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 ENGL 359: MWF 3:30-4:20  
 King 343

## Literature, Race and Justice

This course is an exploration of the central presence of law and legal themes in American literature, especially around the issue of race. In context of key legal issues and rulings—from the Fugitive Slave Law to *Brown v. Board of Education*—the course considers how 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century American narratives create and shape systems of justice and authority.

While American law has attempted to define racial identity throughout its history, American literature has explored the ambiguities and contradictions of such rigid definitions. Ideas of justice play into these seemingly disparate fields of law and literature: each advances its own claims to authority; each uses evidence to do so. Taken together, law and literature can show how cultural and legal categories relate to, even shape one another. At the heart of this interdisciplinary seminar is a close analysis of the interplay between social and jurisprudential forms of justice in determining the outcome of racial issues.

Readings include founding documents of America (such as the Bible and the Constitution), constitutional amendments (especially the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup>), and decisive court decisions (the Fugitive Slave Law; *Dred Scott*; *Plessy v. Ferguson*; *Brown v. Board*; Affirmative Action). We will also read some and discuss some important examples of literary and cultural criticism that discuss the construction of law through culture. Readings in literature—primarily novels—include 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century texts by white and black authors: Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Herman Melville, Charles Chesnutt, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Styron, Charles Fuller, Philip Roth. Films include “*Twelve Angry Men*”; “*Amistad*”; “*The Human Stain*.”

### Required Texts

Books: (Available at the Oberlin College Bookstore): Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; Herman Melville, *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*; Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*; Charles Fuller, *A Soldier's Play*; William Styron, *Confessions of Nat Turner*; Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*.

Handouts (distributed in class): Ida B. Wells, from *A Red Record*; Richard Wright, “*Big Boy Leaves Home*”; Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, poetry.

Course Requirements: two writing assignments totaling 15 pages (30% each); group oral presentation (15%); class participation and attendance (25%).

M Feb 7: Course introduction.

W Feb 9: Screening, "Twelve Angry Men."

F Feb 11: Screening, "Twelve Angry Men." Discussion.

Assignment: short personal essay defining justice—how, in your view, it is important to American society and literature (today or in the past).

M Feb 14: Discussion of essays. Introduction of major theoretical and critical approaches we will use to discuss law and literature.

W Feb 16: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative*, chapter 1 through chapter 8

F Feb 18: Independent work; read Douglass, chapter 9 through to end of narrative

M Feb 21: Douglass, *Narrative*; group presentation #1

W Feb 23: Douglass, *Narrative*

F Feb 25: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, through ch. 15 (p.95)

M Feb 28: Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ch. 16-32 (p.187)

W March 2: Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ch. 33-conclusion.

F March 4: Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in entirety

M March 7: Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno"

W March 9: Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno"

F March 11: *Amistad*

M March 14: *Amistad*

W March 16: *Amistad*

F March 18: *Amistad*

Due date, paper #1

M March 21: Discussion, Melville's "Benito Cereno" and *Amistad*  
Distribution of Ida B. Wells, for Wednesday's discussion

W March 23: Ida B. Wells, from *A Red Record*; group presentation #2

F March 25: screening, video

March 26-April 3: Spring Break

M April 4: Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, in entirety; Wilmington riots

W April 6: Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*

F April 8: Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*  
Distribution of "BBLH" for Monday's discussion

M April 11: Richard Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home"

W April 13: Richard Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home": literary naturalism

F April 15: Native Son, screening  
Due date, paper #2

M April 18: Charles Fuller, *A Soldier's Play*, in entirety

W April 20: *A Soldier's Play*

F April 22: *A Soldier's Play*

M April 25: Emmett Till, screening; group presentation #3  
Distribution of Brooks's "A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon..." for Wednesday's discussion

W April 27: Gwendolyn Brooks, poetry

F April 29: group presentation #4

M May 2: William Styron, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, in entirety

W May 4: *Confessions of Nat Turner*

F May 6: Roth, *The Human Stain*

M May 9: Roth, *The Human Stain*

W May 11: Roth, *The Human Stain*

F May 13: Roth, *The Human Stain*

Course Requirements and Policy:

- Group presentation (15%): Each group will be assigned the project of creating a timeline that covers a period of approximately fifty years, assigned by the instructor. The group should present important historical events that take place, paying special attention to federal legislation and court debates as well as people's movements that take place outside the courtroom and the senate floor. (For example, constitutional amendments as well as protest parades.) Address what aspects you find to be crucial to the shaping of the American social cultural and political atmosphere—and make sure you can explain why they are so important.
- Two short, formal critical essays (30% each): Each of these essays must adhere to the standards that the instructor introduces in class. Students are expected to incorporate the building blocks of close reading, argument, and example, as well as proper citation, in order to complete each critical essay with a passing grade. Guidelines for paper format and citation can be found at the end of this syllabus.

You must turn in all short, critical essays to receive a grade for the class (otherwise, you will fail the class).

Note: You must come to class, on time, on the day that papers are due.

- Regular attendance and active participation (25%): Attendance is required, and I will take roll at the beginning of each class. Latecomers will be counted as absent. Attendance at all classes is required. If you miss more than six classes without good reason, your final grade will be lowered by one full letter grade per absence. If you miss eight classes, you will receive an "F" as your final grade for the course.

Note: it is your job to keep track of your absences from the class.

Our class is a seminar, not a lecture: your participation in class discussion is not only welcomed—it is required. I expect thoughtful comments and active listening, respectful interaction with peers as well as the professor. You must keep up with the readings in order to fulfill your obligation as a member of the class and a participant in the ongoing discussion.

#### Late Work:

The course moves at a rapid pace, so all work must be completed on time. Late work will lower your final grade. Late papers will be penalized by \_ of a letter grade per day, with a maximum of two calendar days (not weekdays) permitted.

#### Office Hours:

Every week I will be available in my office for consultation. Office hours are your opportunity to talk to me about the reading and writing process and the ideas that you develop on an individual basis. If you cannot make my office hours, you may schedule an appointment for another time.

#### What you should know about plagiarism

It is incumbent upon you, as a scholar, both to document the borrowings you make from the work of others and to report more general indebtedness to the

people and books (and internet sources) you have consulted in the course of preparing your papers. Plagiarism consists of intentionally misrepresenting someone else's work, words, or insights as your own. Like any other form of intellectual dishonesty, plagiarism is a serious offense in an academic community. A paper that shows evidence of plagiarism will receive no grade and will lead to an "F" grade for the entire term. Every case of plagiarism will be reported to the Dean of Oberlin College for disciplinary action, which may range from further reprimand to expulsion from Oberlin College.

### Proper Citation of Sources and Format Requirements for all papers

All papers must be submitted as typed, double-spaced hard copies, and must be stapled. No electronic submissions will be accepted under any circumstances. Set a one-inch margin on all sides. Choose a font that results in 250-300 words per page, such as Courier 12, Times 12, Helvetica 12, New Century Schoolbook 12, or Palatino 12.

A short essay does not require a title page. Instead, as a heading, place your name, the course number and section number, the professor's name, and the date in the upper right-hand corner of the first page. Center the title you are giving to your essay three lines below the last line of your heading. Do not put quotation marks around your title unless the title is a phrase drawn from another piece of work.

The pages of your essay must be numbered and stapled. Print your surname as an abbreviated header to the second and all subsequent pages, along with the page number. (Thus the upper right-hand corner of the second and third pages of your essay would print the following: "surname 2" and "surname 3".)

Be careful to save your document frequently (every ten minutes or so) to prevent its sudden and disheartening disappearance. At every stage of a draft print a hard copy and save to disk/cd.

Always keep a copy of the paper for yourself.

- Citations must be completed in MLA style in the following format, as footnotes:
  - the author's name, first name first
  - the title of the book, italicized
  - the name of the editor or translator (if any), first name first, preceded by "ed." or "trans."
  - the volume number, in Arabic numerals, if you are using a multi-volumed work ("Vol. 2")
  - in parenthesis, the place of publication, followed by a colon, the name of the publishing company, followed by a comma, and the year of publication
  - the page number(s), in Arabic numerals ("47" or "47-51"). If you are citing verse quotations cite line number(s) instead of page number(s) ("2" or "5-7")

--place a comma between each item in the sequence, except that a comma does not precede the parenthesis containing information about place and date of publication.

--a footnote always ends with a period.

Note: if you will be citing a single text throughout your essay, make one initial footnote citation, ending with a period, then add the following phrase: "Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the body of the text."

- Guidelines for quotations

From Poetry:

--Unless unusual emphasis is required, verse quotations of a single line or part of a line should be incorporated, within quotation marks, into the body of your paper's text. Quotation of two or three lines may also be placed in your text, within quotation marks, but separated by a slash ( / ). Leave a single space on each side of the slash.

--Verse quotations of four or more lines should be introduced (in most cases) by a colon and indented from the left margin, but without quotation marks unless quotation marks appear in the poem being quoted. Single space between lines of verse. The spatial arrangement of the poem being quoted should be reproduced as closely as possible.

From Prose:

--Prose quotations of not more than four lines in your printed text should be incorporated, within quotation marks, as part of the text, unless special emphasis is required.

--Longer quotations are usually introduced by a colon, and indented from the left margin. No quotation marks are necessary unless they are present in the material being quoted. Let the reader see how the source you are quoting from is paragraphed, just as you let the reader know how the lines of a poem are arranged on the page. If the first sentence of the excerpt being quoted is the beginning of a paragraph in the source, indent a few spaces. If not, do not indent.