

Reading for Fun: The Aesthetics of Free Time in Mid-Century America

This seminar explores the literature and social theory of postwar leisure, what we will call the aesthetics of free time. In 1940's and 50's America, leisure was transforming in dramatic ways. Working hours had been decreasing for decades, and new patterns of free time such as weekends, vacations and retirement were changing the organization of daily life. Heavily invested with desire, leisure time was also a topic of continual struggle. Many commentators believed that a 2-hour workday was within reach, and the unequal distribution of free time to women and black Americans was an important impetus for civil rights agitation. All of these changes left marks in both the subject matter and form of literary production. Vacations, road trips, sports, trips to the pool, and even mere relaxation gave new models for plotting and narration. Novelists also registered a change in the subjective experience of time through formal and grammatical techniques. We will read works by Ernest Hemingway, Jane Bowles, Patricia Highsmith, Ralph Ellison, and Jack Kerouac through the context of midcentury discourses of leisure, consumption, work and pleasure in order to explore how the imagine free time.

A central focus of this course will be to provide students with grounding in historical and archival methods and the skills to integrate these methods with close reading and literary analysis. The final project, a research paper, asks students to perform a reading of one literary text on the syllabus through the lens of historical discourses of free time. Students are also responsible for conducting original archival research on one object that they will present to the class.

Learning Objectives

- Become familiar with mid-century discourses of leisure, consumption, work, and pleasure, and be able to describe their historical transformation.
- Draw connections between the form or content of a literary work, and the context of its reception through a sociological category, such as leisure.
- Extrapolate ideologies from changes in literary categories (plot structure, character type, narration, genre)
- Gain experience performing archival research.
- Practice summarizing and explaining critical theory to colleagues.

Texts

Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)
Jane Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies* (1943)
Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)
Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1937-1954)
Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957)

Assignments:

Precis: Over the semester, students will choose four of the secondary readings and write a synopsis of that article or chapter. Each precis should be between 1 and 2 pages, single spaced, and should summarize the main thesis and argument of the work. Students should devote a significant portion of the work to clear and fair summary, before offering any commentary of their own, or drawing connections to other works from the course.

Archival Presentation: In consultation with the instructor, students will choose an archive material that relates to the class. Preference will be given to archives housed in Special Collections. Students will gain enough familiarity with the archive to characterize its holdings, and generate some claims about the discourses of leisure that are active in it. They will then choose an object from the archive and lead a 20-30 minute presentation and discussion about that object. Suggestions include: trade journals for sports, playground, or leisure sectors; government recreation planning; the personal archive of a significant figure; specific gallery or museum exhibitions; industrial design and architectural archives; ephemera of activist organizations or institutions.

Research Paper: In consultation with the instructor, students will write a 15-20 page research paper at the end of this class. The paper should make a connection between a literary text—either one from the class, or from the period more broadly—and should make an argument about the effect of attending to free time therein. The paper may engage critical readings from the course, and from the student’s archival project, but it should also respond to the current literary criticism on the text or texts.

Course Schedule

Part 1: Something New Under the Sun

Week 1: Leisure as an Aesthetic and Historical Category

EP Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism”

William Gleason, “Introduction,” from *The Leisure Ethic: Work and Play in American Literature*

Joseph Pieper, in *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*

HD, “Mira Mare”

Week 2: The New Leisure

Susan Currell, “The Problem and the Promise,” from *The March of Spare Time*

Warren Susman, “Culture and Civilization: The Nineteen Twenties”

Bernard Mergen, “From Play to Recreation: The Acceptance of Leisure in the United States, 1880-1930”

Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

Week 3: The End(s) of Work

Denney, Reuel, David Riesman. "Leisure and Human Values in Industrial Civilization."
Creating an Industrial Civilization
Margaret Mead, "The Pattern of Leisure in Contemporary American Culture"
David Riesman, "Some Observations on Changes in Leisure Attitudes,"
Ernest Hemingway, Continued.

Week 4: Fun Morality

Martha Wolfenstein, "The Emergence of Fun Morality"
Herbert Marcuse, "The New Forms of Control" in *One-Dimensional Man*
Theodore Adorno, "Free Time"
Erica Weitzman, "No Fun: Aporias of Pleasure in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory"
Jane Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies*

Week 5: Hobbies, Vacations, Retirement

Eric Larrabee, "What's Happening to Hobbies?" in *Mass Leisure*
Susan G. Davis, "Time Out: Leisure and Tourism," in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*
L.C. Michelon, "The New Leisure Class"
JD Salinger, "A Perfect Day for a Bananafish"

Part 2: The Use and Abuse of Leisure for Life

Week 6: Endless Consumption

Editors of Fortune, "30 Billion for Fun," in *Mass Leisure*
Louis Hyman "Postwar Consumer Credit: Borrowing for Prosperity" in *Debtor Nation*
Lizbeth Cohen, "Reconversion: The Emergence of the Consumer's Republic" in *A Consumer's Republic*
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

Week 7: Sex as a Recreation

Nelson Foote, "Sex as Play."
Paul Rutheford, "The Early *Playboy*"
Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*
Screening: White Christmas

Week 8: Gender and Free Time

Redstockings, "Consumerism and Women"
Claire Langhammer, "Towards a Feminist Framework for the History of Women's Leisure, 1920-1960"
Bill Osgerby, "A Pedigree of the Consuming Male: Masculinity, Consumption and the American 'leisure Class'"
Highsmith, *continued*

Week 9: Race and Leisure

Victoria W. Wolcott, "Riotland: Race and the Decline of Urban Amusements," in *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*

William Gleason, "Public Space, Private Lives" in *The Leisure Ethic*

Victor Green, *The Negro Motorist's Green Book*

Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Week 10: Working Hours and the Leisure Society

Juliet Schor. "A Life at Hard Labor" in *The Overworked American*

Benjamin Hunnicutt, "The End of Shorter Hours" in *Free Time*

Chris Rojek, "The Leisure Society Thesis and its Consequences" in *The Labor of Leisure*

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Part 3: American Leisure Aesthetics**Week 11: The Pursuit of Happiness**

Russell Davenport, "A LIFE Roundtable on the Pursuit of Happiness,"

Howard Mumford Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness*

Truman, Harry. "Letter to the National Recreation Congress."

Tom Cook, "Democracy, Leisure, and Communism"

Kerouac, continued

Week 12: An Education into Leisure

Miriam Forman-Brunell. "Suburban Parents and Sitters Unions" in *Babysitter: An American History*

Mortimer Adler, "Labor, Leisure, and Liberal Education,"

David Snyder, "Playroom" in *Cold War Hothouses*

Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home*

Week 13: Middle Brow Aesthetics

Dwight MacDonald, "Masscult and Midcult"

Tom Perrin, "The Second-Greatest Stories Ever Told"

Ellison, continued

Week 14: The Legacy of Leisure

Kathi Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work"

John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion"

Reuel Denney, "The Leisure Society"

Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy"