The American Renaissance

English 6a (Spring 2018)
MW 2:00-3:20
Shiffman Humanities Center 201
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Course Description: “Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.” Literary critic F.O. Matthiessen used this quote by Henry David Thoreau to justify his classic 1941 study of what he called “The American Renaissance.” For Matthiessen the “best books” in American literature were works written by Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman between 1850 and 1855. Since then, scholars have challenged and broadened that account, but the term itself has remained remarkably resilient. In this course we will follow Thoreau’s advice and explore some of the most imaginative and provocative literature of the antebellum period. Along the way we will sample several influential scholarly accounts of the American Renaissance and consider how they reflect evolving conceptions of the period and of literary value itself. The first half of the course follows Matthiessen’s Renaissance alongside three influential critical paradigms from the post-WWII period: the agrarian myth, the “American Adam,” and the “machine in the garden.” The second half turns to more recent revisions of the Renaissance that have included new kinds of texts and new voices, including narratives of slavery and racial oppression, domestic novels by women, and sensational fiction of urban crime and frontier heroes. Throughout the semester we will place the literature in dialogue with popular works of art in other artistic media. In an era that produced such celebrated forms of cultural expression as Hudson River School painting, Matthew Brady’s Civil War photographs, Central Park, and sculpture by Horatio Greenough and Harriet Hosmer, why did American claims to national cultural greatness come to rest so heavily on its literature? Class will consist of discussion and occasional lectures. Requirements include class participation and two essays.

Required books: The following texts are available for purchase at the Brandeis University Bookstore. If you buy them from another vendor, please get these editions. Other course readings will be available on the course page on Latte. They are marked “[L]” on the reading schedule.

Frederick Douglass, A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (Oxford, 2009)
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature and Selected Essays (Penguin, 2003)
Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Blithedale Romance (Oxford World’s Classics, 2009)
Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Oxford World’s Classics, 2008)
Henry David Thoreau, Walden; or, Life in the Woods (Dover, 1995)
Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855 Edition (Dover, 2007)
Reading Schedule

I ‘An Original Relation to the Universe’

Jan. 10 (W)  Welcome and introduction

Jan. 15 (M)  Martin Luther King Day – No Class


Jan. 18 (Th)  (Brandeis Monday)
Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837)

II The American Adam


Jan. 24 (W)  Thoreau, *Walden*, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” through “Visitors” (pp. 53-100)

Jan. 29 (M)  Thoreau, *Walden*, “The Bean-Field” through “House Warming” (pp. 100-165)

Jan. 31 (W)  Thoreau, *Walden*, “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors” through “Conclusion” (finish)

Friday, Feb. 2: Response paper #1 (2-3 pp.) due uploaded to Latte by 4:30 p.m.

III Manifest Destiny and the Agrarian Myth

Feb. 5 (M)  Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), pp. 21-68

Feb. 7 (W)  Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 69-113 (finish)

IV Social Reform and the Quest for Utopia
Feb. 12 (M) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Preface through chap. 7 (pp. 1-57)

Recommended: Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), chap. 1: “Sleepy Hollow, 1844” (pp. 11-33) [L]

Feb. 19-23 Midterm Recess – No Class


Feb. 28 (W) Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, chaps. 23-29 (finish)

**Friday, March 2: Response paper #2 (2-3 pp.) due uploaded to Latte by 4:30 p.m.**

**V Slavery and the Vision of Evil**

Mar. 5 (M) Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1855), pp. 164-222 [L]

Mar. 7 (W) Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1855), pp. 222-47 (finish)  

Mar. 12 (M) Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Preface and chaps 1-8 (pp. 3-52)

Mar. 14 (W) Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, chaps. 9-11 and Appendix (pp. 52-106)  

**Friday, March 16: Essay #1 due uploaded to Latte by 4:30 p.m.**

**VI Sentimental Power**


Mar. 21 (W) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 10-15 (pp. 98-174)

Mar. 26 (M) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 16-21 (pp. 174-265) (note: if pressed for time, skip chapter 21)

Mar. 28 (W) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 22-30 (pp. 265-344) (finish) (note: if pressed for time, skip chapters 29-30)
Mar. 29-Apr. 6  Passover and Spring Recess – No Class

Apr. 9 (M)  Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 31-45 (finish) (note: if pressed for time, skip chapters 35, 39, 42)

V American Sensation!


VI The Poetry of War

April 18 (W)  Emily Dickinson, Selected poems, part I [L]

April 23 (M)  Emily Dickinson, Selected poems, part II [L]
Course conclusion; Final paper prompt handed out

April 25 (W)  Brandeis Friday (No Class)

Monday, April 30: Essay #2 (7-8 pp.) due uploaded to Latte by 4:30 p.m.
Course Policies and Requirements

Prerequisites: None

Four-Credit Course (three hours of class-time per week): Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).

Learning goals:
- Hone your ability to close-read and analyze literary and visual texts.
- Gain a basic understanding of the major authors and literary movements of a key period in U.S. literary history (the antebellum or pre-Civil War period, ca. 1820 to 1861).
- Situate those literary developments within the broader cultural and intellectual history of the period.
- Understand how scholarly accounts of this literary period have changed over time and how the literary canon associated with that period has evolved.
- Improve your academic writing skills
- Gain greater appreciation of and enjoyment from works of 19th-century American literature—including works on this syllabus and beyond it.

Grading breakdown:
- Attendance: 10%
- In-class participation: 15%
- Response papers: 20%
- Essay #1: 25%
- Essay #2: 30%

Course requirements:
1. Attendance: Regular and prompt class attendance is mandatory. If you need to miss class because of sickness, religious holidays, or an emergency, please contact me in advance if possible. You will be responsible for posting a response to the readings for the session you missed on the discussion board on Latte before the next class. Students who come to class without bringing that day’s assigned readings will be marked absent. Each unexcused absence will impact your attendance grade (10% of the total). Missing more than three classes will result in failing the class.

2. In-class participation: Participating fully in this class requires completing the assigned readings and contributing to class discussion. Reading assigned material carefully and in its entirety before class on the day it is assigned is essential for your success in this class. You can expect to read between 50 and 100 pages per class period. Please be sure to buy the exact editions listed on the syllabus so we can all refer to the same page numbers, and bring all texts to class in hard copy (bring the book). Most of our class time will be spent in detailed discussion of these texts, so your participation grade includes contributing to class discussion. Every student is expected to speak at least once per class. I may call on you even if you haven’t raised your hand. Please note that in this course, participation includes a visit to a local literary site outside of regular class hours. This site will be chosen by the group (date and time to be determined). Students who are unable to attend that session can visit a literary site on their own.
3. **Response papers:** These two brief (2-3 pp.) papers account for 20% of your grade. I will provide a prompt intended to jump-start your own thinking about a text. Response papers do not need to be as formal or as polished as essays—I am most interested in your ideas and your thoughtful response to a text. I will grade these on a three-point scale: a check for satisfactory work; a check-minus for work that is sloppy, too short, or turned in late; and a check-plus if you really wow me. I will make brief written comments to these papers (often some marginal comments and two or three handwritten sentences at the end).

4. **Formal essays:** These two longer (5-8 pp.) papers together account for more than half of your grade. Each essay should make a clear claim (expressed in a thesis statement) and support it with specific evidence from the text. The argument should unfold in a logical, well-organized fashion and be framed by a compelling introduction and conclusion. Formatting guidelines are below. I will accept revisions for the first essay.

**Formatting guidelines:** All papers should be in 11- or 12-point type, double-spaced, using Times New Roman or another standard, readable font, and not in italics. Margins should be 1 inch all around. Any citations should use Chicago style (for a helpful overview see the “Quick Guide” at [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html)).

**Late policy:** Papers will be docked a half-grade for each day they are late (e.g., from A to A-).

**Academic Integrity:** Plagiarism is the use of someone else’s ideas or words in your writing without acknowledging the source. It is a serious offense, and may result in failing the class and suspension from the university. Please note that your writing assignments will automatically be scanned using plagiarism detection software on Latte. When in doubt, see me or consult the student resources listed by Brandeis Library & Technology Services ([https://lts.brandeis.edu/courses/instruction/academic-integrity/index.html](https://lts.brandeis.edu/courses/instruction/academic-integrity/index.html)), and this handout on “How to avoid plagiarism” ([http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html)).

**Writing Center:** Students who want additional help with their writing are encouraged to visit the campus Writing Center ([http://www.brandeis.edu/writingprogram/writingcenter/](http://www.brandeis.edu/writingprogram/writingcenter/); Goldfarb Main Library, Room 232; 781-736-2130; writingcenter@brandeis.edu).

**Electronic devices:** Computers and tablets are allowed during class for taking and reviewing notes only. Browsing the Internet, checking email or Facebook, etc. is not allowed during class; if I find you doing those things I will bar you from bringing your device to future classes. Cell phone and smartphone use during class is prohibited.

**Communications:** Any changes to the syllabus or class schedule, including accommodations for snow days, will be communicated via the class email list and posted on Latte. Please plan to check your university email account and Latte daily to keep informed.

**Disabilities:** If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.