

English 256: The Making of American Literary Culture  
TTh 9:35 – 10:50 AM in AJLC 201

Fall 2008

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### **Course description:**

This course will explore the emergence of literary culture in American in the 19th century. We'll examine the interaction of the American literary scene with its broader social and cultural context and its interaction with foreign literatures. Writers we consider may include Poe, Emerson, Stowe, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, Hawthorne, Douglass, James, Twain, Jewett, Howells, Chopin, and Chesnut. We'll approach the readings in the contexts of the emergence and development of American literary culture while recognizing our positions as 21st-century readers. Emphasis will be given to reading historically and interpretively.

As a “gateway” course, English 256 offers an introduction to the academic study of literature. Our work together will have three interrelated goals. First, this course will introduce you to a broad range of literatures written and read in the nineteenth-century United States, and will help you to understand those literatures in their cultural and historical contexts. Second, it will develop your ability to construct persuasive and innovative interpretations of literary and cultural texts. Finally, it will provide a framework within which you can improve your writing.

### **Course format:**

English 256 is a discussion-intensive course. Though I will lecture periodically, the majority of our class time will be spent in thoughtful collective analysis of the course texts in question. We will spend time discussing because the give and take of an informed, intelligent conversation most accurately models the way in which sound scholarship builds on the insights of others. Because this course is discussion-intensive, its success will depend on your consistent preparation for and engagement with class discussion. I encourage you to think of your contributions to class discussion as a dialogue with your fellow readers first, and with me second. I hope that you will take our class sessions as an opportunity to sharpen your ability to engage with, respond to, and build upon your peers' insights.

### **Course texts and schedule:**

Our texts for this course are available at the College Bookstore and on the library's eReserve system. The password for our eReserves is **engl256**.

*The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (Dover Thrift Edition)

*Empire and the Literature of Sensation*, eds. Jesse Aleman and Shelley Streeby

All of the readings listed below are required. For selections from the Heath Anthology (marked with an **H**), you should also read the headnotes that precede each text. Please bring the Heath with you to class.

- 9/2 first day
- 9/4 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (H); read also the introduction to the Heath (1443-1473)
- 9/9 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (H)  
**Q**
- 9/11 Emerson, “Self-Reliance” and “The American Scholar” (H)
- 9/16 Cluster: Expansion and Removal (Blackboard); Mailloux, “Interpretation” (eRes)
- 9/18 William Apess, “An Indian’s Looking Glass” (H)  
**Close Reading #1 due (2 pages, on Douglass, Emerson, Apess, or another author from the cluster on expansion)**
- 9/23 Hawthorne, “The Celestial Railroad” (ERes); Bunyan, selections from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (ERes); McLaughlin, “Figurative Language” (eRes)
- 9/25 Thoreau, *Resistance to Civil Government* (H)  
**Q**
- 9/30 Cluster: E Pluribus Unum – Race and Slavery (Blackboard); Walker, selections from *Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens* (H); Garrison, editorial from the *Liberator* (H); Child, selections from *Appeal in Favor of that Class . . .* and “Antiabolitionist Mobs” (H); Garnet, “Address to the Slaves” (H); Harper, “The Slave Mother” (H).
- 10/2 Stowe, selections from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (H)  
**Q**
- 10/7 Stowe, selections from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (H); “Concluding Remarks” (Blackboard)
- 10/9 Yom Kippur (no class)
- 10/14 Melville, selections from *The Confidence Man* (ERes) **\*\*note these selections differ from the ones in the “Cluster: Expansion and Removal” packet—be sure to get today’s readings from eRes.**  
**Paper #1 due (5 – 6 pages)**
- 10/16 TBA

10/21 and 23: Fall Break

- 10/28 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (read the full work, not the selections in the Heath)
- 10/30 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*  
**Close Reading #2 due (2 pages)**
- 11/4 Dickinson, selected poems (H—see Blackboard for selections)
- 11/6 Whitman, *Song of Myself* (H) (finish *Song* before this class)  
**Q**
- 11/11 Whitman, *Song of Myself* (H)
- 11/13 Melville, *Benito Cereno* (H) (finish *Benito Cereno* before this class)  
**Q**
- 11/18 Melville, *Benito Cereno* (H)  
**Close Reading #3 due (2 pages, on Dickinson, Whitman, or Melville)**
- 11/20 George Lippard, *'Bel of Prairie Eden* (in *Empire and the Literature of Sensation*) (finish *'Bel* before this class)
- 11/25 George Lippard, *'Bel of Prairie Eden* (in *Empire and the Literature of Sensation*)  
**Q**
- 11/27 Thanksgiving break (no class)
- 12/2 Chopin, “La Belle Zoraïde” and “Desiree’s Baby” (ERes)  
**Close Reading #4 due (2 pages)**
- 12/4 Sui Sin Far, “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian,” “In the Land of the Free,” and “The Wisdom of the New” (ERes)  
**Q**
- 12/9 Harriet Prescott Spofford, “Circumstance” (ERes)  
Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “A New-England Nun” (ERes)
- 12/11 Zitkala-Sa, selections from *American Indian Stories* (ERes)

**Final Paper (5-6 pages) due by email (to [Toni.Jaudon@oberlin.edu](mailto:Toni.Jaudon@oberlin.edu)) on Thursday, December 18<sup>th</sup> by 11 AM.**

### **Written work:**

**Questions:** About once a week, I will ask you to post a developed, well-thought out question to our Blackboard site. These dates are indicated by a “Q”. You should begin your post by quoting a selection from the reading, which you will then formulate into a question that you would like to see us address in class discussion. (Here, you’ll want to avoid factual questions—I am very happy to address these if you send them separately, but they offer limited resources for class discussion). **Post your question to our Blackboard site by 7 PM on the evening before the class indicated.**

**Close Readings:** These short, two-page papers offer you the chance to refine your interpretive skills and to work out some of your thoughts on our course texts. In this assignment, you will analyze **one sentence** from one of our course texts, attending to the interplay between its content and its form. These papers are meant to be selective, not comprehensive. **Brevity is integral to the assignment**—please keep your readings to two pages, or at most two and a half. (I will return any close reading **over three pages** to you ungraded). If you find that you have more to say about the text, as I hope you will, you should consider developing your close reading into the root of one of your longer papers. **Please come to talk with me first, though, if you choose this option.**

**Papers:** These longer, formal essays will allow you to develop a thesis about one of our course texts in some detail. We will discuss these assignments in class as they approach.

### **Course policies, requirements, and general information:**

Getting in touch with me: I’m very happy to confer with you in office hours about your written work (both before and after you submit it), and to talk generally about the course texts, about the nineteenth century, or about your interests. If you send me email, please give me 24 hours to respond.

Reading must be done before class. Should it become apparent that a majority of the class is not keeping up with the readings, I may institute short reading quizzes (which will contribute to your course discussion grade).

Participation is a requirement of this course. I’m not so much interested in the quantity of your contributions as I am in their quality. To my mind, quality participation involves thoughtful engagement with the course texts and, more importantly, with the other members of the course. Often, the most productive comments build on or draw together what the others around you are saying. Essential to participating well is not just your willingness to talk, but also your willingness to listen to those around you, to take others’ comments seriously, and to actively work to synthesize major points or lines of inquiry.

Because active engagement on everyone’s part is so important, I strongly discourage the use of laptops in the classroom, especially for notetaking. I do this because I recognize that the siren call of email and Facebook can be impossible for even the most conscientious of us to resist. Should you find it necessary to use your laptop in class, please keep your wifi turned off. I’ll

happily “borrow” your laptop for the remainder of any class session in which The Internet makes an uninvited appearance.

Attendance at all course meetings is mandatory. Attendance includes not just your physical presence, but also your careful, consistent preparation for class. More than two unexcused absences will negatively affect your final grade; **more than six absences for any reason** will cause you to fail the course.

Tardiness is exceptionally disruptive in a discussion-intensive course. Chronic lateness will cause me to mark you absent for the day.

**Papers:** Papers should be formatted according to the guidelines in the MLA Style Manual. Your paper should be double-spaced, in Times New Roman or an equivalent 12 point font, with one-inch margins on each side. Please give your paper a title, number and staple your pages, and spell-check and proofread your text. You **must** cite all of your sources, your primary text, in MLA format. If you have any questions about citations or formatting, please come to see me in office hours. The library also maintains a list of helpful links to citation guides at <http://www.oberlin.edu/library/research/reference.html#citation> .

Late papers and close readings will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade (for example, A- becomes B+) for each day past the due date, unless there are extenuating circumstances documented by medical staff or the class deans. Should you find yourself in need of an extension, you should ask at least 24 hours before your paper is due. I will not accept any work over two weeks late, no matter the reason. Late “Q”s will not be accepted.

**Grading:** Papers will count for 50 % of your grade, close readings for 25 %, and class participation (including discussion questions) for 25 %.

You cannot pass this course unless you attend class regularly, submit all of the written assignments listed on the syllabus, and participate in our class discussions. If at any time you are curious (or concerned) about your progress in the course, please don’t hesitate to come talk to me in office hours. Likewise, if there are family or personal difficulties that are interfering with your ability to complete your assignments or otherwise work to your potential in this course, please get in touch with me, as well as with the class deans.

If you have a physical, psychiatric, or learning disability that affects your ability to access course materials or complete course work, please let me know early in the semester. You’ll also want to contact the Office of Disability Services in Peters G-27/G-28. I am committed to making this course fully accessible to all its members. If you are having any difficulties accessing course materials or resources, or if other barriers to your full and effective participation in this course arise, please contact me as soon as possible so that we can work things out.

**Honor code:** I take potential violations of the honor code, especially plagiarism, very seriously. It goes without saying that all of the written work you submit for this course must be your own. If you are inspired or influenced by a particular text or conversation, as I hope you will be, you are responsible for appropriately crediting that source. If you have questions about how to do

this, don't hesitate to ask. Please take the time, if you haven't already, to review the honor code, which is available at:

<http://www.oberlin.edu/students/links-life/honorcode.html>

Please write and sign the honor code pledge (“I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment”) on each of your assignments, including your Blackboard postings. If you do not include the honor code pledge, I will return the assignment to you ungraded.