tuesday, February 7

Screen *The Pawnbroker*

Wednesday, February 8

Discuss *The Pawnbroker*

Friday, February 10

Discuss Mordecai Richler, "The War, Chaverim, and After" in *The Street* (1969 11 pp)

Tuesday, February 14

Reading Break

Wednesday, February 15

Reading Break

Friday, February 17

Reading Break

Tuesday, February 21

### **III. In-class short essay on *Portnoy's Complaint* passage**

Discuss Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)

Wednesday, February 22

Discuss Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)

Friday, February 24

Discuss Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)

Tuesday, February 28

Discuss Grace Paley, "Faith in a Tree" (1974 20 pp)

Wednesday, February 29

Discuss Cynthia Ozick, "The Shawl" (1989 3 pp)

Friday, March 2

Discuss Andrew Furman, *Contemporary American Jewish Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma* (2000), "Introduction" (pp. 1-21)

Tuesday, March 6

Jennifer Glaser, "The Politics of Difference and the Future(s) of American Jewish Literary Studies" (2009 12 pp)

Wednesday, March 7

Screen *Schindler's List* (1993 USA 195 mins), dir. Steven Spielberg

Friday, March 9

**Research essay due**  
Screen *Schindler's List*

Tuesday, March 13

Discuss *Schindler's List*

Wednesday, March 14

Discuss *Schindler's List* (1993)

Friday, March 16

Discuss Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007)

Tuesday, March 20

**IV. In-class short essay on Chabon passage**  
Discuss Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

Wednesday, March 21

Discuss Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

Friday, March 23

Discuss Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*

Tuesday, March 27

Screen *Inglourious Basterds* (2009 USA Quentin Tarantino 153 mins)

Wednesday, March 28

Screen *Inglourious Basterds*

Friday, March 30

Discuss *Inglourious Basterds*

Tuesday, April 3

Discuss Nathan Englander, "What We Talk about when We Talk about Anne Frank" (2011) 10pp

Wednesday, April 4

Discuss Katie Roiphe, "The Naked and the Conflicted" and responses (NY Times Dec. 2009 22pp)