ENG 5010-001: Studies in Twentieth-Century American Literature: Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo

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Studies in Twentieth-Century American Literature:
Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo
English 5010—Fall, 2003

Instructor: Tim Engles
Phone: 581-6316 (it’s usually easier to reach me by e-mail: cftde@eiu.edu)
Office hours (Coleman 3831): Tues/Thurs, 11:00 – 12:00 and by appointment

Required Texts:

Toni Morrison: The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Beloved,
and Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination

Don DeLillo: Running Dog, White Noise, Libra, and Mao II

Course Description:

Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo are two of this country’s most award-winning, widely
read, and challenging contemporary novelists. Each garners tremendous praise for
stunningly original stylistic techniques and for insightful thematic content, yet their styles
and themes differ dramatically. We will put these novelists in conversation with each
other in order to consider both sides of several divides that they and their works
represent. Where do their differing perspectives meet, and where do they diverge? We
will also consider more subtle issues. If, for instance, Morrison is often labeled and
examined as an “African American” “female” novelist, why has there been so little
consideration of DeLillo as a “white” (or “European American”) “male” novelist?

Both artists tackle a myriad of themes, from the ways in which our race, gender, and class
status inform our perceptions of the world around us, to representations of fear, anger,
loneliness, and desire in various periods of American history. As many readers have
discovered, these authors’ works may inspire you, shock you, and challenge your
previously held conceptions regarding literary and social traditions, and even life in
general. We will read some of the most accomplished novels of these two prolific writers,
as well as useful secondary sources and commentary, and students will deliver oral
presentations and lead class discussion based on these secondary sources.

Students should emerge from this course with a solid understanding of themes and
techniques in key works by two giants of contemporary American literature. The course
will be conducted as an inquiring conversation on these matters, with your daily
participation central to our work. Because the success of our conversations will depend so
heavily on everyone’s participation, it is crucial that you keep up with the reading, and
that you do so with careful attention. Also, the rule regarding attendance is: be here. If
you have more than two absences this semester, your course grade will drop a full letter
grade for each absence beyond two.
Course Requirements:

1. Written response and oral presentation: Each student will choose one day on the syllabus. For this class session, you will write a two-page, single-spaced response/review of a related secondary source (usually chosen by the instructor). This written response will be duplicated and handed out to the rest of us on the day of your presentation, and it will function as your guidelines for summarizing the secondary source’s main or most useful points, and for leading class discussion for a significant portion of the session. Suggestions: focus attention on a problem or set of problems, and the apparent solution(s) offered in the secondary source; make connections, within the text, and/or with others; zero in on a significant or surprising aspect of the secondary source and/or the novel that we’re reading at the time. The written response should end with at least two questions whose answers could provide, as you see it, keys to understanding the text under discussion. Don’t plan on talking by yourself for long—your primary goal is to stimulate discussion. After the discussion of the text, you will then revise your response (into something no more than three pages, single spaced) on the basis of your reaction to how class discussion changed (or verified) your response to the secondary source, and describing also how well you think your presentation and the class discussion went. This revision will be due one week after the in-class presentation. (15%)

2. 5-7 page critical essay: This paper will focus on any one of our syllabus readings from 9/4 to 10/23 (in the case of Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, you could focus on it alone, or use it to help interpret another work on the syllabus from those dates). Focus your close interpretation of the work in any way you chose, taking your reader beyond what most readers are likely to realize when first reading the text. You are welcome to incorporate points and insights raised during class discussion, but if you do so, do your best to add further insight. Like the longer essay, this one will follow traditional conventions for academic essays (e.g., unity, coherence, proper formatting and MLA-style documentation, and so on). You are welcome to use any secondary sources, but they are not required for this paper. Because this essay is due near midterm, you can think of it as a kind of take-home midterm, assigned very early. (20%)

3. research essay: This paper will focus on one of the other literary texts on our syllabus (or another of your choosing by Morrison or DeLillo, with my prior approval). The topic is open, as long as it relates directly to some of our readings and discussions, and a 250-400 word proposal will be required beforehand. The essay must reflect your close attention to and understanding of insights and interpretive concepts that will have arisen throughout the semester, and of course, it must be an entirely new essay (not something you wrote for a previous course). Regarding length, you have two options: you can write the final paper as a conference presentation, in which case it must be ten pages long (and no longer) and must also be presented at the English Department’s graduate/undergraduate conference on Saturday, December 13. Students who chose this option must submit a proposal and abstract to the conference organizer (dates TBA), and, perhaps, form panels with other students working on similar topics. Students may also
decide to write final papers as scholarly articles, in which case the length requirement is fifteen pages. (25%)

A bit more about essays: All writing assignments are due at the beginning of the class period on the day they are due, whether the student is in class or not. Late-paper penalty: fifteen points each day late. IMPORTANT: When each of the two essays is turned in, it MUST be accompanied in a manila folder by all notes and drafts written towards it, with the final copy of the essay on top of this material. I will use these materials to gauge and offer comments on your writing process. I WILL NOT GRADE an essay that is not accompanied by material that clearly demonstrates several earlier stages leading up to the final draft, so be sure to save all such materials (if you do most or all of your writing on a computer, print out occasional drafts to include with your final copy). Essays unaccompanied by materials that clearly demonstrate several stages of development toward the final copy will receive an automatic ZERO.

4. Final exam (25%)

5. Active, thoughtful class participation and good reading-quiz grades: I will not deliver lectures in this class; because we are a relatively small group, we must all contribute to a positive, challenging, interesting learning environment. Doing so will call for your careful concentration before class on each assigned reading, and your willingness to share your thoughts, questions, and feelings with others about what you read and hear. Finally, because your careful preparation for class is so crucial, I will begin each session with a reading quiz. I know that because you are graduate students I can trust most of you to keep up with our heavy reading load, but past experience has demonstrated that reading quizzes are the best way to ensure that everyone is prepared to participate in class discussion. Be aware that most of these novels are intense, concentrated, demanding readings, and schedule your study time accordingly. (15%)

Other Matters:

E-mail: Enrollment in this class requires an e-mail account, and I strongly recommend that you use your free EIU account or another commercial account (Yahoo, Hotmail, and other free accounts are too limited for professional purposes). E-mail is the quickest, easiest way to reach me if I am not in my office; I welcome any and all questions and comments.

Academic honesty: I expect you to act honestly and do your own work in this class, and so does Eastern Illinois University. It is your responsibility (once again) to familiarize yourself with the English Department’s policy on plagiarism: “Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—‘The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one’s original work’ (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.”
ENGLISH 5010: DAILY SCHEDULE
(this schedule may be subject to change)

Note: This schedule may change; any changes will be announced in advance. Reading assignments are to be completed by the dates on which they appear on the syllabus. BE SURE to bring the appropriate handout or book to class if a reading assignment is listed for that day.

R AUG 28 Introduction to course, each other, etc.
    Hillary Hurd, "At Home with Toni Morrison"
    Nick Gillespie, "Don DeLillo’s Bum Luck"

R SEP 4 Morrison, Playing in the Dark
    (before class: English graduate student orientation and reception, CH 3732, 5:30)

R SEP 11 The Bluest Eye

R SEP 18 Running Dog

R SEP 25 Sula

R OCT 2 White Noise

R OCT 9 White Noise

R OCT 16 Song of Solomon

R OCT 23 Song of Solomon
    Paper 1 due at the beginning of class

R OCT 30 Libra

R NOV 6 Libra

R NOV 13 Beloved
    Proposal for final paper due at the beginning of class (if you prefer, it’s okay to send this proposal by e-mail to cftde@eiu.edu)

R NOV 20 Beloved

M NOV 24 – F NOV 28 Thanksgiving Recess

R DEC 4 Mao II
R DEC 11 Mao II
    Final day of class; final papers due
(F DEC 12 Last Day of classes)
M DEC 15 – F DEC 19 final exams; our final exam period is Thursday, 12/18, 7:30-9:30