Novel Options: Woolf, Morrison, Ondaatje

For your next work for literary study in this course, you can choose Mrs. Dalloway, Sula, or Anil’s Ghost. All three are complex narratives with non-linear structures and experimental writing styles, and all three use shifting perspectives (sometimes with stream-of-consciousness or other modernist techniques), and all three are written in complex, fluid, beautiful prose (although the prose style varies between the three highly individualistic authors).

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf (published 1925)

From Amazon.com: “Direct and vivid in her account of Clarissa Dalloway’s preparations for a party, Virginia Woolf explores the hidden springs of thought and action in one day of a woman’s life...In Mrs. Dalloway, the novel on which the movie The Hours was based, Virginia Woolf details Clarissa Dalloway’s preparations for a party of which she is to be hostess, exploring the hidden springs of thought and action in one day of a woman’s life. The novel ‘contains some of the most beautiful, complex, incisive and idiosyncratic sentences ever written in English, and that alone would be reason enough to read it. It is one of the most moving, revolutionary artworks of the twentieth century’ (Michael Cunningham).”

Themes: roles of women; sanity and insanity; war/PTSD; modernization; love/marriage

Setting: London in the 1920s

Some Significant Characters: Clarissa Dalloway, a middle-aged, wealthy London hostess; her husband Richard, a government official; her girlhood best friend Sally; Peter Walsh, who was desperately in love with Clarissa in their youth; Septimus Warren Smith, a World War I veteran with severe PTSD; Lucrezia Smith, Septimus’s young Italian wife.

About Virginia Woolf (1882–1941): One of the most influential English-language writers of the first half of the twentieth century, Woolf is recognized for her revolutionary writing style as well as for her contributions to feminist literature. She is best known for her complex, rich, experimental novels and for her long essay “A Room of One’s Own,” which made the case for women’s access to education and called for support and encouragement of women in fields traditionally dominated by men. Woolf, who experienced periods of severe mental illness and committed suicide in 1941, lived in a companionate marriage with publisher Leonard Woolf and shared an important romantic relationship with poet and influential garden writer Vita Sackville-West. Woolf was a member of the influential “Bloomsbury Group” of writers, artists, and thinkers.
“Sula” by Toni Morrison (published 1973)

From Amazon.com: “Two girls who grow up to become women. Two friends who become something worse than enemies. In this brilliantly imagined novel, Toni Morrison tells the story of Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who meet as children in the small town of Medallion, Ohio. Their devotion is fierce enough to withstand bullies and the burden of a dreadful secret. It endures even after Nel has grown up to be a pillar of the black community and Sula has become a pariah. But their friendship ends in an unforgivable betrayal—or does it end? Terrifying, comic, ribald and tragic, Sula is a work that overflows with life.”

Themes: African American experience; roles of women; sanity and insanity; trauma and violence

Setting: Small-town Ohio in the first half of the twentieth century

Some Significant Characters: Nel, a young African-American girl being raised by her strict grandmother; Sula Peace, her best friend, with whom she develops an intense friendship and whose beauty and strong personality make her a notable figure in their town; Eva, the one-legged matriarch of the Peace family; Hannah, Sula’s infamous but kind and generous mother; Shadrack, a World War I veteran with PTSD and the founder of “National Suicide Day”; children and family members of the Peace household.

Trigger Warning: Although all three of the novels I am offering as options contain some violent and disturbing passages, Sula has some particularly distressing and harsh scenes, including a violent death by fire.

About Toni Morrison (1931–): Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison is arguably the most significant living fiction writer in America today. Her novels are known for their exquisite prose, imaginative plots, complex characters—and for their powerful exploration of the legacy of slavery. Morrison grew up in a working-class African-American family in Ohio. She studied at historically black Howard University, then earned a master’s at Cornell. Her master’s thesis was on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf (and Sula contains many clear references to Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway). She taught English and worked in publishing before beginning serious work as a writer. Throughout the ’70s and ’80s she strengthened her craft, receiving increasing recognition and numerous prestigious literary awards, culminating in the Novel Prize in 1993. Morrison retired from Princeton in 2006 but remains a significant figure in U.S. intellectual life.

From Amazon.com: “With his first novel since the internationally acclaimed The English Patient, Booker Prize—winning author Michael Ondaatje gives us a work displaying all the richness of imagery and language and the piercing emotional truth that we have come to know as the hallmarks of his writing... Anil’s Ghost transports us to Sri Lanka, a country steeped in centuries of tradition, now forced into the late twentieth century by the ravages of civil war. Into this maelstrom steps Anil Tissera, a young woman born in Sri Lanka, educated in England and America, who returns to her homeland as a forensic anthropologist sent by an international human rights group to discover the source of the organized campaigns of murder engulfing the island. What follows is a story about love, about family, about identity, about the unknown enemy, about the quest to unlock the hidden past—a story propelled by a riveting mystery. Unfolding against the deeply evocative background of Sri Lanka’s landscape and ancient civilization, Anil’s Ghost is a literary spellbinder—Michael Ondaatje’s most powerful novel yet.”

Themes: war; truth & reconciliation; quest for truth; postcolonialism

Setting: mostly Sri Lanka in the 1990s (with some flashbacks to the UK, US, and other places)

Some Significant Characters: Anil Tissera, a female forensic anthropologist who works for the UN to try to identify victims of genocide (Anil was born in Sri Lanka and has just returned to that country a number of years after leaving to attend college in the UK); “Sailor,” a skeleton whose identity Anil is trying to find; Sarath Diyasena, a Sri Lankan archaeologist who is assigned to work with Anil; Gaminini, a doctor working in hospitals with victims of the raging civil war; Ananda, an artist and sculptor reduced to alcoholism and mining work by war trauma; in flashbacks, there are also characters from Anil’s life in the UK and the US.

Put a check next to the book you would like to read:

_____ Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf
_____ Sula by Toni Morrison
_____ Anil’s Ghost by Michael Ondaatje