Modern American Short Story

Note: This is a course in short stories in any genre, including classic, romance, SF, detective fiction. Think about stories you'd like to discuss.

Short stories bring you to the heart of narrative in a way that no other kind of literature does. Novels, plays, and movies have time to do world-building, and therefore they can give you a sense of what's unique about their world. But short stories have to be far more direct, have to interact with readers in their own world. Even SF or fantasy stories or fairy tales work because we can very quickly orient ourselves to the worlds they're describing.

What happens in the story is usually a single and very intense thing, something that appears against the background of this world we already know. So the narrative pivot of a story becomes central and powerful in a unique way.

Because this is a summer course, we have a lot of flexibility in what stories we choose. In the past we've covered writers as different as Gabriel Garcia Marquez (since “American” can also mean South American), Flannery O'Connor, Alice Munro, Richard Wright, Dashiell Hammett, and Philip K. Dick. The point is to look at how very short fiction works – partly for its own sake, since these stories can be so good, and partly because this will give you insight into how fiction works.

On the first day of class I'll invite you to propose one or two stories that you want to do: either stories you know and want to discuss in class, or stories that you've always wanted to read and will have a chance to read now.

Grading will be based on two 1000-1,500 word papers. You may write a short story of your own for extra credit. Class participation will always help but is not mandatory.