American Literature II (Spring 2017)

10:00-10:50 MWF LA342

“I try to laugh / At whatever life brings / Cause when I look down / I just miss all the good stuff / When I look up / I just trip over things.” Ani DiFranco, “As Is”

“[Literature does] educate us about life. … I’m thinking of the great question of nineteenth-century Russian literature: how should one live? A novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of human possibility, of what human nature is, of what happens in the world. It’s a creator of inwardness. … I can’t care about a book that has nothing to contribute to the wisdom project.”

Susan Sontag, The Paris Review Interview

“wonder is defined as a constriction and suspension of the heart caused by amazement at the appearance of something so portentous, and unusual that the heart suffers a systole. Hence wonder is something like fear in its effect on the heart. This effect of wonder, then, this constriction and systole of the heart, springs from an unfulfilled but felt desire to know… Now the man who is puzzled and wonders apparently does not know. … Hence wonder is the movement of the man who does not know on his way to finding out.”

Albertus Magnus, Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle

Overview:

The University has designed the survey course to give students an introduction to the major authors, genres, and works of an extended time period and a given language and culture before they progress to higher-level courses focused on a specific artistic movement, genre, author, or work. This course follows that basic design -- we will do much of that hard work -- but with two slight variations: First, many of you are not and do not intend to become English majors and thus do not intend more-specialized literary study; much of our discussion will therefore focus on the intersection of literature and larger cultural and political movements and on the translation of literary “close-reading” techniques and interpretive strategies to all efforts at careful reading and interpretation. Second, traditional attempts to familiarize students “generally” with hundreds of years of a national canon tend to move very quickly and to focus on short selections from many authors, paired with a presentation of relevant historic context. Instead, we are going to read longer works by fewer authors and our discussion of historic context will focus on prevalent ideas and ‘moods’ as revealed in seminal political, historical, scientific, and philosophical documents: the stuff of intellectual history.

The list of required texts for this course is long and your weekly reading assignments will average 100 pages. This reading -- careful, engaged, on-time -- is your primary responsibility for this course. Writing assignments are limited to an in-class ‘free write’ on each of the course texts and two short (4-5 page) essays. We will, however, talk about writing -- yours and others’ -- all semester and we will all be stronger, more-confident writers come spring. (That’s one of the happier consequences of reading 1300 pages in 13 weeks … .)

I’m happy directing your reading, but less happy dictating your reading. If you would like to substitute another author or text (one you hoped to see on the syllabus but don’t), appropriate to the unit of study, please come see me and we’ll work out an independent-study option for that unit. NB: this creates more work for me. Please don’t take advantage and substitute a novel that you’ve recently read just to reduce your own workload. Your substituted text should be one you’ve long wanted to read, or one you read long ago in a different time and place, when you were a different reader, one that has haunted you since, but that you have not yet encountered on a course list.
Finally, I expect that laptops and smart phones are being used in the service of our class activities and that they will not distract you, me, or the other students in the class; distractions include noise and your wayward attention. You may take notes on a laptop only if you sit within the first row of the classroom.

**Required Texts:**

- Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”
- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (excerpts)
- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*
- William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
- Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
- Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*

**Optional Texts**

- Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems North and South--A Cold Spring* (selections)
- Langston Hughes, *Collected Works* (selections)
- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, a Slave* (excerpts)

**Requirements**

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<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Portfolio</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<td>Midterm exam</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final exam (cumulative)</td>
<td>30%</td>
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Though there will be lecture segments, this is a discussion course. You will earn an A in participation if you attend class regularly, read the assigned texts carefully and diligently, and demonstrate that careful diligent reading in your free writes and in classroom discussion. Cris will update participation grades every three weeks.

Your essays must be turned in at the beginning of class on the day they are due, typed and double-spaced, with 1” margins, using in-text citations (MLA format). You may revise your first essay, for up to a grade-point increase (C → B, for example). Additional instructions will be provided when the essays are assigned. I encourage you to visit Cris or me during office hours to discuss the papers and your writing in more detail. The Writing Center (LA 144) also provides valuable assistance.

Every Monday, beginning week 2, will begin with a common grammar error or question, a “tool” for effective writing, and a sentence begging for your revision. **You will include the “writer’s tool box” built from this repeated exercise with your final essay.**

Both the midterm and the final exam will feature a combination of questions on terminology and short essays; more details to follow later in the semester.
There are lots of extra-credit opportunities: provide music, poems, or illustrations to accompany the course or a study unit (with a very brief discussion of how the work applies to the course or unit); attend one of the many university or community lectures or readings (I will announce the coming week’s roster every Monday); bring a grammatical error - made by someone who should know better - to the class’s attention.

Academic Honesty

All work that you submit for this class must be your own, and it must be written exclusively for this course. The unacknowledged borrowing of others’ words or ideas—whether from books, the internet, or other sources—constitutes the serious academic crime of plagiarism if you fail to document properly those sources consulted for your writing, you risk an automatic failure for the entire course. If you have any doubts or questions about plagiarism or the University’s policy on it, please see me or Cris.

Special Needs

If you have a documented disability, or otherwise anticipate needing special accommodations for this course, please bring this to my attention as early in the semester as possible so that we have an understanding and can make arrangements.

Tentative Schedule

NB: this schedule is truly tentative and will be adjusted according to the needs of the class. Specific reading assignments will be determined at least one week in advance. All reading must be completed by class time on the date listed; please note that you are not prepared for class unless you have that reading in front of you as we discuss it.

Introduction: Close Reading

Wk 1 (Jan. 23)

- m  Course introduction
  - Critical versus Uncritical Reading
  - *As I Lay Dying* excerpt
  - *Moby Dick* excerpt
  o  assignment for Friday: Watch *Touching the Void*
- w  Close-Reading Techniques
  - *Benito Cereno* excerpts
  o  assignment for Friday: Finish watching *Touching the Void*
- f  Discussion: *Touching the Void*
  o  reading for Monday: Toni Morrison, “Strangers”; The Writing Center’s “Writing about Literature” (on Moodle)
Introduction: Nation Story and Nationalism

Wk 2 (Jan. 30)

- m Lecture: “Kinds of Criticism”; Discussion: “Strangers”
  - reading for Wednesday: “Rip Van Winkle”
- w Lecture: Nation Story; Discussion: “Rip Van Winkle”
  - reading for Friday: “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”
- f Discussion: “Sleepy Hollow”

Unit 1: (im)Migration

Wk 3 (Feb. 6)

- m Lecture: American Migration
  - reading for Wednesday: *Leaves of Grass*, selections (on Moodle); Langston Hughes, select poems (on Moodle)
- w Discussion: *Leaves of Grass* and Langston Hughes
- f Discussion: Whitman and Hughes, continued
  - reading for Wk 4: Mississippi Black Codes (on Moodle); Douglass, excerpts (on Moodle)

Unit 2: American Realism

NB: *HF* is our longest novel/this is your heaviest reading load. Begin early.

Wk 4 (Feb 13)

- m *Leaves of Grass* In-Class Free Write (part of your Participation Grade); Lecture: American Realism
  - reading for Wednesday: Begin *Huck Finn*
- w Lecture: The American Vernacular and Narrative Structure
- f Discussion: *Huck Finn*
  - reading for Wednesday: continue *Huck Finn*

Wk 5 (Feb 20)

- m NO CLASS; Presidents-Day Holiday
  - reading for Wednesday: continue *Huck Finn*
• w Discussion: *Huck Finn*
  ○ reading for Friday: finish *Huck Finn*

• f *Huck Finn* In-Class Free Write
  ○ reading assignment: Finish *Huck Finn*
  ○ reading for Monday: None

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**Unit 3: American Naturalism (and Midterm Exam)**

**Wk 6 (Feb. 27)**

• m Lecture: American Naturalism
  ○ reading assignment: Continue *Ethan Frome*

• w Discussion: *Ethan Frome*
  ○ reading assignment: Finish *Ethan Frome*

• f Discussion: *Ethan Frome; Ethan Frome* In-Class Free Write;
  ○ reading for Monday: None

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**Wk 7 (March 6)**

• m Exam review
• w Midterm Exam
• f Writing Workshop; Essay-Prompt Development assignment: **Essay 1**

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**Unit 4: American Modernism I**

**Wk 8 (March 13)**

• m **Essay 1 Due:** Lecture: American Modernism I
  ○ reading for Wednesday: Stephen Mitchell, trans: *The Book of Job*, selections (on Moodle); Adam Gopnik, “The Big One” (on Moodle)

• w Discussion: *The Book of Job*
  ○ reading for Friday: Begin *As I Lay Dying*

• f Discussion: *AILD*
  ○ reading for week 10: Continue *AILD*

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**Wk 9 (March 20)**

*No Class; Spring Break*
Wk 10 (March 27)

- m  Discussion: *As I Lay Dying*
  - o  reading for Wednesday: continue *AILD*
- w  Discussion: *As I Lay Dying*
  - o  reading for Friday: Finish *AILD*
- f  Discussion: *As I Lay Dying;* *AILD* free write:
  - o  reading for Week 10: Hayden White, “On Narrativity”; Begin *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Unit 5: American Modernism II

Wk 11 (April 3)

- m  Lecture: American Modernism II (Narrative Form)
- w  Writing Workshop
- f  Discussion: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
  - o  reading for Week 12: Finish *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Wk 12 (April 10):

- m  Discussion: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
- w  Discussion: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
- f  *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in-class free write; Writing Workshop
  - o  reading for Monday: Stuart Hall (on Moodle)

Unit 6: American Postmodernism & American Contemporary

Wk 13 (April 17)

- m  Lecture: American Postmodernism
  - o  reading for Wednesday: Adrienne Rich selected poems (to be announced)
- w  Discussion: Adrienne Rich
  - o  reading for Friday: Elizabeth Bishop selected poems (to be announced)
- f  Discussion: Elizabeth Bishop
  - o  reading for week 14: revisit Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction" to *Through Other Continents*; begin *All the Pretty Horses*
  - o  assignment: Essay 2
Wk 14 (April 24)

- **m** Bishop and Rich In-Class Free Write; **Essay 2 due**
- **w** Lecture: World Literature
  - reading for Friday: continue *All the Pretty Horses*
- **f** Discussion: *All the Pretty Horses*
  - reading for Monday: *All the Pretty Horses*

Wk 15 (May 1)

- **m** Discussion: *All the Pretty Horses*
  - reading for Wednesday: finish *All the Pretty Horses*
- **w** Discussion: *All the Pretty Horses; PH free write*
- **f** Course Review

**Optional Final-Exam Review Sessions**, time and location to be determined

**Final Exam:**

10:10 - 12:10, Monday May 8