EngL 1201W: Introduction to American Literature
Lauren Curtright
Spring 2006, Tuesday 5:00-7:30 p.m.

Course Description

Why was the U.S. the birthplace of the crime detective story? Are horror and demise as much a part of the American Dream as are money and success? How does our national literature represent America's histories of racism, genocide, slavery, segregation, sexism, and class struggle? In this course, we will pursue these questions, and others, as we explore some of the "dark" undercurrents of U.S. culture through the study of texts that critique, as they instantiate, American values, beliefs, and identities. We will study works created by Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a number of genres, including the novel, short story, poetry, prose-poetry, essay, autobiography, and film. The texts include fixtures of the American literary canon, as well as the marginalized. This course is not intended as a comprehensive survey of American literature but rather as an introduction to selected texts that arguably illuminate certain preoccupations and themes in common. However, we will also discuss the ways in which these works present contrastive aesthetic modes and conflicting political views and may be interpreted from a variety of perspectives. As a student, you will be expected to assume a critical stance on several texts from the course in the process of developing your analytical writing skills.

Required Texts Available at the University Bookstore in Coffman Union

1. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Frederick Douglass (Prestwick House)

2. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs (Dover)

3. The Turn of the Screw, Henry James (Dover)

4. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas Johnson (Back Bay)

5. The Gold-Bug and Other Tales, Edgar Allan Poe (Dover)

6. Civil Disobedience and Other Essays, Henry David Thoreau (Dover)

7. Cane, Jean Toomer (Liveright)

8. Pudd'nhead Wilson, Mark Twain (Dover)

9. Great Short Stories by American Women, ed. Candace Ward (Dover)
10. Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust, Nathanael West (New Directions)

11. The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton (Dover)

Recommended Text

1. A Writer’s Reference, Diana Hacker; or other style manual that includes MLA style

Films Screened in class

* Roger Corman’s The Pit and the Pendulum (1961)

* Howard Hawks’ The Big Sleep (1946)

Other Required Supplies

In class: A notebook with perforated pages for taking notes and completing in-class assignments, a folder for handouts, and a working pen. You must also bring the assigned text/s for that day to every class meeting. Outside of class: a computer, printer (or other word processor), and stapler.

Course Policies, Expectations, and General Information

Attendance: Because EngL 1201W is a discussion-based course, your presence and participation in class is crucial. You are allowed to miss one class meeting during the semester, no questions asked, without affecting your grade. For each additional absence for which you do not provide a legitimate, documented excuse (e.g., illness, death, school- or work-related event), your final grade will be deducted by 2/3 of a letter grade. You will automatically fail the course if you miss five class meetings without an excuse. If illness causes you to miss more than five classes, I may recommend that you take a medical withdrawal from the course. Please talk to me as soon as possible if you have or if you develop a medical condition that may cause you to miss as many as five classes. If you know that you will miss a class or be late, or that you must leave class early for a legitimate reason, please notify me beforehand. Since I will take attendance at the beginning of each class, if you are late, you may be recorded as absent. Even if I discover you are present, repeated tardiness will affect your attendance record: being late to class three times will count as one absence.

Class Atmosphere: Everyone is required to pay attention during class. All materials not related to the class must be put away for the entire period. Cell phones and other electronic devices must be silenced before class begins. Everyone's experience and opinions will be valued. Courtesy is expected when others are speaking. Disagreements with others, including the instructor, will undoubtedly occur. In fact, controversy and expression of differing perspectives are encouraged. However, conflicting points of view must be communicated respectfully. Bias, discrimination,
and harassment in all forms will not be tolerated in this class. Complaints, questions, and concerns about bias, discrimination, or harassment should be brought to me and/or directed to the University Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, 419 Morrill Hall, 612-624-9547, http://www.d.umn.edu/umdoeo/eoaa.html. During the first few weeks of the semester, the class will work together to devise a discussion policy to which everyone will agree to adhere.

Workload: The reading load for this course is significant. It is up to you to plan ahead and budget your time effectively. You will be responsible for roughly 100 pages (sometimes more, sometimes less) of reading per week. Because this is a writing-intensive course, all students will be required to complete 15 pages of formal writing, as well as one revision, during the semester.

Due dates: All assignments are due at the beginning of class on the day scheduled. If you know you will miss a class when an assignment is due, you must turn in the assignment early. A late written assignment will be penalized by 1/3 of a letter grade for every calendar day it is late. Early and late assignments may be dropped in the door chute of Lind 330B; you must notify me in person or by email when you drop a paper at Lind 330B. I do not accept papers by email. I do not accept papers more than one week after the due date unless you have discussed an extension with me.

Writing Assignments: Formal writing assignments for the course will include three 4-page papers and an expanded revision (7 pages) of one paper. There will also be an extra credit opportunity to supplement the VG/Voices from the Gaps, http://voices.cla.umn.edu, artist page on Harriet Jacobs or on Zora Neale Hurston. All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced in 12-pt. font, with 1 or 1.25 inch margins, and stapled. All must have a proper heading—with your name, my name, course number, and the due date—in the upper left-hand corner of the first page, must have numbered pages after the first page, and must have a Works Cited page in MLA style.

Group Presentations: Students are responsible for creating a group presentation about 40 minutes in length, in collaboration with five classmates, on one book from the course, as indicated on the schedule. You will sign up for your group presentation during the second week of the semester.

Quizzes: During each class, you will be given a short quiz that tests your knowledge of the reading assigned for that day: your responses will demonstrate how completely and closely you read the assignment and how well you can apply to it the concepts we have been discussing in class.

Participation: Fully participating in the course means that you contribute thoughtfully to class discussion, to in-class writing assignments, and to peer workshops, that you are alert and
demonstrate interest during class discussion, and that you visit me during my office hours to discuss your work, in addition to regularly attending class and being on-time.

Weight of assignments: Papers: 60%; Group Presentation: 15%; Quizzes: 15%; Participation: 10%

Grading: Letter grades on papers are determined by the following guidelines:

A—the paper meets all of the basic requirements and has all or nearly all of the additional features

B—the paper meets all of the basic requirements and has several of the additional features

C—the paper meets all of the basic requirements but has few, if any, of the additional features

D—the paper does not meet all of the basic requirements

F—the paper does not meet any of the basic requirements

0—the paper is plagiarized, or you fail to turn in the assignment within one week of the due date

Basic Requirements (of equal weight): The paper (1) satisfies the requirements of form, page length, and topic, (2) is academic in tone, (3) includes an argument or main idea about the text/s, (4) has analytical claims about the text/s supported by evidence in the form of select quotations and/or paraphrasing, (5) uses MLA style for in-text citations, (6) includes a Works Cited page with end-of-text citations in MLA style.

Additional Features (in order of decreasing importance): (1) The ideas conveyed move beyond the obvious in thinking about the text/s; (2) The paper relies on evidence interpreted fully and convincingly to support the argument or main idea; (3) The paper is well-organized—coherently and effectively—with logical transitions between ideas and paragraphs; (4) The argument evolves rather than remains static from beginning to end of the paper; (5) The introduction is fully developed—it provokes the reader’s interest, situates the discussion within a context or in relation to a specific issue or question, identifies (by author and title) the text/s that will be analyzed, and includes an argument or main idea; (6) The conclusion is fully developed—it clarifies the most complicated point to which the analysis has evolved, returns to the context, issue, or question laid out in the introduction, and provides a ‘send-off’ for your reader; (7) The sentences in the paper are well-crafted to communicate ideas to your reader: the language is clear, precise, and non-redundant; (8) The paper follows established rules of grammar, syntax, and spelling; (9) The paper has a creative and catchy title that reflects the argument or main idea.
Scholastic Dishonesty: The College of Liberal Arts defines scholastic dishonesty as “any act that violates the rights of another student with respect to academic work or that involves misrepresentation of a student’s own work. Scholastic dishonesty includes cheating on assignments or examinations, plagiarizing (misrepresenting as one’s own anything done by another), inventing or falsifying research or other findings with the intent to deceive, submitting the same or substantially similar papers (or creative work) for more than one course without consent of all instructors concerned, depriving another of necessary course materials, and sabotaging another’s work” (http://www.cla.umn.edu/cgep/5.html). I will do the research to determine if a suspicious assignment includes plagiarism. If I discover that you have plagiarized, you will receive a zero for that assignment. Further, you will be required to rewrite the assignment in order to pass the course. If you plagiarize more than once, you will automatically fail the course and I will report you to the CLA.

Student Writing Support is a valuable resource for improving your writing skills. SWS provides one-on-one guidance to writers of all levels of ability. I strongly encourage all students in this course to take advantage of this service, and to make an appointment as soon as possible for each assignment. For more information or to schedule an appointment, go to 10 Nicholson Hall or http://writing.umn.edu, or call 612-626-7579.

Special Needs: If you have a documented disability that needs accommodation in this course, please notify me at the start of the semester. You might also contact University Disability Services.

Schedule:
Class Meeting

Class Activities & Reading Assignments

Writing & Presentations

Wk 1 T 1/17

Introduction; Film viewing: The Pit and the Pendulum, Dir. Roger Corman (1961)

Wk 2 T 1/24


Wk 3 T 1/31

Civil Disobedience and Other Essays, Henry David Thoreau
Wk 4  T 2/7

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Frederick Douglass

Paper 1 due (4 pgs.) (10%)

(1 copy)

Wk 5  T 2/14

In Great Short Stories by American Women: “Life in the Iron Mills,” Rebecca Harding Davis (2-34)

Wk 6  T 2/21

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs

Wk 7  T 2/28

In The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson:

1,2: pp. 141-188; 3,4: pp. 188-236; 5,6: pp. 236-294; 7,8: pp. 294-331

Wk 8  T 3/7

Film viewing and discussion: The Big Sleep, Dir. Howard Hawks (1946)

Paper 2 due (4 pgs.) (15%)

Spring Break

Wk 9  T 3/21

In Great Short Stories by American Women:

“Sweat,” Zora Neale Hurston (182-193)

Extra Credit Project due

Wk 10  T 3/28

Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust, Nathanael West

Group 1 Presentation

Wk 11  T 4/4
Cane, Jean Toomer

Group 2 Presentation

Wk 12  T 4/11

In Great Short Stories by American Women:


Paper 3 due (4 pgs.) (15%)

(2 copies)

Wk 13  T 4/18

The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton

Group 3 Presentation

Wk 14  T 4/25

The Turn of the Screw, Henry James

Group 4 Presentation

Wk 15  T 5/2

Pudd’nhead Wilson, Mark Twain

Group 5 Presentation

Finals Wk T 5/9

Meet in Eddy 102 at 5:00 p.m.

Revision due (7 pgs.) (20%)