This course charts the issues, evolution, and achievements of the short story form as practiced by African American writers. Well known to many are the names and works of major African American writers, such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Paule Marshall. Perhaps less well known is the contribution to the short story form by such authors and those who worked exclusively in the form during the past century.

The course will be organized around three themes: region, history, and the heroic. The significance of social and cultural settings and their diverse demonstrations will be examined. Those settings vary from the rural South to the urban North. Compelling within the analysis of setting will be stories which treat generations transitioning between contrasting settings, such as in the works of Rudolph Fisher and Toni Cade Bambara. The weight of the past (social, familial, individual) upon current conflicts is consistently dramatized in the stories. More specifically, what impact did the Civil Rights movement have upon the stability of families, churches, schools, etc.? How did this social and political movement help to shape notions of the heroic in individuals and their communities? Within and during social movements how were values taught to the young and how was a community sustained?

Short story writers confront these individual and social questions in a variety of approaches and tones, ranging from the straightforward realistic to the wildly comic. Their voicings are as diverse as those of the most effective writing and even music during the past century. The majority of readings will be drawn from works published during the 1955-2000 period and most will be set in North America, except for an important cluster set in the Caribbean (Edwidge Danticat’s and Paule Marshall’s).