

620:053 sec. 01 Major American Writers Spring 2003
Emersonian Echoes

Instructor: Dr. Anne Myles
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I'd prefer you to contact me via my office phone or e-mail otherwise)

Office hours:

Available Tuesday 3:30-4:30 p.m., Wednesday 11:30 a.m.-1:00 p.m., Thursday 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. If this doesn't fit your schedule, please contact me and I'll be happy to arrange another time. I am often in my office at other times besides scheduled office hours; please feel free to knock anytime.

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Description:

This course will introduce you to major periods and trends in American literature, and give you a taste of the work of some of the major writers of this tradition. Rather than simply moving chronologically, this section will be organized around the thought and legacy of a tremendously influential writer/thinker: the mid-nineteenth-century essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, the central figure of the movement known as Transcendentalism. Beginning with a somewhat extended examination of his ideas, we will then move back in time to consider the culture that preceded him, then back to responses and alternatives to his ideas within his period, and finally on into the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where we will consider how his core themes of individualism, nonconformity, nature, and the promise of America get reflected, refracted, and reconstrued in a series of significant works.

Prerequisites:

620:034, Critical Writing About Literature (or the equivalent), is a prerequisite; it may be taken at the same time with permission of the English advisor.

Required Texts:

- McQuade et al, eds. *The Harper Single Volume American Literature*, 3rd. ed.
- Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Required Work:

1. **Weekly responses.** On the schedule of readings, you will see discussion questions following each reading assignment. Once a week, you are required to turn in written response to that day's question (or one that at least uses that question as a starting point for your own reflections on the assigned text). I would like each response to be at least a page in length; I'd prefer them typed, but I'll accept handwritten. You are required to turn in a total of 12 responses, which gives you a few weeks off.
2. **Class presentation.** By the second week, everyone will sign up to do a presentation on one writer/text. Your assignment has a great deal of freedom: You have 10 minutes to present some material that you believe will help that work come alive for the rest of the class. This might involve research into background or criticism; it might be an interpretive discussion; it might involve media other than words – music? drama? the web? We have the technology in our classroom. In other words, this might be but does not have to be a normal academic presentation. Try to figure out a way to be more interesting than just droning through biographical information. Surprise us – grading for this will be generous, but will include a “daring factor”!
3. **Midterm Take-Home Exam.** This will involve some paragraph-long response questions and a choice of essay questions covering the first part of the course.
4. **Pairing Essay.** A comparative essay, 5-9 pages, involving a limited amount of library research. You will choose one writer we have covered in class, plus a second writer of the same or a different period whose work you think has an interesting relationship to that of the first writer. With your paper you must submit an annotated bibliography of at least six critical sources (books or articles) related to your writers and the issue you are considering, and you should refer to at least three of these sources in the paper itself.
5. **Final Exam.** The exam will include A) a short-answer section in which you will be asked to *identify* and *answer questions on* a number of key passages from works covered throughout the syllabus; B) an essay section with two questions asking you to make more sustained comments on or connections between works, periods, and issues we have covered. There will be a choice of essay topics in this section, and you will have considerable freedom in choosing the works you use as examples.

Grading:

Your course grade will be determined by the percentage of points that you earn, minus any subtractions for poor attendance or late work. Especially strong class participation will strengthen your final grade if your grades for written work do not seem to me to fully reflect your overall performance in the course. The total number of points possible for the semester may vary slightly from this estimate.

10 response papers	50 points total (5 pts each)
Midterm	100 points
Essay	100 points
Final Exam	100 points
Class presentation	25 points
Oral participation	25 points
Total	400 points

Your semester grade will be based on the following standard percentage scale:

A	95%	B-	80%	D+	67%
A-	90%	C+	77%	D	64%
B+	87%	C	74%	D-	60%
B	84%	C-	70%		

If you are unable to complete all the work by finals week and wish to receive a grade of I (Incomplete) you must request this of me specifically by the beginning of finals week. However, I will *not* give Is to people who have vanished without a word for most of the semester and make a sudden late reappearance. According to University policy, the final date you may drop the class and receive a W on your transcript is Friday, March 14.

Grading Criteria:

The midterm exam will be graded on accuracy and full, coherent expression in your commentary, and the degree to which your answers reflect an understanding of the texts and issues discussed so far in the course. Your essay will be graded on clarity and persuasiveness of the argument, effectiveness of the close reading and research that supports the argument, coherence of the paper’s organization, clarity and correctness of the language, and use of correct form for quotations and citations. The final exam will be graded on accuracy of identifications and appropriateness of comments in the short-answer section, and completeness and persuasiveness of argument in the essay section. Presentations will be graded on the degree to which they show evidence of research, of your having a good understanding of the text/author, and on engagement/creativity. (See attached sample grading sheets.)

Deadlines:

Work is due on the date specified. Papers are normally due at the beginning of class, but I will not penalize you so long as they are in by 5 p.m. on that day. (Do not skip class because you’re having trouble with your printer, etc.) There will be subtractions from your grade for late work, increasing with the length of time the paper is late. In those cases I will give the paper a “merit grade” which lets you know how I responded to the paper in itself, and the official “recorded grade” which factors in the lateness. I am willing to negotiate extensions requested at least one class in advance, preferably more.

Revision Policy:

Yes, you are welcome to revise the pairing essay. If I give the revision a higher grade, it replaces the old grade. However, you are required to meet with me first to go over my comments and your revision plans. I expect substantial rethinking/rewriting in a revised paper; except in special, mutually agreed-upon cases, I will return unmarked a revision that contains only mechanical or sentence-level changes. When you submit a revised essay, you must also attach the original copy of the first version along with my comments and grade sheet; I cannot evaluate your changes otherwise. I will accept revisions of the essay until Friday of the last week of regular class (i.e. prior to finals week).

Short papers normally may *not* be revised; if you are unhappy with your marks on them, you may do additional ones and I will count the most successful submissions.

Format for Submitting Class Work:

All essays must be word-processed/typed in a plain, average-sized font, double-spaced, with approximately 1" margins on all sides, on 8 1/2" x 11" plain paper. I recommend Times Roman 12-pt. font (as in this syllabus) or something similar.

No separate title page is necessary. At the top of the first page of your paper (I don't care which corner[s]), include your name, the name of this course, and the date. Centered beneath that, give your paper a title that gives some idea what it is about – do not use just the title of the work you are writing about. Double-spacing between the title and the beginning of the text makes it easier to read. Also, please number your pages -- do so by hand if you forget to do it on the computer.

In a separate page at the end of your paper, list all the texts you have used in the paper in correct MLA style.

All quotations from the text or direct references to passages in the text of the work(s) you are writing about must be followed by page references. I expect prose, poetry, and dialogue to be quoted in the correct form(s).

Proofread your paper carefully (spell-checkers help but won't do the whole job [*see?*]); numerous typos and other errors you could easily have fixed make you look careless or indifferent and will detract from your grade, probably more than one or two honest mistakes in syntax will.

Also, be sure to save all your work on a disk. On rare occasions papers do get misplaced during the grading process – or your hard disk may crash. Don't let this become a crisis.

Attendance:

Expected and required. I take attendance. Legitimate reasons for missing class include your own illness; a death or medical emergency in your immediate family; your required attendance at an official University-sponsored event; or dangerous driving conditions. If one of these pertains to you, please notify me by e-mailing me or leaving a message on my office voice-mail, if possible before the class you will miss.

If a situation arises that will cause you to miss a number of classes, notify me as soon as you reasonably can so that we can discuss how we will handle it. If you are going through a personal or family crisis that wreaks havoc with your ability to participate in the class, I strongly urge you to withdraw from it: see the reading and assignment schedule for the last date this semester on which you may withdraw with a "W." Every semester a few students have problems and ask for Incompletes: in my experience few of them ever complete their coursework later. You will spare yourself and me future headaches by not getting yourself into this situation. There is no stigma attached to withdrawing from a course.

Academic Ethics:

All students are expected to abide by the University's official policy on academic ethics. You can review this policy at <http://www.uni.edu/pres/policies/301.html>. If you have any question about what would constitute plagiarism in relation to your use of a particular source, please consult with me or, if I am not available, with another faculty member. Keep a record of the sources you consult while doing research for a piece of writing; you should be able to retrieve all sources consulted if an issue should arise.

Any work you submit that appears intentionally plagiarized (you attempt to pass off language, ideas, or a complete text from another source as your own, assuming or hoping I won't be able to tell) will be graded F, and you will have to redo the assignment from the beginning on another topic, under close supervision.

In addition to the above penalties, I reserve the right to automatically fail any student from the course for wholesale or repeated plagiarism.

Students with Disabilities:

If you have a disability requiring special accommodation in the classroom or for exams or other assignments, please contact me early in the semester so we can work out the appropriate adjustments. Please bring some kind of official documentation if possible; I should receive this directly from the university, but I may not have it at hand.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

January

T 14 Introduction

Th 16 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Introduction (480-86), "Self-Reliance" (537-554)
Choose a sentence from the essay that you especially like or that seems especially representative of Emerson's thought. Explain what it means and how it relates to other ideas in the essay.

T 21 Emerson, "The American Scholar" (514-526); *Nature*, Introduction and sections I, III, VII, Prospects (essay runs 487-513); strongly recommended, Stephen Whicher, "The Dream of Greatness" (Xerox).
Explain the nature and purpose of the American Scholar according to Emerson (and explain the contrast with the image of the "scholar" in a narrowly academic sense). Alternatively, draw together your readings so far to discuss your current understanding of Emerson's views on nature, on society, on human creation (literature, art, etc.).

Th 23 Emerson, "Experience" (568-584)
How does Emerson's perspective in this late essay differ? How does he attempt to reconcile the tensions he encounters? How do you feel about it?

T 28 Henry David Thoreau, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," from *Walden* (643-52); "Resistance to Civil Government" (697-711)
How is Thoreau's writing similar or different in content, perspective, and/or style from Emerson's?

Th 30 William Bradford, from *Of Plymouth Plantation* (79-92, plus short xeroxed extract); John Winthrop, from "A Model of Christian Charity" (92-95); [Anne Hutchinson's Trial], 117-121
Explain several ways that Puritan views of society, nature, or the divine are different from Emerson's. Are there any points of connection?

February

T 4 Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, Part I (182-213)
How is Franklin's vision of the individual different from the Puritans'? From Emerson's? How would you describe his voice as a writer -- do you see evidence of his sense of humor?

Th 6 *The Autobiography*, Part II (214-222), Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence* (273-277)

What is BF's vision of the good life and how it can be achieved? If you could be the sort of individual he describes, would you want to be? Would Emerson? Why?

- T 11 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1020-1081).
"You have seen how a man became a slave; you shall see how a slave becomes a man," writes FD around the middle of his narrative. In what way does he portray these as things you *become*? Also, do you find any traces of either Franklin's or Emerson's ideas in this work?
- Th 12 Harriet Ann Jacobs, from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (982-1008); Harriet Beecher Stowe, excerpts from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (964-981).
How are the experience of slavery and liberation, and the concerns that shape *writing* about this experience, similar or different for Jacobs as compared to Douglass? In particular, how does gender shape both her experience and her representation of experience?
- T 18 Nathanael Hawthorne, intro (786-91), "Wakefield" (813-818)
What do you make of the character Wakefield – how do you read his actions? What perspective might the story be offering on self-reliance?
- Th 20 Hawthorne, "The Minister's Black Veil" (825-834)
How do you read *this* character's actions? Or, how would you contrast Hawthorne's vision of human nature or potential to Emerson's?
- T 25 Herman Melville, intro 853-56, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (856-880)
Is Bartleby a pathetic victim – or the ultimate self-reliant man? Also, what is the importance of the narrator character in this story? Of the setting?
- Th 27 **Take-home Midterm distributed**
Walt Whitman, intro 1146-1152; look at Preface to 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (1152-1165 -- don't need to read every word); start "Song of Myself" (1166-1209)
Both Emerson and Whitman saw the latter's writing as a poetic realization of the former's vision. Point out some ways you perceive this in your reading so far.

March

- T 4 Whitman, finish "Song of Myself," plus two poems from *Calamus* (1216); Allen Ginsberg, read all 2444-2454
Pick out some passages that establish "Song" as a religious/spiritual poem, a sexual/erotic poem, and a political (in the broadest sense of the term) poem. What continuities do you see in Ginsberg's 20th-century poetry?
- Th 6 Emily Dickinson, intro 1254-57, poems #185, #216, #241, #258, #303, #324, #341, #401, #435, #448, #465, #632, #640, #709, #986, #1129, #1624, all letters

(1279-1287). Supplement: 20th-century poet Adrienne Rich's essay, Rich's essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" (will provide xerox). Dickinson lived in Emerson's time, yet the culture and family she grew up in had deep roots in the Puritan tradition. Where do you see traces of either element in her poetry? Or how does she otherwise express resistance to the expectations placed upon women in her time?

T 11 Take-home Midterm due

Mark Twain, "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1333-1342), "Corn-Pone Opinions" (1351-54).

How would you contrast the content or style of Twain's social critique, or his views of human nature, to Emerson's?

Th 13 Sarah Orne Jewett, "A White Heron" (1639-45)

How would you read this quiet story in terms of nature; gender; non-conformity; or some combination of these elements?

F 14 Last day to drop Spring semester course without an "F"

T 18 Spring Break

Th 20 Spring Break

T 25 Henry James, *Daisy Miller* (1549-97).

What is/are Daisy's error[s]? What is/are Winterbourne's? Which one deserves harsher judgment, according to Emersonian standards (and/or your own)? And what does this story, set in Europe, have to do with America?

Th 27 Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat" (1811-1830); Jack London, "Love of Life"
(read intro 1837-39, download story from

<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/London/Writings/LoveLife/life.html>)

Explain how the Naturalist view of nature and the universe implied in either story offers a radical contrast to Emerson's and/or Jewett's views.

April

T 1 Modernist poets: Robert Frost, "Mending Wall" (1903-4); "The Road Not Taken" (1904); "After Apple-Picking" (1905-6); "Desert Places" and "Design" (1909); "The Most of It" (1910-11). Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar" (1947); "The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain" (1950); William Carlos Williams, "Spring and All" (1963), "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1964); T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men" (2021-24); Langston Hughes, "I, Too" (2226), "Dream Boogie" (2226-27)

To respond on Frost: Can you pick out some ways you see Frost either echoing or critiquing elements of his New England forebear Emerson in one or more of these poems? To respond on another poet: Choose one poem from this set and

comment on how it reflects issues of nature, art, America, or the self in the context of the self-conscious ‘newness’ of modernism/modern life.

Th 3 Ernest Hemingway, “Soldier’s Home” (2213-23)
How do you explain Krebs’s actions and/or feelings? What is the importance of truth vs. lies, and what does this have to do with the war?

T 8 William Faulkner, intro 2143-46, “Barn Burning” (2170-82)
How do you explain Sarty’s actions -- what motivates them? What about Abner’s? Is there a basis for understanding Abner, if not approving? Also, what are some of the elements of Faulkner’s unique prose style?

Th 10 I will be away at a conference. Free time to work on Pairing Essay.

T 15 **Pairing Essay Due**

Post-War poets: Robert Lowell, “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” “Skunk Hour,” “For the Union Dead” (2364-70); Anne Sexton, “Her Kind,” “Self in 1958,” “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife” (2474-2478); Adrienne Rich, “Living in Sin,” (2493-96, “I Am in Danger—Sir—,” “Trying to Talk with a Man” (2498-2500) “Translations” (2503).

Choose one poem from this set that intrigues you. Discuss what you see going on in it, drawing on any of the following questions that seem relevant/helpful: how does this poem use explicitly personal, “confessional” material? How does it reflect, or reflect on, American life in its time? Is the poem political, and if so how/in what sense? Is it aware of gender issues? Is it feminist? These poems are mostly not in traditional form – how do we see evidence of the poet’s craft?

Th 17 Jack Kerouac, excerpt (chaps. 1-4) from *On the Road* [xerox]
Do you see this text as embodying positive elements of the Emersonian tradition? As showing its dark side? As not really echoing Emersonian qualities? In general, why do the characters/activities here seem attractive or not to you?

T 22 John Updike, “Separating” (2512-21); Philip Roth, “The Conversion of the Jews” (2534-46).
For one of these stories, choose a sentence in the editor’s introduction to the selection that seems to make a key statement characterizing the author’s work. Use that statement as a starting point for discussing what seem to be important themes, stylistic features, or reflections of American life in the story that follows.

Th 24 Toni Morrison, *Sula*
Response questions for *Sula* will be provided by the time we begin the novel.

T 29 *Sula*, continued

May

Th 1 *Sula*, continued

Th 8 **Final Exam, 3:00-4:50 p.m.**

620:053 sec. 1 Major American Writers
Myles

Pairing Essay (plus annotated bibliography)

5-9 pages

Due Tuesday, April 15

Choose one writer we have covered in class, plus a second writer from either the same or a different period whose work you think has an interesting relationship to that of the first writer. This second writer may also be from our syllabus, or may be another writer from our anthology or elsewhere whose work you have read or discovered. Yes, you are allowed to work on the same writer you have researched for your class presentation.

Do some research on both of these writers and their period(s), both to learn more about them individually and to discover influences, issues, etc. that connect them. In some cases you may find your pair discussed as related, in others not. Don't despair if you don't find them discussed together – if *you* can make a good argument for considering them as a pair, that's fine.

Prepare an annotated bibliography of at least six critical sources (books, articles, or websites) related to your writers and the issue you are considering. Generally, I would prefer no more than two of your sources to be websites (remember, getting into the habit of doing all your research on the web is like eating potato chips for dinner -- easy, but you're kidding yourself if you pretend it's decent nutrition). Remember that you may perceive a number of ways your writers might be connected, but you will need to focus on one or two in order to write a coherent paper. Try to clarify for yourself what your focus is going to be as you are in the research process, before you sit down to write the paper.

Write a coherent, well-supported essay that makes an argument for why it is worthwhile to consider the two writers you've chosen in relation to one another. Support your claim with discussion of the texts you've read by these writers and with reference to your research sources.

In the conclusion to your essay, I would like you to offer some comment on/speculate about what, as you see it, your chosen pairing reveals about connections and/or differences within one period of American literature, about continuities and/or changes across different periods, or about the overarching theme(s) we have been discussing during the semester. In other words, I don't want you just to conclude your points about your writers as a pair, but to set them in the broader context of American literature.

This project will take some time, so don't leave it to the last minute. I encourage you to consult me early about possible pairings that will pick up on interests you'd like to pursue, and about secondary works it might be fruitful to consult. (I will ask you to turn in an indication of which pairing you're planning to pursue and what you think your focus will be a couple of weeks before the essay is due.)

I will happily provide feedback on rough drafts, preferably received at least 48 hours before the papers are due. E-mailing them to me as Word attachments generally works best.

Major American Writers
Class presentation grade sheet (sample)

Name:

Topic:

Comments:

Reflects good understanding of writer/text:

5 4 3 2 1

Reflects research or other relevant effort:

5 4 3 2 1

Clear, articulate, well-planned:

5 4 3 2 1

Engaging; helped text come alive:

5 4 3 2 1

Daring/creativity/uniqueness factor:

5 4 3 (you can't get less than 3)

Total: _____ out of 25 points

Major American Writers
Pairing essay grade sheet (sample)

Name:

Topic:

Quality of argument (appropriate to topic and works selected, paper has a clear thesis, reflects accurate understanding of each writer chosen)

(5 x 5=25) 5 4 3 2 1

Quality of support (evidence and effective use of secondary research, good use of primary texts)

(5 x 5=25) 5 4 3 2 1

Coherence of organization (at overall level and paragraph level)

(5 x 4=20) 5 4 3 2 1

Clarity and correctness of the language (includes editing and proofreading)

(5 x 4=20) 5 4 3 2 1

Textual citations incorporated according to MLA style; bibliography in correct form; paper has appropriate title, etc.

(5 x 2=10) 5 4 3 2 1

Total: _____ out of 100 points

5	4	3	2	1
excellent	good	fair	below average	poor

Comments: