

## English 254 – African American Literature

Prof. Gwen Bergner \* T/Th 10:00-11:15 \* 317 Clark \* Spring 2013

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Office: 239 Colson  
Office Hours: T/Th 1:00-2:30, & by appt.

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### Course Description

This course surveys the African-American novel from its foundation in slave narratives through postmodernism. Covering the periods of slavery, post-Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and postmodernism, we will examine how literary expression varies with the changing place of African Americans within American culture and politics. We'll read novels that offer resistance to

racism, celebrate African-American cultural practices, give voice to individual identity, and emphasize the relationship between self and community. We'll also trace some of the major themes and structural elements of the African-American literary tradition including double consciousness, folklore, racial passing, signifying, blues aesthetic, womanism, and racial uplift. One of our primary goals will be to consider the relationship between artistic form and political content. Secondary readings include African American literary and cultural criticism contemporary to the primary texts as well as contemporary theory.

### Primary Readings

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Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola Leroy*

James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

Richard Wright, *Native Son*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Plus select readings available on eCampus

[Collage by Romare Bearden]

**English Program Goals**--Upon completing a B.A. in English, a student should be able to:

- Interpret texts within diverse literary, cultural, and historical contexts.
  - Identify genre conventions and analyze their effects.
  - Identify and analyze effects of complexity or ambiguity.
  - Locate texts in social / economic / political / literary history.
  - Connect texts to other literary or cultural texts.
- Demonstrate a general knowledge of the social and structural aspects of the English language.
- Demonstrate a range of contextually effective writing strategies.

**Learning Outcomes**—By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Describe the basic historical, political, and cultural contexts of African American literature.
- Characterize the genres and conventions of African American literary expression.
- Define major concepts, terms, and reading strategies of African American literary studies.
- Use the knowledge embodied in the first three objectives to analyze and interpret African American literature.

In order to achieve the learning outcomes listed above, students should also be able to:

- Construct unified, coherent, and supported written paragraphs of textual analysis.
- Demonstrate mastery of the mechanics of quotation and citation.
- Combine the conventions of academic writing with creative use of text, graphics, photographs, and Web links to create an intertextual and multi-modal blog that conveys critical thought on course texts and concepts related to African American literary studies.

<b>Course Work</b>	<b>Points</b>
Discussion Questions/Context Facts (9 DQ/Fs @ 2 pts. ea. + 2 free pts.)	20
Group Class Presentation and Blog Post on <i>Invisible Man</i>	10
Take-home Exams (three exams @ 40 pts. ea.)	120
Final Project (multi-modal blog)	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>

#### Grade Scale

A	180-200 pts.	C	140-159 pts.	F	< 120 pts.
B	160-179 pts.	D	120-139 pts.		

You must complete all assignments and attend class regularly for a passing grade.

#### In-class Work

In classes of this small size, learning comes primarily from the quality of discussion rather than from lectures. This means that students bear a responsibility to themselves and to classmates to attend class and to participate in discussion. You must bring the texts for discussion to each class either in hard copy or electronic format. In-class work also includes activities such as summarizing key concepts from our secondary texts, answering discussion questions, completing writing exercises, peer editing paper drafts, and participating in group work. To complete in-class work, you must attend class; therefore, points will be deducted for absences that exceed the allowed maximum (see Attendance and Late Policy below).

### Discussion Question/Paragraphs

For each book and several of the shorter texts that we read, you will post on your course blog two questions and one author/context fact on the reading for that day (as marked on the syllabus). If you are absent on a DQ/F due date, you must post a full analytic paragraph (not discussion questions) on the original reading by the next day that you are in class. We will use these questions and paragraphs to generate class discussion (they will be accessible to the whole class). You will complete nine such assignments over the course of the semester. Each assignment is worth two points of your final grade; you get full credit for each assignment you complete according to guidelines and on time (they aren't graded), and you get two free points.

### Class Presentation

You will work in groups of 2-3 to prepare a class presentation of 8-10 minutes that interprets a chapter from Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. I will assign students to groups and assign each group a chapter. You will also create a blog post based on your presentation.

### Take-home Exams

There are three take-home exams. The exams will ask you to write analytic paragraphs on topics related to each of the novels and/or other readings we have completed since the last exam (exams are not cumulative). We will workshop drafts of your exams in class. You will hand your exam in to me in hard copy in class.

### Capstone Project: Multi-modal Blog

For the capstone project you will convert your DQ/F and presentation blog postings into a multi-modal blog that conveys informed ideas and critical thinking on course texts and issues of African American literature, culture, history, and politics. In other words, the DQ/F blog assignments consist only of written responses to the readings; the capstone consists of turning those narrative DQ/Fs into a multi-modal account (including graphics, images, music, videos, and links) to convey in a creative way your informed ideas and critical thinking about course texts and concepts. Although this project takes the form of a blog, you are expected to write coherently, observe basic requirements of academic documentation, and critically analyze your own ideas as well as those of your secondary sources. You can use text from your take-home exams in your blog.

Guidelines: Separate guidelines will be provided for all graded components of course work.

## **Policies**

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### Attendance and Late Policy

Consistent class attendance helps students succeed academically and enriches our class dynamics. Therefore, attendance is required. **You are granted four absences without penalty.** Use these for school trips, illness, family emergencies, etc. You do not need to clear these absences with me. **Each additional absence costs you two points** (1% of course grade) from your total for the class. If you miss a class, you are still responsible for graded and ungraded assignments due in the next class and for finding out whether changes were made to the syllabus.

At the beginning of each class, we will discuss upcoming assignments, due dates, and questions on graded work. Therefore, it is important that you arrive to class on time. Please anticipate traffic and parking difficulties. Everyone has an emergency now and then, so **you get**

**two late arrivals without penalty. After that, any late arrival counts as half a class absence and costs you one point** from your class total.

### Late Work

One full letter grade will be deducted per day for late submissions unless you make **prior** arrangements with me. Assignments will not be accepted by email without prior permission or unless specified on the syllabus or in assignment guidelines. You must complete all assignments and attend class regularly for a passing grade.

### Electronic “Handouts,” Assignment Guidelines, and Supplementary Course Materials

I will often distribute assignment guidelines and other materials by email attachment in either PDF or Word format, and I will post these handouts on eCampus. You **MUST** have access to these materials **in class**, in either electronic or hard copy format. One point per ten points of value will be deducted from assignments for failure to bring guidelines or readings to class.

### E-Mail

I will use WVU’s MIX e-mail system to communicate with the class between meetings, so please check your MIX e-mail account regularly. Although email etiquette has relaxed with the advent of smart phones, please be courteous and clear by indicating your full name and the course you’re in. No texting in class, please.

### Academic Integrity

The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the Student Conduct Code at

[http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office\\_of\\_student\\_conduct/student\\_conduct\\_code](http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office_of_student_conduct/student_conduct_code).

Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me *before* the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

### Social Justice Policy

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration.

**Syllabus** (subject to change, if necessary)

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**Week 1**

- T, Jan. 15 Introduction  
 Th, Jan. 17 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Frederick Douglass and the Language of the Self” (eCampus)

**Week 2**

- T, Jan. 22 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Preface-Ch. VIII)  
**DQ/F #1**  
 Th, Jan. 24 Douglass, *Narrative* (to end)

**Week 3**

- T, Jan. 29 Jean F. Yellin, “Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative” (eC)  
 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Ch. I-XI)  
 Th, Jan. 31 Jacobs, *Incidents* (Ch. XII-XXVII)  
**DQ/F #2**

**Week 4**

- T, Feb. 5 Jacobs, *Incidents* (Ch. XXVIII-Appendix)  
 Th, Feb. 7 Exam Draft Workshop

**Week 5**

- T, Feb. 12 Film: “Ethnic Notions,” Marlon Riggs (57 min.)  
**Due: Exam #1, in class**  
 Th, Feb. 14 Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola Leroy* (Ch. I-XI)

**Week 6**

- T, Feb. 19 Harper, *Iola Leroy* (Ch. XII-XXII)  
**DQ/F #3**  
 Th, Feb. 21 Harper, *Iola Leroy* (to end, incl. Note)

**Week 7**

- T, Feb. 26 James Weldon Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Writer” (link on eC)  
 Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Ch. I-VI)  
**DQ/F #4**  
 Th, Feb. 28 Johnson, *Autobiography* (to end)  
 Ida B. Wells Barnett, *The Red Record* (link on eC)

**Week 8**

- T, Mar. 5 Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (Ch. 1-12)  
**DQ/F #5**  
 Th, Mar. 7 Larsen, *Quicksand* (to end)  
 Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (eC)

**Week 9**

T, Mar. 12 Exam Draft Workshop  
 Th, Mar. 14 **Due: Exam #2, 11:30, in my mailbox in Colson Hall**

**Week 10**

T, Mar. 19 Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Book 1)  
**DQ/F #6**  
 Th., Mar. 21 Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Book 2)

**Spring Break!****Week 11**

T, Apr. 2 Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Book 3)  
 Th, Apr. 4 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Prologue-Ch.9)  
 Booker T. Washington, “The Atlanta Exposition Address” (eC)  
 W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” and “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington” (eC)  
**DQ/F #7**

**Week 12**

T, Apr. 9 Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Ch. 10-15)  
**DQ/F #8**  
 Th, Apr. 11 Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Ch. 16-21)  
 Group Presentations

**Week 13**

T, Apr. 16 Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Ch. 22-Epilogue)  
 Group Presentations  
 Th, Apr. 18 Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” (link on eC)  
 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (3-100)  
**DQ/F #9**

**Week 14**

T, Apr. 23 Morrison, *Beloved* (101-195)  
 Th, Apr. 25 Morrison, *Beloved* (199-end)

**Week 15**

T, Apr. 30 Exam Draft and Capstone Project Blog Workshops  
 Th, May 2 Capstone Project Blog Workshop  
**Due: Exam #3, in class**

**Capstone Project Blog—Due online Wednesday, May 8, 11:00 AM**