

POGA 6321-001 (Fall, 2001)
632 Faber Hall, Ext. 3955

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Political Philosophy and Literature (The American Political Novel)

This course studies American political thought and development by examining the ways in which American novelists throughout our history understood and responded to the fundamental principles defining and animating American politics: equality, consent, liberty, and individual rights, and the relation between political life and the pursuit of happiness in a liberal regime.

Required Books:

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Scarlet Letter (Penguin)
2. Herman Melville, Moby Dick (Oxford)
3. Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn (Bantam)
4. Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (Bantam)
5. Ernest Hemingway In Our Time (Collier)
6. William Faulkner Go Down Moses (Vintage)
7. Walker Percy, The Moviegoer (Vintage)
8. Saul Bellow, Ravelstein (Viking)

Course Requirements: Choose one book on which to write a paper and turn in your first draft on the day on which we begin discussion of your novel. Provide copies for me and your classmates, who will write a 2-page response/criticism, providing copies for you and me by the next class. Final drafts, taking into account comments (including mine) and perhaps broadening your treatment to include other novel(s) discussed, will be due at the end of the semester. Final paper should be 10-12 pages long.

Assignments:

1. Thursday, Sept. 6, Introduction to course
2. Tuesday, Sept. 11, Scarlet Letter
3. Tuesday, Sept. 18, Scarlet Letter and Moby Dick
(*Papers on Moby Dick due*)
4. Tuesday, Sept. 25, Moby Dick
5. Tuesday, Oct. 2, Huckleberry Finn
(*Papers on Huckleberry Finn due*)
6. Tuesday, Oct. 9, No Class, Monday classes are on Tuesday

7. Tuesday, Oct. 16, Huckleberry Finn and Custom of the Country
(Papers on Custom of the Country due)
8. Tuesday, Oct. 23, Custom of the Country
9. Tuesday, Oct. 30, In Our Time
(Papers on In Our Time due)
10. Tuesday, Nov. 6, In Our Time and Go Down, Moses
(Papers on Go Down, Moses due)
11. Tuesday, Nov. 13, Do Down, Moses
12. Tuesday, Nov. 20, The Moviegoer
(Papers on The Moviegoer due)
13. Tuesday, Nov. 27, The Moviegoer and Ravelstein
(Papers on Ravelstein due)
14. Tuesday, Dec. 4, Ravelstein

Discussion Questions on the Novels

1. **Scarlet Letter**: Is Puritan New England, where “religion and law were almost identical,” as an antithesis of liberal society? What are Hawthorne’s reservations about such a society? Are there any considerations that recommend it? Contrast the Puritan society that punishes Hester with the society that Hawthorne describes in “The Custom House.” Are there any similarities between these so apparently different societies? What does Hawthorne conceive to be the relationship between Puritan New England and his own society more generally? Is the latter rooted in the former, and if so how? What effects do both societies have on art and human creativity? To what extent is art and the artist a theme of the novel?
2. **Moby Dick**: What kind of society does the crew aboard the Pequod represent? Why does Ishmael go to sea? What are Ahab’s purposes? What kind of ship captain or leader is Ahab? How does Ahab represent the dangerous potentials of American individualism? Does Ishmael face similar temptations, and, if so, how does he overcome them?
3. **Huckleberry Finn**: Is Huckleberry Finn an American hero, a democratic hero? What are his democratic virtues? To what extent is the novel a comment on American democracy, and its ability or inability to deal with the injustice of slavery? What do Huck’s adventures on the raft, the various episodes that occur on his trip on the river, reveal about Huck? About the society in which they take place? For example, is the con man (such as the Duke or the Dauphin) a particularly American type? Why? Is this novel a criticism of conventional society and an appeal to nature and natural rights? Can any society live up natural standards? Should we ever “light out for the territory,” when, and how?

4. **Custom of the Country:** What is the “custom of the country” to which the title refers (see p. 131)? Is there any “custom” of the country, or does Wharton shows us different customs followed by different social strata of American society? Does Undine represent “homo sapiens, Americanus”? Is Undine Spragg bound by customs that prevent her from achieving happiness? Is American society, in Wharton’s view, a “custom house” as constricting as Puritan New England? Or is Undine free of customs, “fiercely independent,” as she is described? Is this the cause of her restlessness and dissatisfaction? Compare Undine’s journey through different social and cultural milieu to Huck’s journey on the Mississippi River. Are there ways in which Undine resembles Huck Finn, or is she more like Tom Sawyer? Contrast Claude Washington Popple and Ralph Marvel as artists/poets.

5. **In Our Time:** Is Nick Adams’s confronting his own death a source of his despair about life, or is this confrontation necessary for any understanding of life’s goodness? How does Nick’s experience in the war help to free him from his society, and its past? Does Hemingway present this as a good thing? Why is the river “two-hearted”? Is Twain’s Mississippi “two-hearted”? Do Nick’s feelings of contentment in nature provide any foundation for a commitment to politics, society, family, or even friendship? Is Nick really content in nature?

6. **Go Down, Moses:** Do Ike McCaslin’s annual hunting trips to the wilderness make him a better human being? Are they analogous to Huck Finn’s “lighting out for the territory”? Do Ike’s hunting trips serve the same purposes as Nick Adams’s fishing trips? Why does Ike want to relinquish the land he was to inherit? What is the meaning of ownership or possession? Does his decision to relinquish the land provide him with happiness? What is the relation between slavery and incest? How do the stories in this book present a view of human life that modifies or deepens the Declaration’s understanding of individualism and natural rights? Does the South, as interpreted by Faulkner, have anything to teach to America? Does Faulkner present a view of human progress, or human decline? Does the latest generation, for example, Roth Edmonds, hold any signs of hope? Does Faulkner’s novel?

7. **The Moviegoer:** Is Binx an ordinary man? Is he crazy? Is he trying to recover something by rejecting conventional society? Is his spending time in movie theaters rather than, for example, in nature such as Huck Finn, Ike McCaslin, or Nick Adams, a sign of his escapism and evasion of life, or does his activity find a way to attain what they were looking for? Is Binx a self-conscious Huck? If so, is this an improvement? Is Binx more like Ike or his cousin Cass? Does Binx’s quest and whatever answers he attains isolate him from the society of others, or are other human beings necessary to his search and fulfillment?

8. **Ravelstein:** Why does the novel open in Paris? Why does Europe appeal to an American? Compare Ravelstein’s interest in Europe, especially France, with Undine Spragg’s. Is Ravelstein more of a democratic or an aristocratic type? Is Undine Spragg? Do Ravelstein’s life and preferences resemble those of Binx more than those of typically American heroes like Huck, Ike, or Nick Adams? Yet, what do Ravelstein’s teaching, writing, and befriending Chick indicate about his own quest? What is the role of Judaism in the novel? In Ravelstein’s life? To what extent does Ravelstein’s emphasis on Jerusalem over Athens near the end of his life connect him with Binx (religion), and with Faulkner (history)?