



# SPELLBOUND

## Beginnings and Endings in American Literature and Film

**Room and time:** Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor) · Wednesday, 11:45-13:15

**First session:** October 12, 2016

**Course number:** 512.312

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Office hours:** Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. · **Email:** [stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at](mailto:stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at)

**Description:** There is hardly a motif in the western cultural imagination that has fascinated audiences as much as that of the beginning. "A magic dwells in each beginning," German author Hermann Hesse once quipped. Formally, the beginning is one of the formative elements of each literary (and cinematic) work. "The first sentence, often the first word," literary theorist Norbert Miller argues, "is a preliminary decision made by an author regarding the mode, style, and genre of the narrative." Beginnings often encapsulate the gist of the whole story before it actually starts; they foreshadow the coming events and prepare the reader for the general tone and framing of the work. Likewise, endings have a strong effect upon the way we perceive a particular work. Using cues from reception aesthetics and phenomenology as well as from structuralist theory, this course will look at the important function that beginnings and endings assume in American literature and film history. How do these important structural elements contribute to the dramaturgy and reception of literary and cinematic texts? Which function(s) do they have in the individual work? Examples will include the novels *Moby-Dick* (H. Melville, 1851), *A Farewell to Arms* (E. Hemingway, 1929), and *Paradise* (T. Morrison, 1997) as well as key works of American cinema such as *Citizen Kane* (dir. O. Welles, 1940), *Casablanca* (dir. M. Curtiz, 1942), and *Looper* (dir. R. Johnson, 2012).

**Teaching and Learning Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by 'experts' who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a fact file on a handout). Experts upload their questions 6 days in advance!

**Materials:** All printed texts will be made available on Moodle. Please watch the films and TV episodes in our **Media Archive!**

**Aims:** The course will examine the function(s) and aesthetics of beginnings and endings in key works of American literature and film.

**Assessment:** **A.) regular attendance** (*no more than 2 absences!*) and **active in-class participation**, as well as eight (!) substantial entries in the **discussion forum** (1/3); **B.) presentation** as part of an expert session plus **3-page handout** and **online questions** (1/3); **C.) research proposal** (2 pages) and **final paper** (10 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

**Deadline for Final Papers** (including declaration of honesty): Wednesday, February 8, 2017. *There is no (!) extension of this deadline.* Please **indicate** on a **post-it** attached to your final paper if you would like to get **detailed feedback!**

## Syllabus

- 12 October**      **Beginnings and Endings in Literature and Film – An Introduction**  
Basic texts:  
Edward Said, *Beginnings* (1975), preface & chapter 1 [Text on Moodle]  
Norbert Miller, "Einleitung," *Der empfindsame Erzähler* (1968), on novel beginnings. [Text on Moodle]  
Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), chapter 1. [Text on Moodle]
- 19 October**      **"Let Me Start Again..." – Comedic Beginnings in Film**  
Main examples (watching required):  
*Annie Hall* (1977, dir. Woody Allen). [Link on Moodle]  
*Manhattan* (1979, dir. Woody Allen). [Link on Moodle]  
Keywords: Addressing the Audience; Comic Relief; Mel Brooks; Marx Brothers.
- 09 November**    **Shocking Beginnings – Visceral Involvement in Action & Horror Cinema**  
Main examples (watching required):  
*Jaws* (1975, dir. Steven Spielberg). [Link on Moodle]  
*Saw* (2004, dir. James Wan). [Link on Moodle]  
*Source Code* (2011, dir. Duncan Jones). [Link on Moodle]  
Keywords: Fears; Immersion; In Medias Res; Shock; Surprise; Visceral Involvement.
- 16 November**    **Initiation and Growing Up – Framing Adulthood in Novels of Adolescence**  
Main texts (reading required):

Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1886). [Text on Moodle]  
J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). [Text on Moodle]  
Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). [Text on Moodle]  
Keywords: Direct Address; Initiation; Realism; Vernacular; Young Adult Fiction.

**23 November Autobiographical Approaches –Trauma and Survival in American Life Writing**

Main texts (reading required):

Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1902). [Text on Moodle]  
Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). [Text on Moodle]  
Paul Monette, *Becoming a Man* (1992). [Text on Moodle]

Keywords: Difference; Family; Otherness; Survival; Trauma.

**30 November Historical Framings – Past, Present, and Future in Toni Morrison’s ‘Trilogy’**

Main texts (reading required):

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987). [Text on Moodle]  
---, *Jazz* (1992). [Text on Moodle]  
---, *Paradise* (1997). [Text on Moodle]

Keywords: Ethnicity; Historiographic Metafiction; Temporality; Traumatization.



**Deadline Research Proposal TODAY, November 30!**

**07 December Raising Consciousness – Protest and Visibility in Narratives of Resistance**

Main texts (reading required):

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906). [Text on Moodle]  
James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). [Text on Moodle]  
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952). [Text on Moodle]

Keywords: African American; Injustice; Resistance Writing; Socialism; Visibility.

**14 December Romantically Involved – Gender and Story Framing**

Main examples (reading required):

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899). [Text on Moodle]  
Harold Bell Wright, *When a Man’s a Man* (1916). [Text on Moodle]  
Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). [Text on Moodle]

Keywords: Closure; Femininity; Masculinity; Naturalism; Nature; Romanticization; Tragedy.

**11 January Breaking the Fourth Wall – Modernist and Minimalist Approaches**

Main example (reading/watching required):

Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (1938). [Text on Moodle]  
*Dogville* (2003, dir. Lars von Trier). [Link on Moodle]

Keywords: Alienation Effect; Fourth Wall; Minimalism; Props; Secondary Text; Staging.

**18 January Postmodernist Framings – Shifting Angles in Time and Point of View**

Main texts (reading required):

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). [Text on Moodle]  
Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005). [Text on Moodle]  
John Updike, *Terrorist* (2006). [Text on Moodle]

Keywords: Authenticity; Author; Intertextuality; Metafiction; Point of View; Temporality; 9/11.

**25 January Mind-Tricking Narratives – Shocking, Confrontational & Surprise Endings**

Main examples (watching required):

*Psycho* (1960, dir. Alfred Hitchcock). [Link on Moodle]  
*Jacob’s Ladder* (1990, dir. Adrian Lyne). [Link on Moodle]  
*Fight Club* (1999, dir. David Fincher). [Link on Moodle]

Keywords: Death; Mind-Tricking Fiction; Plot Twists; Psychology; Reality; *The Sixth Sense* (film).

**01 February To Be Continued... – Open Endings in Narrative Cinema**

Main examples (watching required):

*Once Upon a Time in America* (1984, dir. Sergio Leone). [Link on Moodle]  
*Magnolia* (1999, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson). [Link on Moodle]  
*Inception* (2010, dir. Christopher Nolan). [Link on Moodle]

Keywords: Ambiguity; Camera Movement; Close-up; Real/Imaginary; Time Leaps.



**FINAL PAPER DUE FEBRUARY 8 (THERE IS NO EXTENSION OF THIS DEADLINE!)**