

National Narratives: Great American Books

Sebastian Williams – ENGL 25000-002 – 3 Credit Hours

Overview:

From the start of the nation to the Beatniks and beyond, this course will explore a range of significant American books. The current political landscape is rife with debates about what it means to be an “American,” and it is in this context that we will read American books that encapsulate (and sometimes resist) a particular brand of American identity.

Over the course of the semester, we will read various genres from a wide selection of writers, such as Ben Franklin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jhumpa Lahiri. This scope of readings is meant to survey what it means to be an “American” to different people at different times in our nation’s history. We will also investigate formal components like style and narrative as we read; however, the focus of this course is the idea that national identity is socially constructed. You will have a chance to exchange perspectives and develop complex arguments about literary and cultural texts, and this class is also an opportunity to learn an appreciation for some truly great books.

Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will . . .

- interpret a range of American books, becoming skilled readers who can appreciate ambiguity and multifaceted writing.
- craft rhetorically complex analyses of literary texts.
- compare a range of texts from various sociohistorical contexts and articulate important differences between multiple literary movements, historical eras, and cultures.
- investigate various definitions of “American” identity in literary works and build a foundational vocabulary in literary studies.

ENGL 25000-002

CRN: 16543

TR from 7:30am to 8:45am

Krannert Building G007

Instructor Info:

Name: Sebastian Williams

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Office: HEAV 127

Office Hrs.: T 9:00 to 10:00am

Online Platform:

Blackboard

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Texts:

You can find these books at Von's Book Shop (315 W State St, West Lafayette, IN 47906) or online through Amazon.com.

- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. 1793. Dover, 1996. ISBN: 978-0486290737.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden: or, Life in the Woods*. 1854. Signet, 1999. ISBN: 978-0451529459. [NOTE: We will only be reading the Intro and first two chapters of *Walden*]
- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. 1919. Oxford UP, 1999. ISBN: 978-0192839770.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. Harper, 2013. ISBN: 978-0061120060.
- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. 1957. Penguin, 1999. ISBN: 978-0140283297.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. 1973. Vintage, 2004. ISBN: 978-1400033430.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Mariner, 2004. ISBN: 978-0618485222.

Assignments:

- **Online Journal** (10%). *8 entries, 250 words each entry (2000 words total)*. After Week 1 and for the final day we read each text, you will turn in an entry using the online journal feature in Blackboard. You can use the following questions to guide your entries: How did you react to the text? Why did you react that way? What was difficult about this book? What questions do you have for the author? While the journal is exploratory, it is also designed to work as a platform for developing ideas for future papers. Therefore, each entry should be professional and well composed, and it should cite at least one passage from the book (the citation is not included in the word count). I will give detailed feedback after the first entry and at the midterm; however, these will ultimately be graded holistically at the end of the semester.
- **Close-Reading Paper** (15%). *800 to 1200 words*. This paper requires you to read and explicate a passage from one of the books we've read. You should focus on the text itself (as much as possible), including things like style and narrative. The goal for this paper is to demonstrate your analytic reading and writing ability, and you should answer questions like the following:
 - What does this specific passage reveal about the piece as a whole?

- How does this author maintain or break with the formal conventions we've discussed in class?
- How does the form or structure relate to the content?
- **Comparison Paper** (15%). *1200 words to 1500 words.* For this paper, you will compare two books from class. Your writing should focus on our course theme, national identity, though you're also welcome to discuss style and narrative while you write. The goal of this essay is to demonstrate your knowledge of social constructionism in the context of national identity, as well your ability to advance a comparative argument using primary sources.
- **Quizzes** (4 total, 20%). There are several quizzes that will be staggered throughout the semester. These are designed to test your knowledge and to ensure you have read and understood assigned texts.
- **Midterm Exam** (15%). This is a standard in-class midterm examination with true/false questions, multiple choice, and short essay questions. This will be used to gauge your knowledge of literary terms and concepts, historical information, and your understanding of the class theme on American identity.
- **Final Exam** (25%). During Finals Week; Date TBA. This is a comprehensive examination. As such, this exam covers material from the entire semester, including readings, lectures, and discussions. Failure to finish the readings or attend class will significantly affect your ability to complete the final exam. This exam will feature primarily multiple choice and short essay questions.

OR

Final Paper (25%). DUE Thursday, 12/6. To fulfill writing requirements or for those interested in writing a paper in lieu of a final exam, students may compose a 2400- to 3000-word research-based argument. The paper should follow conventions for literary criticism, including reference to at least seven secondary sources. The argument should be about national identity and should focus on one to two books we read for class. Students are encouraged to meet with me earlier in the semester (e.g., Week 10) to discuss paper topics.

Grades

You earn a final grade based on performance.

1. Please track your own grades. If you think I've made a mistake or evaluated your work unfairly, please speak with me.
2. You will receive a final grade of F if you do not complete all parts of a major assignment.
3. Grades of "Incomplete" are typically only given in the case of military service, documented medical emergency, or documented death in the family.

A	93% to 100%
A-	90% to 92.9%
B+	87% to 89.9%
B	83% to 86.9%
B-	80% to 82.9%
C+	77% to 79.9%
C	73% to 76.9%
C-	70% to 72.9%
D	60% to 69.9%
F	00% to 59.9%

Turning in Work

I must receive an electronic copy of every major assignment. Electronic copies of work can be turned in on Blackboard as .doc or .docx files. Such copies are due on the date listed on the assignment sheet before the start of class (no later than 7:29am).

If for some reason you do not think you will be able to turn in work on time or if you are having issues uploading work, please contact me immediately. Otherwise, your work may be counted as late, and you may not receive credit.

You are expected to use the latest version of MLA. If you do not know how to use MLA, I'd be happy to teach you the basics during office hours or an appointment. Otherwise, the Purdue OWL is an excellent resource: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html

Absences

You may be absent up to four (4) times before it affects your grade. I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. More than four absences will result in a 10-percent reduction of your final grade. So, if you score a 100% in the course but miss five days, you will earn a 90% in the class. More than eight absences will result in automatic failure of the course. If you miss a significant portion of class by arriving late or leaving early (more than 10 mins.), this will count as half an absence. You are responsible for keeping track of your own absences.

Late Work

All assignments are due on the date listed on the assignment sheet. Generally, I do not accept late work. Contact me immediately if you are ill. Even if you miss class, I will still assume you will turn in your work on time. If you don't think you'll be able to turn something in on time, communicate with me in advance so we can work out a positive solution. I also accept early papers, so if you know you must miss a class when an assignment is due, turn in the work beforehand. I'll do my best to be timely when handing back assignments, so you should do your best to get things in on time.

Academic Honesty Policy

The following statement about honesty and the use of sources is from the Students' Guide to ICaP <http://icap.rhetorike.org/studentguide#academichonesty>:

When writers use material from other sources, they must acknowledge this source. Not doing so is called plagiarism, which means using without credit the ideas or expressions of another. You are therefore cautioned (1) against using, word for word, without acknowledgment, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc., from the printed or manuscript material of others; (2) against using with only slight changes the materials of another; and (3) against using the general plan, the main headings, or a rewritten form of someone else's

material. These cautions apply to the work of other students as well as to the published work of professional writers.

If you are in doubt, please ask me, since the consequences for plagiarism are severe. The university policies about plagiarism include penalties ranging from failure of an assignment to expulsion from the university. In this class, anyone who plagiarizes fails the course and will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students. The Department of English & ICaP consider the previous explanation to be official notification of the nature and seriousness of plagiarism.

Purdue also has an honor pledge to encourage excellence: “As a Boilermaker pursuing academic excellence, I pledge to be honest and true in all that I do. Accountable together—we are Purdue.”

Accommodation of Disabilities

I want our classroom to be a welcoming space for all students, and I hope to maximize learning regardless of your learning style or any disabilities. If you have any requests for adjustments that would make our class more accessible for you, please come see or contact me.

Purdue University strives to make learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience physical or academic barriers based on disability, you are welcome to let me know so that we can discuss options. You are also encouraged to contact the Disability Resource Center at: drc@purdue.edu or by phone: 765-494-1247.

Purdue University is committed to advancing the mental health and well-being of its students. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, such individuals should contact Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at (765) 494-6995 and <http://www.purdue.edu/caps> during and after hours, on weekends and holidays, or through its counselors physically located in the Purdue University Student Health Center (PUSH) during business hours.

Diversity and Inclusion

Our classroom is a space for exchanging ideas, and I require that all students treat me and their fellow classmates with respect and dignity. Purdue University is committed to maintaining a community which recognizes and values the inherent worth and dignity of every person; fosters tolerance, sensitivity, understanding, and mutual respect among its members; and encourages each individual to strive to reach his or her own potential. In pursuit of its goal of academic excellence, the University seeks to develop and nurture diversity. The University believes that diversity among its many members strengthens the institution, stimulates creativity, promotes the exchange of ideas, and enriches campus life. Purdue’s nondiscrimination policy can be found at: http://www.purdue.edu/purdue/ea_eou_statement.html.

What to Do in an Emergency

For any emergency, call 911. Whether you call from a campus phone or your cell phone, your 911 call goes directly to campus police when you are on campus. *Indoor Fire Alarm:* Immediately evacuate the

building. Do not use the elevator. Move away from the building until emergency response personnel tell you it is safe to return. *All Hazards Outdoor Emergency Warning Siren*: If you are outdoors, seek shelter in a building. If you are indoors, remain indoors, away from windows and doors. You may want to sign up with Purdue ALERT so you can receive emergency notifications through text messages.

Reading Schedule

This is a tentative reading schedule and it is subject to change. I will post a revised schedule if there are any updates.

Week 1: Introduction

- T, 8/21 – Introduction; “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes (in class)
- R, 8/23 – “The American Scholar” by Ralph Waldo Emerson (on Blackboard); “New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus; “America” by Walt Whitman (on BB)

Week 2: Developing an American Voice

- T, 8/28 – **First Journal Entry DUE** (on readings for Week 1); *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1-34)
- R, 8/31 – *Autobiography* (34-69)

Week 3: Memoir or Fiction? Franklin’s *Autobiography*

- T, 9/4 – *Autobiography* (69-102)
- R, 9/6 – *Autobiography* (102-136); **Quiz 1**

Week 4: American Transcendentalism

- T, 9/11 – Excerpts from “Self-Reliance” by Emerson and “Song of Myself” by Whitman (on BB); Start “Economy” in *Walden* (1-24)
- R, 9/13 – Finish “Economy” in *Walden* (24-64)

Week 5: Living Deliberately

- T, 9/18 – “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” in *Walden* (64-79); NOTE: We will only be reading the introduction and first two chapters of *Walden*.
- R, 9/20 – *Winesburg, Ohio* (1-41); Close Reading Workshop

Week 6: Anderson and the American Grotesque

- T, 9/25 – *Winesburg, Ohio* (42-98); **Quiz 2**
- R, 9/27 – *Winesburg, Ohio* (99-134)

Week 7: Regional Writing and Modernism

- T, 10/2 – *Winesburg, Ohio* (135-204); **Close Reading DUE**
- R, 10/4 – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1-33)

Week 8: Midterm

- T, 10/9 – **NO CLASS (Fall Break)**
- R, 10/11 – **MIDTERM**

Week 9: Race and the American South

- T, 10/16 – *Their Eyes* (34-138)
- R, 10/18 – *Their Eyes* (139-193)

Week 10: “I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel”

- T, 10/23 – *On the Road* (1-59); **Quiz 3**
- R, 10/25 – *On the Road* (60-111); “America” by Ginsberg (in class)

Week 11: American Disillusionment

- T, 10/30 – *On the Road* (111-212)
- R, 11/1 – *On the Road* (213-307)

Week 12: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in America

- T, 11/6 – *Sula* (1-48); **Quiz 4**
- R, 11/8 – *Sula* (49-92); Workshop on Comparison Papers

Week 13: Race and Sexuality in American Lit.

- T, 11/13 – *Sula* (93-146)
- R, 11/15 – *Sula* (146-176); **Comparison Paper DUE**

Week 14: The American Dream?

- T, 11/20 – *The Namesake* (1-71)
- R, 11/22 – **NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)**

Week 15: Told by Immigrants

- T, 11/27 – *Namesake* (72-158)
- R, 11/29 – *Namesake* (159-201, to “A week later . . .”)

Week 16: Course Wrap-Up

- T, 12/4 – *Namesake* (201-291)

- R, 12/6 – Finish *Namesake* discussion; Exam review; **FINAL PAPER DUE**, if applicable.

FINAL EXAM during Exams Week (Exact date TBA)