The American Renaissance

English 6a (Fall 2015)
MW 2:00-3:20, Room TBA
Professor Tharaud
Email: jtharaud@brandeis.edu
Office: Rabb 138; Phone: 781-736-2140
Office Hours: Mondays 3:30 to 4:30, Thursdays 11 am to 1 pm, and by appointment

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 of the American Renaissance, but the term itself has remained remarkably resilient. In this course we will follow Thoreau’s advice and enjoy 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, literature from regions beyond New England, and narratives of slavery and racial oppression. 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:
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature and Selected Essays (Penguin, 2003)
Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Classic Slave Narratives (Signet Classics, 2012)
Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables (Modern Library, 2001)
Herman Melville, Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales (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)

These texts are available for purchase at the Brandeis University Bookstore. If you buy them from another source, please make sure you get these editions. Readings not listed above will be available on the course page on Latte (http://lts.brandeis.edu/courses/newlatte/). They are marked “Latte” on the reading schedule below.
Course Plan:

Weeks 1-2: ‘An Original Relation to the Universe’

Aug. 31 (M) Welcome and introduction

Sept. 2 (W) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836)  
F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), “Method and Scope” (pp. vii-xvi) [Latte]

Sept. 7 (M) No Class—Labor Day (Brandeis Day on Thursday, Sept. 10)

Sept. 9 (W) Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837), “Self-Reliance” (1841)  
Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, “Eloquence” and “Expression” (pp. 14-29) [Latte]

Sept. 10 (Th) (Brandeis Day) Emerson, “Circles” (1841), “Experience” (1844)

Weeks 3-4: Spanning the Continent

Sept. 14 (M) No class—Rosh Hashanah

Sept. 16 (W) Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), “Preface,” “Song of Myself” (pp. 3-68)  

Sept. 21 (M) Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (finish)  

Sept. 23 (W) No Class—Yom Kippur

Friday, Sept. 25: Response paper #1 (2-3 pp.) due in my box by 4:30 p.m.

Weeks 5-6: The American Adam

Sept. 28 (M) No Class—Sukkot (Brandeis Day on Tuesday, Sept. 29)

Sept. 29 (T) (Brandeis Day) Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), “Economy” (pp. 1-52)  

Sept. 30 (W) Thoreau, *Walden*, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” through “Solitude” (pp. 53-90)

Oct. 5 (M) No Class—Shmini Atzeret
Oct. 7 (W)  Thoreau, *Walden*, “Visitors” through “Conclusion” (pp. 90-216)

**Weeks 7-8: The Machine in the Garden**


Oct. 14 (W)  Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables*, chaps. 6-11 (pp. 76-149)

**Friday, Oct. 16: Response paper #2 (2-3 pp.) due in my box by 4:30 p.m.**

Oct. 19 (M)  Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, chaps. 12-15 (pp. 149-206)
Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), “Sleepy Hollow, 1844” (pp. 11-33) [Latte]

Oct. 21 (W)  Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, chaps 16-21 (pp. 206-74)

**Weeks 9-10: Slavery and the Vision of Evil**

Oct. 26 (M)  Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1855), pp. 164-222

Oct. 28 (W)  Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1855), pp. 222-47 (finish)
Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, “The Vision of Evil” (pp. 179-91) [Latte]

**Friday, Oct. 30: Essay #1 (5-6 pp.) due under my office door by 4:30 p.m.**

Nov. 2 (M)  Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Preface and chaps 1-8


**Weeks 11-13: Sentimental Power**

Nov. 9 (M)  Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Preface and chaps. 1-9 (pp. 3-98)

Nov. 11 (W)  Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 10-15 (pp. 98-174)

Nov. 16 (M)  Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 16-21 (pp. 174-265) (note: if pressed for time, skip chapter 21)
Nov. 18 (W) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 22-30 (pp. 265-344) (note: if pressed for time, skip chapters 29-30)

Nov. 23 (M) Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 31-45 (pp. 344-456) (note: if pressed for time, skip chapters 35, 39, 42)

Nov. 25 (W) No Class—Thanksgiving Break

**Week 14: American Sensation!**


**Week 15: The Poetry of War**

Dec. 7 (M) Emily Dickinson, Selected poems, part I [Latte]

Dec. 9 (W) Emily Dickinson, Selected poems, part II [Latte]
Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), chap. 6, “Believing and Doubting” (pp. 171-210) [Latte]
Course conclusion; Final paper prompt handed out

**Wednesday, Dec. 16: Essay #2 (7-8 pp.) due under my office door by noon**
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:
- Improve 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.
- Situate those literary developments within the broader cultural and intellectual history of the period.
- Understand how scholarly accounts of a 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.

Course requirements include:
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. 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 lower your attendance and participation grade (20% of the total) by a letter grade. Missing more than three classes will result in failing the class.
2. Active class participation: Participating fully in this class requires completing the assigned readings and participating in 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. This is a literature class, and the readings are substantial: 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 and print out any additional course readings for the day). The majority of our time in class will be spent in detailed discussion of these texts as well as some texts and images presented in class, 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, which will be the basis of one of the response papers. We will take a group visit to Walden Pond in October (date and time to be determined.) Students who are unable to attend that session can visit Walden or a different literary site on their own.
3. Response papers: These 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 longer (5-8 pp.) papers account for more than half of your grade. For our purposes, an essay should make a clear claim (expressed in a thesis statement) and support it with relevant textual evidence. The argument should unfold in a logical, well-organized fashion and be framed by a compelling introduction and conclusion. Formatting guidelines are below.

**Grading breakdown:**
- Attendance and Participation: 20%
- Response papers: 20%
- Essay #1: 25%
- Essay #2: 35%

**Formatting guidelines:** Written assignments must be turned in in hard copy (they must be printed out) by the deadline specified in the Course Plan. Printer malfunctions, ink or paper shortages, etc., will not excuse late papers, so please plan ahead. 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).

**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. 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), including this handout on “How to avoid plagiarism” (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/; Goldfarb Main Library, Room 107; 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.