English 242

Katy Ryan, ENGL 242, Fall 2006

ENG 242: US American Literature, 1865-2006:
Rooted Visions and Literary Traditions

Fall 2006
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- To the extent that American literature is both an art of discovery and an artistic agency for creating a consciousness of cultural identity, it is of such crucial importance as to demand of the artist not only an eclectic resourcefulness of skill, but an act of democratic faith. -- Ralph Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station"

- Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. –Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury"

- I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say yes, the work must be political. –Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation"

Course Description

This survey course will approach US American literature and literary criticism as rooted and visionary traditions, as struggles to represent everyday realities and to create conditions for greater social justice. We will focus primarily, then, on the social content of the literature, on specific matters of concern to writers and their communities. I have divided our readings into three broad sections; within each we will read, roughly, chronologically.

1. *Life-Writing and Education in America*

2. *Poems of Protest and Vision*

3. *Movements toward Justice*

In the first section, we will read autobiographical excerpts focused on American educational experiences. Written by Russian Jewish immigrants, Native Americans, European Americans, and African Americans, these examples of life-writing will give us a chance to think about how "America," as an idea and as a place, has been shaped by formal and informal education. The second section, "Poems of Protest and Vision," presents work by a diverse set of poets who infuse their writing with social and literary concerns. Here, we will confront a number of subjects: lynching, community resistance, love, divorce, divisions between people, divisions within the self, and personal strength. We will explore how the poems forge new possibilities for understanding and acting in our lives. Finally, in section three, "Movements toward Justice," we will turn to short fiction that dramatizes the act of speaking truth to power, whether that power resides in political office, capitalism, or an intimate relation. We will conclude with contemporary writers who contribute both dreams and strategies for creating a more just social order.

Something New

I have taught the second half of the American literature survey class many times—and I always enjoy it and always resist it. There is much that is rich, wondrous, and energizing about US American literature. It is my chosen field of specialty. My enjoyment will be obvious to you. Here are some causes of my resistance:

Teachers of survey classes generally include in their course description a sentence like this: "While we cannot cover all the works produced in this time period, we will read a broad selection of literary works . . ." I have written this line myself many times, and now I ask, What does this explanation or apology mean? Am I suggesting that if we had just a little more time, we could read all the literature written between 1865-2006? Am I claiming that while we won't read everything, we will read what is most important, or what I think is most important, or what some literary critics have decided is most important? Am I saying that the coverage frame for any course is simply outrageous, and it is best to dispense with the fiction right away?" Why are English majors required to take literature surveys on US American and British literatures. Why isn't world literature a requirement? Or North American literature? What might be gained or lost by approaching literature less from a national and more from a global perspective?

Confronted with these questions, I have designed this semester as a laboratory, which will consist of two overlapping creations: 1) discussions and projects generated by the syllabus you

now hold in your hand, one model of the course under discussion; and 2) your collaborative effort to design an ideal syllabus for a US American literature survey course.

Since we are not reading any plays, I invite anyone who is interested and able to join in a discussion of Arthur Miller's The Crucible, which will take place over the course of four days in another class I am teaching, ENG 342. See the schedule below for times.

Course Goals

- To increase your intellectual curiosity about life and literature
- To explore how the study of literature can also be the study of culture and history
- To consider and experiment with different approaches to the US American literature survey course
- To become familiar with US American literature written between 1865 and the present
- To learn to read literary works attentively and intelligently
- To learn to ask analytical, original, and compelling questions
- To express your ideas, in class and in writing, with confidence and to respond thoughtfully to the ideas of others

Teaching Philosophy

I want the English classes I teach to be sites of engagement with the world—in all its complexity, beauty, pain. The classroom can be a place where words and our interaction with words compel us to rethink what we think we know. It should not be easy, nor should it always comfortable. Because I am interested in how literature can change, not simply reflect, realities, my classes move back and forth between texts and contexts, theories and practices. I try to select literature that is formally compelling, socially meaningful, and politically charged. My hope is that our discussions will not be narrowly focused or limited in any way. I hope that we can attend seriously to the challenges of literature and literary scholarship, and to the challenges of a classroom where they may well be differences of opinion and will certainly be differences in experience. I hope that we can, this semester, begin to involve ourselves in the processes of thinking, deliberating, and acting that will, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "make real the promises of democracy."

Required Texts (at WVU Bookstore)

Paul Lauter, ed. *Heath Anthology of American Literature* Vols. C, D, and E (5th Ed.)

Grading Breakdown

Syllabus Project - 25 points
First exam - 20 points
Second exam - 20 points
Reader Responses - 20 points
Class Discussion - 15 points

Grading Scale

A+ - 98-100 points
A - 97-94 points
A- - 93-91 points
B+ - 90-88 points
B - 87-84 points
B- - 83-81 points
C+ - 80-78 points
C - 77-74 points
C- - 73-71 points
D - 61-70 points
F - 60 points or below

REQUIREMENTS

A. Class Discussion and Attendance—15 points

If this course were only about reading stories and poems, we could all go off and do that by ourselves. If it were only about listening to what one person has to say about literature, we could all find a great lecture on video or audio. But English courses are about more than the act of reading and the acquisition of information. I believe they are also about learning how to think, and I believe that the best learning happens in literature classes that are truly interactive—with a critical mass of voices participating at every session. So. I expect everyone to participate.

That said, I hated to talk in my undergraduate classes and in many of my graduate classes. I understand the pressure, uncertainty, and boredom that can lead to silence. I will do my best to

create an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and open, intellectual inquiry. I have become rather bureaucratic about quantifying participation because I have found that this approach does yield more voices. Eventually, most students (as they've written on evaluations) begin to speak because they want to and have something to say, and not (just) because they want points.

There are many ways that you can contribute to discussion: you can ask questions about our readings; you can make observations; you can read aloud your written responses; you can lead discussions in small groups. Please note the following policies with regard to participation and attendance.

- In order to receive all 15 points for discussion, you must participate regularly, which means about once a week, offering substantive comments or questions.
- If you speak occasionally (on average, one comment every 3 weeks), you will receive 10 points.
- If you never or rarely speak in this class but have a strong attendance record, you will receive 5 points. (This makes receiving an A in the class impossible.)
- You are allowed three absences with no penalty. If you do miss class, you are responsible for finding out about handouts or assignments.
- If you miss more than three classes, your final grade will be reduced one letter grade. For each additional absence, your final grade will be reduced by a half letter. If you experience an emergency, please speak with the Dean of Student Affairs and have the necessary documentation forwarded to me.
- Occasional lateness may happen. However, if you are regularly late (more than five minutes late more than three times during this semester), I will count that habitual lateness as a full absence. At any point in the semester, you can ask me what your participation grade is.

B) Reader Responses—20 points

Throughout the semester you will write four short reader responses (500 words, typed, single-spaced). You can choose which literary texts that you respond to, but make sure that you pace your responses, turning in a response about every 2 weeks. Responses should be handed in on the day that we begin discussion of the work(s) that you've chosen to consider. Late work will

receive 0 points unless we have made previous arrangements or there is a documented emergency. I'm asking you to write these responses for very practical reasons. First, it is easier to talk about literature after you have thought about it on your own. Secondly, these responses will help you prepare for the exams. The response should offer a careful, polished analysis of one of our texts. To avoid plot summaries, you should begin your response with a question. This opening question should focus on a specific conflict, scene, idea, character, or line. Don't try to cover everything! Your responses must include direct quotations with proper page citation. (Include the page number at the end of the quotation.) Later in the semester, you might try to incorporate previous works as well, making comparisons or contrasts. Always use your writing as a way to answer, or ask, questions about literature, history, and culture. Feel free to be creative and experimental in your writing. The first-person voice is always welcome. (Note: there is a creative writing option due on or before Sept. 12, which will count as one reader response.)

C) Two Exams—20 points each

There will be two in-class exams—the first one on Oct 5 and the second on Nov. 16. You will be asked to respond to significant quotations from the literary texts we have studied. Your task will be to a) identify the source for each quotation from a provided list; b) to situate the quotation in the overall context of the story, autobiography, speech, essay, or poem; and c) to provide a compelling analysis that identifies key ideas, images, or themes. I will provide study guides for both exams.

D) Experiential Learning: the Syllabus Project—Total of 25 points

This project has three parts: 1) The syllabus; 2) The rationale; and 3) The group presentation and feedback from the audience

1) The Syllabus (10 points)

The Purpose

In small groups working throughout the semester, you will design your own version of this course. The point of this project is to have you experience the difficulty, strangeness, anxiety, and pleasure involved in selecting and organizing a literature course. I do not assume that you will all be English teachers or that you will ever need to compose a syllabus. But you are all college students, and this project will give you an opportunity to handle one of the primary ways that knowledge is created, organized and conveyed in the university—the syllabus. After this project, you will read course syllabi with a more discerning, informed eye, and you will be able to

put this and other classes into a new perspective that, I hope, takes into account other ways of shaping fields and disciplines.

The Procedure

I will give you class time to prepare your project, but you will also need to meet several times with your group outside of class. I do not expect that you will have read everything that your group includes on the syllabus. I will expect that each member of each group will be able to articulate the reasons for your selections and organization. Here are some questions that you might consider in your groups.

- What should determine our selection of literary works?
- Should there be a single guiding question to organize our syllabus, or a number of separate units?
- Should we include information about the time a literary work was produced or about the author's life? Should we include critical or theoretical materials?
- Should the course be multidisciplinary?
- Should we arrange our selections according to chronology, genre, theme, literary movement, national region, or some other category?
- Should we include popular literature?
- What do we hope to teach? Why?

One helpful resource will be the American literature syllabi collected by Project CROW (Course Resources on the Web) http://www.millikin.edu/aci/crow/. You are also encouraged to check out the syllabi listed by the WVU Center for Literary Computing (http://www.as.wvu.edu:8000/clc/projects/kbase/). The Heath Anthology and other literature anthologies should be prime resources as well. However, do not limit your reading to only American literature survey classes, or even only English classes. Take a look at the syllabi from your other classes this semester. Are there assignments or approaches you would like to emulate?

2) The Rationale (5 points)

Everyone will write their own individual, 500-word rationale to explain how the group syllabus came together. This is your chance to describe what you had hoped for and may or may not have achieved in your group deliberations. This is also your chance to convey if you learned anything by designing a literature syllabus.

3) Presentations (5 points) and Feedback (5 points)

In the final two weeks of class, each group will have 15 minutes to present their syllabus as if it were their first day of class. These presentations can be as creative as you like—be the professor you wish you had! After each presentation, the class will have about 10 minutes to provide written feedback, which I will collect and transform into a document for each working group.

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Plagiarism/Cheating. The following definitions are from the West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog. Please see the section on Academic Integrity and Dishonesty for the full definition and discussion of procedures.

Plagiarism: material that has been knowingly obtained or copied in whole or in part, from the work of others . . . including (but not limited to) another individual's academic composition.

Cheating: doing academic work for another student, or providing one's own work for another student to copy and submit as his / her own.

Scholastic dishonesty: involves misrepresenting as your own work any part of work done by another; submitting the same paper or substantially similar papers to meet the requirements of more than one course without the written approval and consent of all instructors concerned; depriving another student of necessary course materials; interfering with another's work.

Clear cases of plagiarism or cheating may result in an unforgivable F for the course. If you have any question about how to document sources, please talk to me.

Cell Phone and Pager Courtesy. Before class, please turn off cell phones and pagers.

Social Justice. I work to realize my own commitment to social justice in the classroom. Please let me know if there is any way to create a more inclusive environment that is free of discrimination based on race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color, or national origin.

Accommodating Disabilities. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation, please let me know. You should also make arrangements with Disability Services (293-6700).

Emergencies or Health Crises. If you have an emergency or serious health problem in the course of the semester, you or your family should immediately contact the Office of Student Life in E. Moore Hall (293-5611). The Dean of Student Life will communicate with me concerning your problem and authorize me to make arrangements for you. Please reserve the Dean's services for serious circumstances or emergencies.

Calendar

*Note: For each of the reading assignments, also read the introductory note about the author.

Tues Aug 22 Introductions

Life-Writing and Education in America

Thurs: Aug 24 Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa), from School Days of an Indian Girl (C: 809-819)
Ghost Dance Songs (C: 214-217)

Tues. Aug 29 Abraham Cahan, from Yekl (C: 768-775);
Mary Antin, from The Promised Land (C: 821-829)

Thurs. Aug 31 Edith Maud Eaton (Sui Sin Far), "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (C: 776-786)
Handout: Mark Twain, "There is only one expert"
Information for Syllabus Project

The Crucible Option: Tues/Thurs. (Sept 5, 7, 12, 14) 1:00-2:15 Stansbury 46C

Tues. Sept 5 Henry Adams, from The Education of Henry Adams (C: 621-642)
Booker T. Washington, from Up from Slavery (D: 868-894)
Syllabus Project Groups

Thurs. Sept. 7 W.E.B. DuBois, from The Souls of Black Folk (D: 894-917)
Handout: W.E.B. Dubois, from "Criteria for Negro Art"
Lucille Clifton, "reply" (E: 2545)

Handout: William Andrews, "The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography: Theory and Explication"

Tues. Sept. 12 Malcolm X, from The Autobiography of Malcolm X (E: 2273-2279)
Tato Laviera, "AmeRícan" (E: 2960-2964)
Handout: bell hooks, "Columbus"

Creative Nonfiction: **American Identity** (500 words, typed, single-spaced)
For one of your reader responses, you may compose an autobiographical account of an experience you have had as an American citizen or as a person inside the borders of the US. You might consider what your relationship is to the United States. You might reflect on a time when you felt at one with your national identity or a time when you felt alienated from it. Feel free to allude to the autobiographical pieces we have read thus far. This must be handed in on or before Sept. 12.

Poems of Protest and Vision

Thurs. Sept 14 Handout: Abel Meeropol, "Bitter Fruit"
Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," "The Lynching," "I Shall Return," "America" (D: 1594-1598)
Documentary: Strange Fruit
Gwendolyn Brooks, "Last Quatrain of Emmett Till" (E: 2142)

Tues. Sept. 19 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "The Weary Blues," "Drum," "Harlem," "I, Too," "Dream Variations," "Freedom Train" (D: 1519-1529)

Thurs. Sept. 21 T. S. Eliot, "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (D: 1278)

Tues. Sept 26 Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," Directive," "Desert Places" (D: 1058-1071)

Thurs. Sept 28 Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," "From a Survivor" (E: 2321)
Joy Harjo, "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," "Remember" (E: 2950-2960)

Tues Oct. 3 Audre Lorde, "Power," "Stations," "Walking our Boundaries," "Never Take Fire from a Woman," "The Art of Response," "Stations" (E: 2489-2495)
Preparation for First Exam

Thurs. Oct. 5 First exam

Announcement: Professor Elizabeth Grosz, a professor of gender studies at Rutgers University, will be delivering a lecture at noon on Oct. 5 in the Rhododendron Room.

Movements toward Justice

Tues. Oct. 10 Upton Sinclair, from The Jungle (C: 606-621)

Thurs. Oct. 12 Mark Twain, "The War Prayer" (C: 56-57; 104-105)
William Dean Howells, "Editha" (C: 256-257; 269-279)

Tues. Oct 17 Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat" (D: 1577-1587)

Thurs. Oct 19 Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" (D: 1420-25)
Gwendolyn Brooks, "Mother" (E: 2142-2143; 2147)

Tues. Oct 24 William Faulkner, "Barn Burning" (D: 1436-1438; 1464-1476)

Thurs. Oct. 26 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (E: 2193-2215)

Special Optional Event: "Ghosts: A Friday-Before-Halloween Reading." Friday, October 27th at Barnes and Noble, Morgantown (Granville). 6 p.m.

Tues. Oct. 31 Handout: Denise Giardina, chap 2 from Storming Heaven

Thurs. Nov. 2 Dorothy Allison, "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know" (E: 2873-2882)

Tues. Nov 7: NO CLASS—Election Day

Thurs. Nov 9 Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream" (E: 2340-2344)
Handout: "Against Vietnam"

Tues. Nov 14 Gloria Anzaldúa, from Borderlands/La Frontera (E: 2738-2763)

Thurs. Nov 16 Second exam

Thanksgiving Holiday

Tues. Nov. 28 Syllabus Presentations & Feedback Sessions

Thurs. Nov. 30 Syllabus Presentations & Feedback Sessions

Tues. Dec. 4 Syllabus Presentations & Feedback Sessions

Thurs. Dec. 6 Syllabus Presentations & Feedback Sessions