English 342: American Literature to 1860
Fall 2009; Tuesdays/Thursdays 11:30-12:20; HH 150
Prof. V. Lamont
Office: HH 226; Office Hours: after class or by appointment
Contact: vlamont@uwaterloo.ca or via ACE

Course Description

This course will survey American literature from the Colonial period to the Civil War, in the context of historical and cultural developments that shaped and were shaped by the literature. These include the following:

• What the literary record tells us about early encounters between European colonists and indigenous peoples,
• Literary contributions to the formation of “America” as an idea,
• Literary debates about colonial expansion into the West,
• Important American cultural figures and movements (e.g. transcendentalism, new poetic forms, the American gothic),
• Slavery in America and literary responses to it,
• Literary debates about women’s place and rights in American literature,
• Changing roles of the author in American culture.

Required Texts (Available in Bookstore)


Recommended Texts (Available in Bookstore)

The Little Brown Compact Handbook (all proceeds donated to the English Society)

Schedule of Classes, Topics, and Readings

Please bring your texts to class. *Indicates reading response due noon the day before on ACE listserv. See Assignments section for details.

Week 1 (Sept 15/17). Introduction to Course; Encounters Between Europeans and Indigenous People; The Captivity Narrative
Tuesday: Introduction to the course.
*Thursday: Introduction (1-15); Creation Stories (17-24); Mary Rowlandson (117-134)
Week 2 (Sept. 22/24). America: Founding Ideas; Slavery: America’s Seedy Underbelly; The American Gothic
*Tuesday: Introduction (151-160); Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography Part II (276-293); De Crevecoeur, Letter IX (320-23); Mercy Warren, “To a Patriotic Gentleman” (401)
*Thursday: Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (689-702)

Week 3 (Sept. 29/Oct 1). Western Expansion in Literature; American Literary Nationalism
*Tuesday: Introduction (431-50); Cooper, excerpt from The Last of the Mohicans (467-76); William Apess, “An Indian’s Looking-Glass” (484-88)
Thursday: No Class (a perfect opportunity to get ahead on your reading, especially Uncle Tom’s Cabin!)

Week 4 (Oct 6/8). “Second Wave” American Literary Nationalism; Gender and Genius
*Tuesday: Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (532-550)
*Thursday: Margaret Fuller, excerpts from The Great Lawsuit (736-48)

Week 5 (Oct 13/15). Slavery; The Abolition Movement; Sentimentalism
*Tuesday: Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (to 245)
Thursday: Continuation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

Week 6 (Oct 20/22). Slave Narratives
*Tuesday: Uncle Tom’s Cabin (to end)
*Thursday: Frederick Douglass, first half of “Narrative of the Life…” (to 956)

Week 7 (Oct. 27/29). Slave Narratives
*Tuesday: finish Douglass, “Narrative of the Life…” (to 988)
*Thursday: Jacobs (excerpts from “Incidents in the Life” 804-25.)

Week 8 (Nov. 3/5). The “Woman Question”; The American Renaissance
*Tuesday: The Scarlet Letter (Including “The Custom House”, to 104)
Thursday: The Scarlet Letter

Week 9 (Nov 10/12). Dissent in American Literature
*Tuesday: Tuesday: The Scarlet Letter (to end)
*Thursday: Thoreau (“Resistance to Civil Government” 829-844)

Week 10 (Nov 17/19). American Authorship
*Tuesday: Melville, “Bartleby, The Scrivener” (1093-1118)
*Thursday: Melville, “Benito Cereno,” (1118-1174)

Week 11 (Nov 24-26). Innovations in American Poetry
*Tuesday: Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1011-1055)
*Thursday: Dickinson, “Because I could not stop for Death” (1214); “Publication is the Auction” (1219); “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” (1218)
Week 12 (Dec. 1/3): Catch-up; Review

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Formulate independent responses to texts and articulate them verbally and in writing.
- Explain how primary texts are connected to key literary movements and historical contexts.
- Recognize and compare formal characteristics of literary texts (e.g. figurative language, narrative structure, point of view).
- Recognize in contemporary American popular culture the influence of themes, forms, or issues from the pre-1860 period.

Assignments and Evaluation

Reading Responses (30%)
Due: On ACE discussion listserv by 12:00 PM on the day before class.

This assignment evaluates your preparation for class. I will post three questions about the assigned texts that you will respond to on the discussion listserv. I might give you specific questions to respond to, or I might just ask for your general response to the text. I’ll give you one mark for each answer (hence each response is worth 3 marks), but if it’s not evident you completed the assigned reading, you’ll get a zero on the whole response (i.e. 0/3). I’ll drop the lowest three marks when I calculate your final grade for this assignment (to allow for sick days, hangovers, co-op interviews, don’t-feel-like-going-to-class-today, etc.). If you bomb on a response you can make up for it by giving a verbal response in class the next day that clearly demonstrates that you read the text. If you miss class you won’t get credit for your response because the whole point of this assignment is to facilitate class discussion. There will be no opportunity to make up additional missed posts without medical documentation that meets UW regulations.

Guidelines: you’ll be divided into groups of six or so for the listserv. You must read previous posts and respond to and add to them in your own post. Your post should be about 100 words long.

Essay (30%)
Proposal Due: Nov 9 (10% of essay mark)
Essay Due: Nov 23
Length: Proposal – 500/600 words; essay 10 pages/2500-3000 words.
Format: 12 point Times New Roman or other standard font (nothing too funky please!), double-spaced, 1-inch margins.
Submit as email attachment to me as MSWord or RTF. Proposals and essays will be marked and returned electronically.
Late proposals will not be accepted. Late essays will be penalized at a rate of 3% day including weekends. Essay extensions will be considered if requested before the deadline.

This assignment evaluates three things: 1. your ability to take a position in an argument about a primary text that applies the knowledge you gain from class and readings; 2. your ability to express your position in essay form; 3. your ability to recognize and compare characteristics of texts including formal characteristics (see learning objectives).

Choose a text from contemporary American popular culture (i.e. a text that is widely known and that circulates in popular media such as print, television, film/video, or new media). Compare that text to one of the assigned texts on the syllabus. You should choose two texts that have something specific in common, but are also somehow different. Based on comparative analysis of the two texts, make an argument about how a specific aspect of American culture has or has not changed since the pre-1860 period. Your essay should include significant discussion of formal characteristics of your target texts (e.g. point of view, structure, metaphor and other figures, etc.).

10% of your essay mark will be based on an essay proposal that you hand in two weeks in advance. Your proposal should identify your target texts and explain why you chose them, summarize your argument about the texts and the evidence you will use to support it, identify any research you need to do and secondary sources you will use, and ask me any questions you may have about how to proceed with your essay.

Your essay mark will be based on the ambitiousness of your topic; the clarity of logic of your argument; use of supporting evidence including integration of quotations and correct MLA format for citations and works cited; and essay mechanics including structure, grammar, and style.

Exam 40%
Due: Exam week (absolutely no deferrals except for documented emergencies)
Exams will not be returned but will be available for you to review at the English main office upon request.

The final exam will cover the entire course. It will include two sections: 1. an essay in which you will be asked to compare and contrast three assigned primary texts; and 2. short-answer questions in which you will be asked to explain the connections between primary texts and the literary and historical contexts covered in the course. In both sections you will have a choice of questions.

A Few More Rules and some Legal Stuff

Missed assignments due to illness must be documented with UW-approved medical documentation that clearly states that you are unable to complete the assignment.
If you experience flu-like symptoms or have been in contact with someone who has, STAY HOME and call 519-888-4096 (UW Health Services) for instructions. You will not be penalized for assignments missed due to the flu, provided you follow the above instructions and notify me of your status as soon as possible. See the UW Influenza Update homepage for important information about how to protect yourself and the UW community: http://www.uwaterloo.ca/influenza/index.php.

Acceptable rules for group work: I encourage students to share ideas and help each other with essays by offering feedback on the logic and clarity of the argument or proofing for grammatical and spelling errors. However, it is NOT acceptable for a student to submit as his or her own an essay that has been, in whole or in part, written, rewritten, or revised by someone else.

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. [Check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/ for more information.]

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70, Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infossec/Policies/policy70.htm. When in doubt please be certain to contact the department’s administrative assistant who will provide further assistance.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity to avoid committing academic offenses and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offense, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offenses (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the undergraduate associate dean. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71, Student Discipline, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infossec/Policies/policy71.htm. For typical penalties check Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infossec/guidelines/penaltyguidelines.htm.

Appeals: A decision made or penalty imposed under Policy 70, Student Petitions and Grievances (other than a petition) or Policy 71, Student Discipline may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes he/she has a ground for an appeal should refer to Policy 72, Student Appeals, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infossec/Policies/policy72.htm.

Note for students with disabilities: The Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD), located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the OPD at the beginning of each academic term.”