The American Classics
ENGL 25405/FNDL 25404/LLSO 25405/SIGN 26065
Spring 2020

Lectures:  Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30-1:50pm
Professor:  Eric Slauter
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            Office hours: TBD and by appointment

Sections: Section 1D01 Fridays 10:30-11:20am
          Section 1D02 Fridays 11:30am-12:20pm

Assistants: Sarah McDaniel
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Description and goals:

“The American Classics” invites you to immerse yourself in six works that have attracted and inspired readers since the middle of the nineteenth century: *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne; *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville; *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe; *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau; *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman; and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, by Frederick Douglass. Among the greatest achievements of American fiction, philosophy, poetry, and autobiography, these six books first appeared in a six-year period from 1850 to 1855, one of the most politically and socially divided periods in American history, and survived to become classics because they have continued to speak and to be meaningful to different people in different places at different times under different circumstances. And they will speak to you too, I hope. For our unusual time of “social distancing” these works, produced as outbreaks of cholera spread around the world, offer an opportunity to reflect on both the blessings of solitude and the problems of social isolation—two of the great themes, among many others, we’ll encounter over the term.

What special conditions and circumstances helped bring these works into being, made them connect with readers, and contributed to their longevity? What do these books mean today? What have they meant to different readers over time? And what makes each a “classic”? These are some of the questions we’ll address together as we closely explore the artistry of each of these works, developing core skills of interpretation and close reading as well as the ability to
assess meaning in particular contexts and changes in meaning over time. But the fact that these six books were published so closely together in such a short period of time—between March 1850 and August 1855—offers us the chance to explore in a focused way the crucial literary, intellectual, legal, religious, economic, scientific, social, and political contexts that shaped the production and initial reception of these distinctly American contributions to world literature. In addition to our treatment of these texts as works of literary art, we will also consider each of our classic literary texts as historical evidence in its own right, hoping to better understand the complex world in which they first appeared.

Remote learning:

You will not be alone as you make your way through these rewarding and challenging books. Your course assistants, Danielle Jones and Sarah McDaniel, and I are committed to staying connected with you—in whatever form that will take, depending on your location and your ability to access and participate in different elements of our remote course. This is a new mode for most of us as learners and teachers, and we may wish to revise the features of Canvas we use as we progress, but as the quarter opens we anticipate that our course will combine a mix of asynchronous and synchronous elements, including Panopto videos and Zoom meetings. We expect to hold some of our lecture and discussion sessions synchronously during our scheduled meeting times on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, though we recognize that such forms of engagement may prove impossible to some of you at some times and to a few of you at all times and so we will look for other ways to keep you connected. In other cases, mini-lectures will be recorded on Panopto and will available for viewing ahead of any synchronous Zoom discussions; for the convenience of those who are unable, for technical or time-zone related reasons, we will plan to automatically record synchronous common elements (such as our introductory session or class discussions), but for privacy reasons no recordings can be shared with others beyond our course. (Please see “Course Policy for Recording” on our site.) You will also be able to participate in class discussions through the Discussion feature on Canvas. Your course assistants and I will be available to you for one-on-one “office” discussions as you need. And I will work to accommodate and arrange, if possible, synchronous discussions at different times (between 6am and 10pm CST) with those of you who are very far from campus.

Course site:

Our Canvas website will enable you to engage with these great works, with one another, and with your instructors, in ways that will enhance your experience and give you a sense of community and of some common goals and shared questions this term. But I am also actively building parts of the Canvas site to be more customized around certain topics and interests than I normally would. Our course has enrolled students from the Collegiate Divisions of the Humanities, the Social Sciences, the Biological Sciences, and the Physical Sciences, as well as the New Collegiate Division. I want our website to be a platform where we can all engage some common topics, but also a place where you can explore aspects of the world in which these books first appeared that particularly interest you.
To that end, the website will ultimately—over the course of the quarter—offer you a kind of virtual access to different institutions, spaces, places, and topics from the early 1850s: you’ll be able to skim the daily news of the time; browse the shelves of the libraries and bookstores where readers first encountered these books; read some early reviews in magazines; visit an art exhibition; listen to a concert of popular or classical music; see early illustrations of some of our books; explore the theater and other popular forms of entertainment; tour a factory and learn about the industrialization of the economy; read speeches from Congress or sermons from churches or lectures of all kinds for children and adults; discover advances in scientific knowledge; learn about contemporary medicine and the Cholera pandemics of the day; play games from the period and perhaps even prepare a recipe from a popular cookbook. My hope is that exploring these virtual spaces and topics on your own, following your own interests, will help enhance your appreciation and understanding of our common books.

Special pass/fail grading policies for Spring 2020:

The College and the Humanities Division have both recently announced Spring 2020 grading policies to enable students to elect a Pass/Fail grade until Friday of Week 9 (June 5). (Please see “College Grading Message” and “HD Grading Policy” on our site.) Students who wish to receive a quality (letter) grade may continue to do so. In addition to the policies of the College and the Humanities the English Department’s own Spring 2020 grading policy allows P/F grades this term to count toward requirements for majors and minors in English and requires instructors to provide all College students with a provisional grade by the end of Week 8 (May 29) so that students can make informed decisions about whether to switch to a P/F grade. All requests for P/F grade options in ENGL courses will be automatically approved. Students should contact their academic advisors should they wish to switch a class to P/F.

Requirements:

1. Regular engagement with asynchronous course material (such as viewing of recorded Panopto mini-lectures and modules, as well as posts on discussion boards) and participation—to the extent that is possible for you, given your particular circumstances, recognizing that not everyone will be able to participate synchronously on all occasions or even any occasion—with scheduled synchronous meetings and asynchronous discussion boards or other small exercises for sections. Please give yourself enough time to reflect closely on our primary texts and asynchronous elements before any synchronous meetings and please email your session leader and the instructor ahead of time if you will not be able to attend a particular synchronous session (20%).

2. A collaborative presentation or group project. This might take the form of a group presentation during one of your synchronous section meetings or it might be a project created for asynchronous viewing or reading at another time. Please sign up at the first section meeting. Collaborative presentations (2-3 students) will begin in week two and should aim to help start conversations in your sections or on discussion boards. Your group presentation or project will not require reading or research beyond what is
already on our syllabus, but you are welcome to explore some of the optional readings on Canvas and to use the tools (such as Panopto video) at your disposal there. You should feel free to present about any topics in the texts you find interesting. Presenters might, for instance, isolate and discuss a passage that seems especially significant, discuss a later adaptation or interpretation, or explore how an item from one of the Canvas modules sheds light on that week’s common readings (10%).

3. Four exercises (due at the beginning of weeks 3, 5, 7, and 9) designed to help you build different skills and to generate ideas for a final project (40%, with each exercise worth 10%).

4. A final exercise on a topic of your choice related to course texts and themes due in week 10 (30%). We will circulate some prompts and suggestions for you to consider for your final exercise as you work through the texts and themes of the course.

Books available through Seminary Coop:

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Penguin)

Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (Penguin)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Penguin)

Henry David Thoreau, Walden (Yale)

Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass [1855 edition] (Penguin)

Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (Yale)

Note on editions:

One sign of a classic is frequent reprinting by different publishers. If you would prefer to read from a printed book, I recommend these standard editions; they are available through the Seminary Coop, which is currently providing free shipping. But in most cases if you already own another printed edition of one of these texts you should be able to use it. If you have any questions about a different printing of one our books, just send me a note. You’ll also find digital facsimiles of early editions as well as some electronic editions available on our Canvas modules. In referring to passages from our common texts in lectures and assignments and in the schedule of readings below I will try to provide both the page number to these particular printed editions as well as chapter numbers or titles (or in the case of Whitman, page numbers from the original 1855 printing) so that you can easily follow along.
Pacing:

Please note that the amount of reading in this course averages about 250 pages per week, in the editions described above, but you will find that it is sometimes very unevenly distributed from week to week. Read at a pace that is comfortable to you, reading ahead when you can. I recognize that you will be able to read some of these works at a higher speed than others and that you have many other commitments this term. Audio recordings of each of these classic books are available for free on YouTube and I will place some links to these in a Canvas module.

Meetings and readings:

Week 1

April 7: **Introduction**


April 9: **A Romantic History of American History**

Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 45-138. (Chapters 1-12)

April 10: **Sections**

Week 2

April 14: **The Rise of Evangelicalism and the Age of Reason**

Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 139-228. (Chapters 13-24)

April 16: **Domesticity, the Family, and Love**

Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. xxxvii-117. (“Etymology” through Chapter 32)

April 17: **Sections**
Week 3

April 20: Exercise 1 due

April 21: Sectional Conflicts and Compromises

April 23: The Industrial and Romantic Revolutions
Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 303-469. (Chapters 60-98)

April 24: Sections

Week 4

April 28: Dissent and Democratization

April 30: Reformers and Radicals
Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, pp. 41-175. (Chapters 1-10)

May 1: Sections

Week 5

May 4: Exercise 2 due

May 5: Sentimentalists, Women, and Children
Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, pp. 176-350. (Chapters 11-19)

May 7: The Slaveholding Society
Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, pp. 351-499. (Chapters 20-32)

May 8:  Sections

Week 6

May 12:  American Gothic
Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, pp. 500-629. (Chapters 33-45)

May 14:  Transcendentalists and Materialists
Thoreau, Walden, pp. 1-167. (“Economy” through “Visitors”)

May 15:  Sections

Week 7

May 18:  Exercise 3 Due

May 19:  The Book of Nature and the Nature of the Book
Thoreau, Walden, pp. 168-362. (“The Bean-Field” through “Conclusion”)

May 21:  Individualism
Whitman, Leaves of Grass, pp. 5-86. (Preface through “Song of Myself”)

May 22:  Sections

Week 8

May 26:  Tensions of Democratic Art
Whitman, Leaves of Grass, pp. 87-145. (“A Song of Occupations” through “Great Are the Myths”)

May 28:  **Black Experiences Under Slavery**


May 29:  **Sections**

*Provisional grades provided to all students*

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**Week 9**

June 1:  **Exercise 4 due**

June 2:  **Conclusion: The House Dividing**


June 4:  [No Lecture] College Reading Period

June 5:  [No Sections] College Reading Period

**Deadline to elect Pass/Fail**

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**Week 10**

June 9:  **Final exercise due for graduating students**

June 11:  **Final exercise due for all other students**