

## LT162 Precarious Life in Literature

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Office Hours: 1-2pm Monday or by appointment

Literature often introduces us to life on the “edge,” to figures or circumstances marked by an extreme fragility or instability, as in the case of the existential heroes of the modern novel such as Dostoevsky’s “man from the underworld” (1864) or Knut Hamsun’s vagrant artist in *Hunger* (1890). Sharing the intensity of these antecedents of modernism, a number of the shorter works of the earlier twentieth century reprise their overarching theme—precarious existence—in a variety of ways. From the migration odyssey of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918), to the racial politics of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1928) and the lonely delirium of Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), the classics of these decades evoke embattled protagonists’ struggle to survive and flourish. In reading these works we explore the ways in which narrative itself can be understood and explained, looking at such features as: openings, the creation of character, the structure of plot and the dynamics of form, as well as the expectations that drive or impede the process of interpretation. Each week’s literary reading is paired with a short theoretical text or guide to literary analysis. Toward the end of our syllabus, we address contemporary instances of preoccupation with “precarious” experience, turning to a novel which has already been hailed as encapsulating the crisis-ridden mood of our times, Christine Smallwood’s *The Life of the Mind* (2021), and to the question of literature, class background, and childhood formation.

### Primary Texts

These texts must be purchased in advance of the course. All other readings will be provided.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956)

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864)

Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (1890)

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1928)

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)

Christine Smallwood, *The Life of the Mind* (2021)

### Weekly Schedule

#### **Week One**

Monday August 29

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864), Part I Sections I-V

Terry Eagleton, “Openings”

Wednesday August 31

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864), Part 1 Sections VI-XI

Terry Eagleton, “Character”

#### **Week Two**

Monday September 5

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864), Part II Sections 1-V  
Terry Eagleton, “Narrative”

Wednesday September 7

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864), Part II Sections 1-V  
Terry Eagleton, “Interpretation”

**Week Three**

Monday September 12

Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (1890), Part I  
James Wood, “Narrating”

Wednesday September 14

Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (1890), Part II  
James Wood, “Detail”

**Week Four**

Monday September 19

Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (1890), Part III  
James Wood, “Character”

Wednesday September 21

Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (1890), Part IV  
James Wood, “A Brief History of Consciousness”

**Week Five**

Monday September 26

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)  
Peter Brooks, “Reading for the Plot”

Wednesday September 28

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)

**Week Six**

Monday October 3 Public Holiday

Wednesday October 5

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)  
Peter Brooks, “Narrative Desire”

**Week Seven**

Monday October 10

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1928)  
bell hooks, “Loving Blackness as Political Resistance”

Wednesday October 12

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1928)

**Mid-term paper due Friday October 14 at 10pm**

**Week Eight**

Monday October 17

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)

Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman"

Wednesday October 19

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)

**Fall Break: October Week of October 24**

**Week Nine**

Monday October 31

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)

from Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*

Wednesday November 2

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)

**Week Ten**

Monday November 7

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

Wayne C. Booth, "Types of Narration"

Wednesday November 9

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

**Week Eleven**

Monday November 14

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

Tzvetan Todorov, "Structural Analysis of Narrative"

Wednesday November 16

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

**Week Twelve**

Monday November 21

Christine Smallwood, *The Life of the Mind* (2021)

Judith Butler, "Precarious Life"

Wednesday November 23

Christine Smallwood, *The Life of the Mind* (2021)

**Week Thirteen**

Monday November 28

Christine Smallwood, *The Life of the Mind* (2021)  
Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device"

Wednesday November 30  
Christine Smallwood, *The Life of the Mind* (2021)

### **Week Fourteen**

Monday December 5  
from Kit de Waal ed. *Common People* (2019)

Wednesday December 7  
from Kit de Waal, *Without Warning and Only Sometimes: Scenes from an Unpredictable Childhood* (2022)

### **Final Paper Due Wednesday, December 14 at 10pm**

#### Requirements

Assignments are two papers, each of 3500, due at mid (Friday 14 October) and end (Friday 14 December) of term, short responses to a question circulated at the beginning of each class, and two short in-class presentations (10 minutes).

#### Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

#### Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

**SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPRING 2022:** Students must refrain from in-person attendance if they are feeling ill. In such cases, classwork can be completed by means of a written assignment.

#### Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to

make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Participation: 30%, First Paper: 20%, In-class questions: 10% Presentations: 10%, Final Paper: 30%