ENGL 3090: Dickinson, Emerson, Whitman: American Identity in the 19th Century

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Syllabus, Assignments, and Reading Schedule

Course Description:

Dickinson, Emerson, and Whitman write about the big issues: Truth and Beauty. At odds with their spiritual concerns are the hard facts of literary production. This course focuses on these Transcendentalists situating their universal concerns with their material culture. Students will learn about Emerson’s lectures, Whitman’s constant re-printings, and Dickinson’s handmade books exploring how different forums reveal the relationship between author and reader while analyzing the role of the poet within public discourse. We will be making three trips in this course: one to the University of Minnesota Printing Press, one to the University of Minnesota Library, and one to the Minnesota Center for Book Arts on Washington Avenue, West Bank.

To understand the nineteenth-century poet and the construction of authorship, students must consider how cultural practices change with advances in technologies of production, including cylinder printing presses and cheap, wood pulp paper. To understand the roles of the reader in mass culture, students must consider the accessibility of cheap reading materials and the rise of the middle class, individuality and silent reading, and reformations of the public and private sphere which contributed to a marked change in social structures. Students will be exposed to a variety of methods by which to interrogate those changes and interpret the past by analyzing different kinds of evidence (oral, manuscript, and printed; primary and secondary; public and private) and perspectives for the analysis of archival sources. The secondary materials we survey will help you explore diverse methodologies and perspectives for the analysis of literary art, especially in relation to cultural and historical issues.

This course exposes 19th Century American identity through biographical study of authors, their works, their contemporary readers, and their continued reception. Studying how mid-nineteenth century authors are preoccupied with national identity enables students to reflect upon and determine a clearer sense of their present and future societal and cultural roles. For example, R.W. Emerson’s lectures are intimately concerned with the definition of citizenship, the project of self-improvement, and the ethics associated with individual and community betterment. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is an American epic founded in both themes of democracy and a poetic style that seeks to voice democracy itself. His treatment of the working class, women, and slaves radically address his contemporary democratic issues from stewardship and equality to national identity. While Emily Dickinson’s poetic concerns are traditionally aligned with consciousness, her study of the interior life, the life of the mind, provides an interesting counterpoint to the other two authors by raising questions about the division between public and
private space and the responsibility artists may or may not have to the political. The role of the poet within public discourse will be interrogated to consider poetics, taste, and ethics in the abstract.

The work required for this class will center your attention on developing critical thinking skills and fine-tuning reading and writing skills, especially useful for the humanities.

Course Objectives:

- explore American national cultures as represented in literature
- situate literature and its mode of production historically, culturally, and aesthetically
- engage with questions of democracy, citizenship, ethics, and taste regarding material (literary) culture
- explore diverse methodologies and perspectives for the analysis of archival sources
- develop writing skills especially as appropriate for the Humanities
- nurture a curiosity for reading and interpretation

Assignments:

Readings:
You are responsible for all the readings on the syllabus; this is a literature class. You should complete each reading before class. I advise you to read ahead.

Commonplace Book:
You will keep a Commonplace Book, a practice popular in the nineteenth century, in which you collect artifacts in a bound journal. These artifacts should have some sort of literary or philosophic function (copies of poems, letters, essays, bumperstickers, billboard sayings, advertisements, etc.). You should annotate these artifacts by maintaining a journal in which questions are raised and observations are made about the material nature of philosophic and literary communication, the historical and contemporary forums and institutions that support philosophic and literary expression, and the ethics of both the content and mode of technologies in the artifacts they acquire. You should think of this as a place to do fieldwork as a thinker and write and to apply and challenge our critical and historical readings through your own archive.

Artifact Presentation:
You will present on one of your artifacts from your Commonplace Books in an Artifact Presentation. This presentation will be accompanied by a short (1- to 2-page) paper on your artifact that addresses the three categories outlined above (the artifact’s material nature, its supporting forums and institutions, and its implied ethical attributes).

Poetry Presentations:
You will be responsible for interpreting two poems: one during week two (Whitman) and one during week three (Dickinson). This presentation does not require handouts, although handouts
are welcome. You may focus on what you prefer but also include discussion about the main themes of the poem as well as the stylistic attributes and how they work with (or against) the theme.

**Essay Presentations:**
You will be responsible for explicating one essay. Do not explain the entire essay, but rather point out a passage or two that holds interest for you and this class. This presentation does not require handouts, although handouts are welcome.

**Weekly Papers:**
Your weekly papers must consider the literary writer of that week (Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson) and respond directly to their work. Try to choose one idea or set of ideas and write an analytical paper that works through that idea, quoting the text directly and compiling that evidence in a logical progression to arrive at a debatable thesis. Your paper should have a set of claims supported by evidence and analysis that culminate in an argument. These 2- to 3-page papers and due each Thursday. They must be typed and double-spaced with reasonable font and margins.

**Grading:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commonplace Book</td>
<td>200 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artifact Presentation</td>
<td>100 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poetry Presentation</td>
<td>100 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay Presentation</td>
<td>100 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly Papers</td>
<td>300 pts (100 points for each paper)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>200 pts</td>
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<td>Participation includes in-class discussion, pre-class preparation, parodies, and any impromptu assignments.</td>
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| Attendance                      | |
|---------------------------------| Attendance is not part of your grade. You are expected to be in class. Tardiness or unpreparedness may constitute an absence. Generally two tardy days equal one day absent. |

**Late Work:** I will not accept late work. Especially due to the pace of this course, late work is unacceptable.

**Required Texts**


**Reading Schedule:**

**M, May 22**  
Introduction to this course: “Material” “Transcendentalists”  
Emerson’s “Circles”

**T, May 23**  
Emerson essay: “Self Reliance”  
T. Augst: “Popular Philosophy and Democratic Voice: Emerson in the Lecture Hall”  
trip to University of Minnesota Press at 1pm

**W, May 24**  
Emerson essays: “Nature,” “Experience”  
B. Anderson: “Introduction” to *Imagined Communities*

**Th, May 25**  
Emerson essays: “Circles,” “The Poet”  
Emerson poetry: all  
W. Ong: “The Orality of Language”  
**Emerson parody (paragraph or poem) due**

**M, May 29**  
no class, Memorial Day

**T, May 30**  
**Paper Due on Emerson**

**Whitman: Leaves of Grass (1855) (including Preface)**

W. C. Dimock: “Whitman, Syntax, and Political Theory”  
trip to University of Minnesota Library Special Collections, in the Ford Library (4th floor) at 1pm

**W, May 31**  
Whitman: *Leaves of Grass* continued  

**Th, June 1**  
Whitman: handout comparing “Song of Occupations” (1855 and 1891-2)  
R. Barthes: “Death of the Author”  
**Whitman parody due**

**M, June 5**  
**Paper Due on Whitman**

Dickinson fascicles: handouts  
S. Cameron: “Dickinson’s Fascicles”

**T, June 6**  
Dickinson poems: tba  
trip to Minnesota Center for Book Arts at 1:30pm
**W, June 7**
Dickinson poems: tba
E. Horan: “To Market: The Dickinson Copyright Wars.”

**Th, June 8**
Dickinson poems: reprinted from editions (handout)

J. Borges: “Pierre Menard”
**Dickinson parody due**
**Paper Due on Dickinson**