

English 223
Sign, Self, and Text
in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction

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This course is a study of the nature of literature and the uses of literature in an important period in American cultural history. Although we will focus on fiction from the period, we will also examine poetry and non-fiction prose in order to improve our understanding of the literary context in which fiction was written and read. Such means will help us formulate a theory of what literature was in the 19th century, which will allow us to consider the purposes it served *then* as well as the uses it may have for us *now*. An influential writer of the era asserted that literature can enable us to see more clearly who we are, where we are, and what we are doing here. This assertion suggests a preoccupation shared by many of the period's writers: the relations between meaning and being, significance and selfhood. Because of this preoccupation, I have organized the course thematically. We will begin our inquiry by looking at signs and signification, proceed to an examination of the peculiar sign "self" and the notions of being it represents, and then turn to texts that bring these matters together in different ways. As you might guess, a study of this sort requires that students reflect on their own beliefs and ideas regarding meaning and being. Students are in no small part responsible for making the course *meaningful*. To do so, everyone must participate responsibly in the following ways:

Reading—all students are expected to complete all assigned readings and to do so through active examination of, explication of, and extrapolation from the materials.

Attendance—all students are expected to attend all class meetings and to arrive at the proper time, prepared to play an active role in discussion.

Protocols (5)—to be handed in Tuesdays at the beginning of class, these writings must respond to the reading, must be typed, must not exceed one page, and must be posted at the course site.

Quizzes (5)—short-answer tests of 10 or fewer questions that are to serve as a reminder to read closely and attend to details.

∞ Midterm: a five page essay on a topic to be announced, due 4 October. [N.B.: an optional second essay (five pages, due 1

November) can be submitted by those wishing to further investigate issues raised in the readings, develop argumentative writing skills, and/or improve upon the midterm grade.]

∞ Final Paper: a seven page essay on a topic to be chosen by student that explores concerns emerging from the second-half of the course, due 18 December.

Grade distribution: participation (attending all meetings, completing all readings, taking part in all discussions) = 25%, quiz and protocol scores = 25%, midterm essay = 25%, final essay = 25%.

Course Materials

Longer works are available at the bookstore:

Edgar Allan Poe, Selected Tales, Oxford
Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, Signet
Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Penguin
Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Original Edition), Penguin
Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, Penguin
Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson (Critical Edition), Norton

The following works contain required shorter readings and have been placed on reserve:

Margaret Fuller Ossoli, The Writings of Margaret Fuller,
814.3 Os7.1941
Henry David Thoreau, Walden, PS3048.A255 1998
" " " , Excursions, 818.3T39E
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays: 1st & 2nd Series, 814.3 Em34ES.5
Rebecca Harding Davis, Life in the Iron-Mills, 813.4D2971L
Fanny Fern, Ruth Hall & Other Writings, PS2513.P9 A6 1986
William Apess, A Son of the Forest, E99.P53 A3 1997
Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems, PS1541.A1 1960B
Paul Lauter, et al. (eds.), The Heath Anthology of American Literature Volumes 1 & 2, PS507.H35 1990

You can also find many of these writings on the web.

"Reading," from Thoreau's Walden:
<http://eserver.org/thoreau/walden03.html>

Emerson's "Circles":
http://www.rwe.org/works/Essays-1st_Series_10_Circles.htm

Thoreau's "Walking":
<http://eserver.org/thoreau/walking.html>

Some of Dickinson's poems:
<http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?tpl=browse.tpl&c=amverse>

Davis's "Life in the Iron-Mills":
<http://www.samford.edu/schools/artsci/english/lassester/editiron.htm>

Spofford's "'Circumstance'":
<http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/gcarr/19cUSWW/HPS/C.html>

Jewett's "A White Heron":
<http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/gcarr/19cUSWW/SOJ/AWH.html>

Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother'":
http://www.geocities.com/short_stories_page/freemanrevolt.html

Calendar

3 Sept. Introduction: American Literature and Its Uses

5 Sept. "A Short Essay on Critics" & "American Literature; Its Position in the Present Time, & Prospects for the Future," Fuller (reserve); "Reading," from Walden, Thoreau (reserve); "MS. Found in a Bottle," Poe

10 Sept. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart," Poe

12 Sept. "The Purloined Letter," Poe

17 Sept. The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne

19 Sept. The Scarlet Letter

24 Sept. The Scarlet Letter

26 Sept. The Scarlet Letter

1 Oct. "The Imp of the Perverse," Poe; "Circles," Emerson (reserve);
"Walking," Thoreau (reserve)
3 Oct. "Hints to Young Wives" & "Independence," Fern (reserve); "An
Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man," Apess (reserve)
4 Oct. *MIDTERM ESSAY DUE*

8 Oct. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Douglass
10 Oct. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

15 Oct. Selected Poems, Dickinson
17 Oct. Selected Poems; critical response by Susan Howe

BREAK

29 Oct. Leaves of Grass, Whitman
31 Oct. Leaves of Grass; critical response by Nick Junkerman
1 Nov. *OPTIONAL ESSAY DUE*

5 Nov. Moby-Dick, Melville
7 Nov. Moby-Dick

12 Nov. Moby-Dick
14 Nov. Moby-Dick

19 Nov. Moby-Dick
21 Nov. Moby-Dick; criticism

26 Nov. "Life in the Iron-Mills," Davis (reserve);
28 Nov. THANKSGIVING

3 Dec. "'Circumstance,'" Harriet Prescott Spofford; "A White Heron," Sarah
Orne Jewett; "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" Mary E. Wilkins Freeman
5 Dec. Pudd'nhead Wilson, Mark Twain

10 Dec. Pudd'nhead Wilson, various critical responses
12 Dec. Evaluations & Farewell

18 Dec. *FINAL ESSAY DUE*

NB: Please affix the Honor Code Pledge to each assignment. For more information
on the code and the pledge itself, go to
http://www.oberlin.edu/students/student_pages/honor_code.html .