

Reconstructing the American Literary Renaissance
Fall 2009

English 5326-001
Instructor: Dr. Roemer
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Nature and Goals of the Course

The focus and organization of this course are conventional; the angle of vision is not. It is conventional, because I organized it by familiar genres (poetry, autobiography, fiction) and because we will be concentrating on an era in 19th-century American literature (1850-1855) and five authors (Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville) often depicted as the most important era in American literature and the most revered authors. The angle of vision is less conventional because we will be discussing the period and the authors through three contexts that raise questions about American literature: (1) a Web site that surveys American literature anthologies and histories from the early 19th-century to the present; (2) discussions of canon formation, especially as these arguments reached their peak during the 1980s; and (3) a series of pairings of well-known texts by the five celebrated authors and texts that either have only recently become part of the canon or are still "outside" the canon.

The use of the Web site, examinations of the canon discussion, and the pairings will help to raise questions about: (1) the literary, cultural, historical, and emotional values of the lesser-known works; (2) new ways to perceive literary "classics" and (3) literary criteria; and (4) aesthetic, ethical, ideological, and institutional implications of changing American literary canons (e.g., how readers, authors, editors, scholars, and publishers conceive of genres and literary canon formation).

Students who complete the readings and assignments successfully should leave the course with increased knowledge of this American literary "renaissance" period and its best-known authors and an ability to address orally and in written form the issues and questions indicated above. (For assessment, see exams, paper, and approximate grading weights.)

Required Readings

www.uta.edu/english/roemer/ctt

Course Packet (CP; 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century readings about canon formation, a brief bibliography, and material relating to specific texts)

The Night Chant (on reserve; Washington Matthews' translation of parts of the Navajo Nightway, as presented by John Bierhorst)

Emerson's "The Poet" (CP)

Whitman's "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry (available in the Norton *Critical Leaves of Grass*)

Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
 Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (handout; selections)
 Emerson's "Self Reliance" (CP)
 Thoreau's *Walden*
 Hopi "Powaq-wuhti" (CP)
 Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (CP)
 Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
 Melville's *Moby-Dick* (Norton Critical Ed, Second Ed.)

Tentative Schedule: Topics, Readings, Exams, Paper

- 8/25 Introduction to the Course & Canon Formation Contexts; Instructor's Self-Positioning; 19th-Century Proclamations
- Readings: In CP: Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, & Boyesen; "American Literature 1820-1865 (bibliography)
- 9/1 The Canon Wars of the 1980s
- Internet: Browse: www.uta/english/roemer/ctt
 Readings: CP: pre-1980: Matthiesen; Warren, Brooks, Lewis
 CP: the 1980's essays -- Lauter through Roemer
 CP: post 1980s – Csicsila & Grossman
 (Reserve): Krupnick, Donadio
- 9/8 Chant Ways: Part I
- Readings: Matthews' *Night Chant* in Bierhorst (reserve)
 CP: map/diagram; Witherspoon, Natonabah, Faris
 Internet: wordsandplace.arizona.edu (select: By This Song I Walk)
- 9/15 Chant Ways Part II
- Readings: Emerson's "The Poet" (CP); Whitman's "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"
- 9/22 Chant Ways Part III: Comparative Analyses: Poetry?/Chant?
- Re-readings: Assignments for Chant Ways I & II
 Take-Home Exam Distributed
- 9/29 Take-Home Exam Turned In**
- 9/29 Life Narratives: Part I

Readings: Douglass, *Narrative*; selections from Jacob's *Incidents*

10/6 Life Narratives: Part II

Readings: Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (CP); Thoreau's *Walden*

10/13 Live Narratives: Part III: Comparative Analysis

Re-readings: Assignments from Life Narratives Parts I & II
Take-Home Distributed

10/20 Take-Home Exam Turned In

10/20 Short Fictions: Comparative Analysis

Readings: "Poowak Wuhti" (CP); Jaskoski's "Witch Lady Story";
Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (CP)
Internet: wordsandplace.arizona.edu (select two: Iisaw and Natwaniwa)

10/27 Long Fictions: Part I

Reading: Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

11/3,10,17 Long Fictions: Part II (includes post-course "field trip" to the Dallas Opera's world premiere of *Moby-Dick* (May-April 30-May 16; May 13 student rates)

Reading: Melville's *Moby-Dick*; "Melville and the Canon" (CP);
selections from Contexts and Criticism in the Norton Critical 2nd. Ed.

11/20 (Friday) Research Paper Prospectus Due

11/24 Individual Conferences on Papers

12/1 Long Fictions: Part III, Comparative Analysis

Re-reading: Assignments from Long Fictions Parts I & II
Review for Final

12/4 (Friday) Papers Due

12/8 Final Exam; Research Papers Returned

Examinations

The two take-home exams and the in-class final will consist of one or more essay questions relating to the goals of the course. Length limits for the take-home exams will be indicated. A study sheet for the final will be distributed on December 1st. The first take-home will cover the chant ways section; the second will cover the Life Narratives. In part I of the final, the question(s) will focus on the short and long fictions; the study sheet will identify the issues from “Nature and Goals” that will be addressed in part II.

The two questions that define my grading criteria are: (1) How well did the student focus on the question(s) asked? (2) How well did he or she use relevant examples from the primary sources and (where relevant) critical readings to build convincing arguments?

Paper

Due: December 4; length: 3,500-4,500 words (approx. 15-18 pages, plus works cited pages). Because of the nature of this course, I would certainly welcome comparative papers that examine the implications of pairing "classic" and lesser-known works appearing during the American literary renaissance. The selection of texts is critical. If the two texts are too dissimilar, you make end up writing two papers stitched together in contrived ways. Yet the two must be different enough to raise questions about different functions, aesthetics, audiences, etc. of literature. If you wish you may also focus on one author, or a comparison of two well-known or two lesser-known texts, or an issue that involves comparing several texts by several authors. Whichever approach you take it will be important to consider the scope, focus, and methodology (see “prospectus” below). A paper with an overly narrow focus can turn redundant; an overly broad paper can become superficial; a paper utilizing an inappropriate critical approach can become contrived.

Conceive of the paper as (a) personal/original idea(s) that is being tested in the context of a critical conversation. Begin the writing process with your own arguments and ideas about the text(s). Formulate a tentative thesis; even plot out tentative argumentative strategies and organization. Then, using relevant print and Internet scholarly and critical sources (my favorite bibliographic guide is still *American Literary Scholarship*) see how your arguments stand up to the critics’ views. This process may involve modifying your thesis and arguments, arguing against particular critics, and/or using them to support (and give authority to) your thesis.

To help you through this process, I am requiring a prospectus for the paper modeled on our Department’s thesis and dissertation prospectus formats:

1. Thesis / Significance (short paragraph): indicate the text or texts selected for examination; define the primary argument(s) claim(s), or question(s); indicate the significance of your focus and thesis (i.e., address the "So what" question?).
2. Feasibility (short paragraph): Is it possible to address this thesis adequately in a fifteen–to eighteen-page research paper and in a one-semester course? Does our library or do other Metroplex libraries or interlibrary loan or the Internet have the resources you will need. (Note for the African American and American Indian texts, the UTA Multicultural Collection is an excellent source.)

3. Method (short paragraph): identify the critical approach(es) to interpretation that you will use. Indicate why these are appropriate for your focus and your thesis.
4. Tentative Organization (brief outline): In a few sentences justify how you will order the paper. (Remember, an order of increasing importance is often effective.)
5. Preliminary Bibliography (short-title list of the most important secondary sources you have found so far).

Grading criteria: I'm expecting engaging, coherent, and convincing papers in which you can articulate your thesis and its significance and support your arguments with pertinent examples from the primary source(s) and by placing those arguments convincingly within the contexts of relevant criticism. Basic writing skills will, of course, also be taken into consideration.

Approximate Grading Weights

The two take-home exams (25%); the final exam (25%); the paper (50%). See the important notes below improvement and on class participation and group reports.

Gentle Warnings

(1) University policies do not allow professors to drop students for excessive absences; however, in this class for every two *unexcused* absences, the semester grade drops by a half grade. (This policy indicates the importance of the group "reports.") (2) If you must withdraw from the class, be sure to follow Graduate School and University procedures. Otherwise your grade may appear as an F. (3) Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will be handled according to University policies. (For a discussion of plagiarism, see the Graduate School's Thesis and Dissertation Manual available online and chapter 2 of the *MLA Handbook*.) (4) Under normal circumstances, no e-mailed or late take-home exams, final exams, or papers will be accepted.

Encouragements

Improvement: significant improvement will encourage me to weigh an early grade less heavily than indicated above. Class participation, especially in the group "reports" can improve semester grades. Typically at the beginning or end of each class, I will divide the class into small groups and assign a question or issue related to the next week's readings to each group. The responses to these questions are key elements in the class's learning experience. Hence it is appropriate to reward students who contribute effectively to the group responses to the questions.

I am very willing to accommodate disabled students. Early in the semester, they should present their authorized documents from appropriate University offices. Students needing academic or personal counseling should consult the English Graduate Advisor and, if necessary, the Office of Student Success Programs (817-272-6107)

Course Packet Contents

Canon Formation Readings

- 1 “The American Scholar” (1837), Emerson
 10 “American Literature” (1846), Fuller
 15 “Reading” from *Walden* (1854), Thoreau
 19 “The American Novelist and His Public” (1886) from *Literary and Social Silhouettes* (1894), Boyesen
 29 “Method and Scope” from *American Renaissance* (1941), Matthiessen
 35 “A National Literature” (1973), Warren, Brooks, Lewis
 47 “Introduction” from *Reconstructing American Literature* (1983), Lauter
 55 “Integrity of Memory” (1985), Kolodny
 64 “American Things / Literary Things” (1985), Spengemann
 77 “But Is It Any Good?” from *Sensational Designs* (1985), Tompkins
 88 “Designing Readers” (1988), Margolis
 92 “Preface” from *Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986), Bercovitch
 95 “Literary History Without Sexism” (1987), Buell
 102 “Preface / Introduction” from *Columbia History of the United States* (1988), Elliott
 113 “Introduction from *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988), Reynolds
 118 “Preface” from *Closing of the American Mind* (1988), Bloom
 121 “Preface” from *Cultural Literacy* (1988), Hirsch
 125 “Reconstructing the American Canon” (1989), Roemer
 140 “American Literature 1820-1865” [bibliographic essay] from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. I, 7th. Ed. (2008), Baym, et al. [for *Canons by Consensus* and *Reconstructing the Am. Renaissance* – see below]

Reading Relating to Specific Texts

- 142 [excerpts] Navajo May and Diagrams from *South Corner of Time* (1980), Evers; and “Cosmological Order” (1988), Griffin-Pierce
 143 “Beautifying the World” (1977), Witherspoon
 146 “By This Song I Walk” (1981), English translation from a performance by Natonabah
 147 “Conclusions” from *The Nightway* (1990), Faris
 151 “The Poet” (1844), Emerson
 159 “Self-Reliance” (1841), Emerson
 168 “Poowak Wuhti” from *The Holy Way* (1986), Sevillano
 173 “The Witch Lady Story” (1990), Jaskoski
 184 “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), Hawthorne
 189 “Melville Climbs the Canon” (1994), Lauter
 203 [excerpt from] *Canons by Consensus* (2004), Csicsila
 224 [excerpt from] *Reconstructing the American Renaissance* (2003), Grossman