

## American Self-Making

Topics in Literature  
ENGL 2303.009 Fall 2009 Syllabus  
MW 2:30-3:50 Preston 103  
Prof. Neill Matheson  
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### Course Description:

This course explores the ambivalent American fascination with narratives of self-making or self-fashioning. From the nation's beginnings, what Crèvecoeur called "the American, this new man" has been understood to be the product of a society defined by freedom and opportunity, open to the possibility of individuals making their way in the world through talent and determination, pursuing their own self-interest. But the democratic promise of social mobility embodied in this new American individual was often shadowed by anxieties about more suspect forms of self-invention, involving "bad subjects" who refuse to own up to their true identity or stay in their proper place, who try to succeed through deception or subterfuge. We will explore the unbounded American belief in self-improvement and social mobility, as well as the darker side of this democratic ideology, through stories of imposters and "aliens," confidence-men and ambitious women, social climbing and racial passing. In addition to the course readings, we will watch one film.

### Course texts:

Louisa May Alcott, *Behind a Mask* (Hesperus)  
Charles Chesnut, *The House Behind the Cedars* (Penguin)  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner)  
Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography* (Dover)  
Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown and Other Stories* (Dover)  
Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Vintage)  
Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (Rutgers)  
Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno* (Dover)  
Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (Oxford)

### Course Requirements:

1. Two papers (each 5-7 pages).
2. Midterm and final exams. These exams will be a combination of short answer and essay questions.
3. Participation. In addition to participation in class discussion, the participation grade for the course will include reading quizzes throughout the semester. Because these quizzes are one measure of your participation in the course on a daily basis, make-ups will not be offered if you miss class on the day a quiz is given.

**Note:** All major assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

**Course Grade:**

The course grade will be made up of the following components:

|                        |     |
|------------------------|-----|
| First paper            | 20% |
| Second paper           | 25% |
| Midterm exam           | 20% |
| Final exam             | 25% |
| Participation, quizzes | 10% |

**Attendance, Participation, Preparation:**

Student participation is an extremely important part of this course. This course will primarily be organized around discussion of the readings, rather than lectures; student interests will play a major role in shaping our discussions. I expect you to come to class having carefully read the texts for each day's meeting, prepared with questions, ideas, enthusiasms, or objections.

Because this course depends on your full involvement, regular attendance is also essential for its success. More than three absences will have a significant impact on your grade for the course. More than eight absences may result in failure for the course. Late arrivals (and early departures) are disruptive, and a pattern of tardiness will also affect your grade.

**Prerequisites:**

The prerequisite for this course is six hours of first-year English credit, or permission of the instructor.

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students should be able to demonstrate critical understanding of the specific authors and texts covered in the course.
2. Students should be able to identify connections synthetically between these texts, comparing and contrasting them, and recognizing patterns of influence.
3. Students should be able to demonstrate knowledge of major themes and issues covered in the course.
4. Students should be able to recognize and identify the characteristics of literary genres relevant to the course readings.
5. Students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the course readings and relevant historical and cultural contexts.
6. Students should be able to explain and make use of literary critical terminology and other relevant analytical concepts covered in the course.
7. Students should be able to express ideas and perform analysis in clear, concise, logical, and persuasive writing.
8. Students should be able to express ideas clearly through relevant oral contributions to class discussion, and to respond substantially to the ideas of other students.

### **Academic Dishonesty Policy:**

It is the philosophy of The University of Texas at Arlington that academic dishonesty is a completely unacceptable mode of conduct and will not be tolerated in any form. All persons involved in academic dishonesty will be disciplined in accordance with University regulations and procedures. Discipline may include suspension or expulsion from the University. “Scholastic dishonesty includes but is not limited to cheating, plagiarism, collusion, the submission for credit of any work or materials that are attributable in whole or in part to another person, any act designed to give unfair advantage to a student or the attempt to commit such acts” (*Regents Rules and Regulations*).

The policy for this course is that any assignment found to involve plagiarism or other significant academic dishonesty will receive a zero.

### **Disability Policy:**

Federal law requires that “reasonable accommodation” be provided to students with disabilities, so as not to discriminate on the basis of that disability. Student responsibility primarily rests with informing faculty at the beginning of the semester and in providing authorized documentation through designated administrative channels. Information regarding specific diagnostic criteria and policies for obtaining academic accommodations can be found at [www.uta.edu/disability](http://www.uta.edu/disability). Also, you may visit the Office for Students with Disabilities in room 102 of University Hall or call them at (817) 272-3364. Let me know if you have a disability, and we can work together to ensure that you are able to participate fully in the course.

### **Student Success:**

The University of Texas at Arlington supports a variety of student success programs to help you connect with the University and achieve academic success. These programs include learning assistance, developmental education, advising and mentoring, admission and transition, and federally funded programs. Students requiring assistance academically, personally, or socially should contact the Office of Student Success Programs at 817-272-6107 for more information and appropriate referrals. Also keep in mind that the Writing Center provides free tutoring for UTA students. The Writing Center is located on the fourth floor of the Central Library.

### **Course Schedule:**

This schedule is provisional: I may make substitutions in readings or changes in the dates of assignments if necessary.

**Aug. 24** Introduction: Self-Making and Cross-Dressing; or, Benjamin Franklin and Fanny Fern  
**Aug. 26** Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, Part One

**Aug. 31** Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, Part One  
**Sept. 2** Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, Part Two

**Sept. 7 Labor Day; no class!**

**Sept. 9** Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” “The Birth-Mark”; Melville, “Bartleby”

**Sept. 14** Alcott, *Behind a Mask*

**Sept. 16** *Behind a Mask*

**Sept. 21** Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

**Sept. 23** *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

**Sept. 28** *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

**Sept. 30** Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars*; **first paper due**

**Oct. 5** *The House Behind the Cedars*

**Oct. 7** *The House Behind the Cedars*

**Oct. 12** *The House Behind the Cedars*

**Oct. 14** **Midterm exam**

**Oct. 19** *Imitation of Life*

**Oct. 21** *Imitation of Life*

**Oct. 26** Larsen, *Passing*

**Oct. 28** *Passing*

**Oct. 30** **Last Day to Drop Classes**

**Nov. 2** Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

**Nov. 4** *The Great Gatsby*

**Nov. 9** *The Great Gatsby*

**Nov. 11** *The Great Gatsby*

**Nov. 16** Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

**Nov. 18** *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

**Nov. 23** *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

**Nov. 25** *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

**Nov. 30** *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

**Dec. 2** *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; **second paper due**

**Final exam: Monday Dec. 7 2:00 – 4:30 pm** (in our usual classroom)