

**SPRING 2008 SEMESTER
ENG 361 -- SECTION 02
TIME: T-TH 9:30-10:50
RM: EVANS 260**

Course Title: American Literature from Civil War to Present (3 credits)
Instructor: Drew Lopenzina
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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursdays 3:30-4:30

Texts:

Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain (must be the Bedfords/St. Martin edition)
Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston
Love Medicine, Louise Erdrich
Slaughter House Five, Kurt Vonnegut
Native Guard, Natasha Tretheway
The Heath Anthology of American Literature, vol. C, ed. Paul Lauter
(Books are available at Sam Bookstores near you)

So then I understood. It was war that made her so angry. She didn't want her babies or anybody else's babies killed in wars. And she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies.

Kurt Vonnegut

The very ink with which all history is written is merely fluid prejudice.

Mark Twain

Course Description:

While serving as a field nurse for wounded Union soldiers in the Civil War, the poet Walt Whitman famously observed that "the real war will never make it into the books." He then proceeded to offer a written account of what those "real" qualities might be that were destined, in his estimation, to escape the boundaries of language and representation. In this class we will launch our own investigation into the literatures of America in the period from the Civil War to the present. As we study the evolving literary movements, the rising voices of ethnicity and gender, and other thematic concerns that shake, rattle and roll through this period of our national emergence as a military, industrial and cultural force, we will pay special attention to the ways in which authors experiment with, and test the boundaries of, language. Like Whitman, many writers of this period began to recognize the inadequacy of conventional narrative forms to express or

encompass the era of transition and upheaval through which they lived. There was a growing perception that our literary and intellectual traditions had ill-prepared us for the times at hand. Language itself was not quite up to the task of representing the shattering realities of World Wars, manifest destiny, slavery, rape, genocide and other afflictions stubbornly embedded in the American/human experience. New ideas, new possibilities and new forms were needed. Part of the excitement of returning to these authors and their texts will be in locating how they rose to meet these challenges, where they succeeded, where they failed, and where the silences must speak for themselves. One question I hope to raise is whether or not the challenge of culture is also the challenge of language to attend to the exigencies of shared and isolated experiences. We will begin with Whitman's Civil War writings from his diaries and poems, spend a couple of weeks revisiting Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and touch base with, perhaps, lesser known writers such as Kate Chopin, Zitkala-Sa, Ambrose Bierce and Zora Neale Hurston. Because we are a nation currently at war, we will sharpen our focus on the literature of war as we move through the 20th Century, reading Hemingway, Vonnegut, and Tim O'Brien. But we will also confront issues of slavery and its aftermath, the forced dislocation of American Indians, the struggles of women, immigrant workers, veterans and others. We will conclude with a great contemporary Native American woman writer, Louise Erdrich, whose book, *Love Medicine*, will bring many of these narrative threads together again. I hopefully project that this tour through the American literary landscape of the past 150 years will provide some important insights into who, and where, we are now as a people feeling our way into the 21st century.

Course Objectives:

- Introduce students to the literary traditions and patterns of intellectual development particular to this time period in American history.
- Foster strong strategies and techniques for critical reading and writing.
- Develop strategies for critical independent thinking.
- Encourage students to confidently voice opinions and to participate in substantive discussions based on demonstrably informed perspectives.

Assignments:

Reading - On most days there will be a reading assignment, and the reading will be heavy at times but never unmanageable. I've attempted to schedule things so that the reading is generally light when a paper is due, and shorter readings follow longer readings. We may not always be able to discuss each selection that has been assigned, but you will, nevertheless, be responsible for the whole lot. The best way to demonstrate that you have kept up with the course work is to engage thoughtfully with the readings, be active in classroom discussions, and be able to refer to specific passages to back up your points. I advise you to take notes, write in the margins of your texts, highlight important passages, in other words, do all those things necessary to help you to recall what you've read so that you may speak intelligently about the readings in class and contribute to the overall shape of this journey. These practices will also give you confidence towards writing interpretively for the three papers that will be assigned

Writing - There are three writing assignments on the syllabus of 5- 7 pages which, taken together, will account for roughly 45% of your grade. These assignments should be thesis driven, showcasing your original interpretation of selected works from the class.

Understand from the onset that a thesis driven paper does not rely upon plot summaries. Nor is it a review in which you declare whether you liked or disliked the pieces in question. Rather it should be something like an attempt to identify tendencies, recurring themes, or structural elements within a text that speak to larger concerns, issues of identity and culture, and how matters of genre, style, and substance are employed in the overall process. Your original thesis should be clearly stated early on in the paper (this is known as the “thesis statement“). An “A” paper should be cogent, well researched, stylistically fluid and grammatically correct. Papers should be double spaced, no more than 12 point font, with, at most, one and a half inch margins. You are also expected to hand in your work on time. Failure to do so will result in a grade reduction. Absence is not an excuse in this case.

Participation :

Class participation is essential in terms of the grade you will receive and in terms of your own understanding of the works we encounter. I hardly know, myself, what I think about a literary work until I’ve discussed it with someone or written about it. I understand that we all have different comfort levels in terms of getting involved in group discussions. But the ability to speak in an informed manner about a text, even if reluctantly, is one of the skills I expect you to develop in this class. Hopefully the environment we create will be conducive to open discussions where everyone feels free to express their thoughts. Be aware, however, that your comments should be related to materials that we cover in class. You should be able to back up your insights with textual evidence if called upon to do so. In other words, this should be a free exchange of informed ideas and opinions on the readings. I will come into class with strong ideas and opinions of my own. Often we will disagree. I expect this and hope to be challenged, enlightened, and entertained by the views you bring to the table. The quality of your overall participation will be reflected in your final grade.

Attendance:

The rule of thumb is, anything more than two absences will be sure to effect your grade. As you are expected to show up to class on time, three lates will count as a missed class. If for some reason you must miss a class, it is your responsibility to contact me about missed assignments or any materials handed out in class during your absence.

Grading:

The three papers will make up 45% of your grade. There will also be three quizzes on the readings each accounting for 10% of your grade. The remainder of your grade will be based upon your attendance, how well you project a comprehension of the materials worked on in class, and the general spirit of your participation. Keep in mind that

according to SHSU grading procedures:

A= Excellent Work. This is work that stands out above the rest, fulfilling all the required criteria for a given assignment in a cogent and original manner while demonstrating a firm grasp of style, research and grammar concerns.

B= Very Good Work. Demonstrates a strong grasp of the materials covered in class and an ability to articulate ideas effectively and efficiently. Academic achievement of high quality.

C= Satisfactory Work. Not bad, meets requirements, but maybe lacking in original interpretation of materials or stylistic fluidity.

D= Unsatisfactory. Does not meet the most basic demands required of the assignment.

F= Failure. Naturally any attempt at plagiarism will result in immediate failure of the course.

Prerequisite Courses: 9 hours of English

University Policy on Academic Dishonesty:

All students are expected to engage in academic pursuits in a manner that is above reproach. Students are expected to maintain complete honesty and integrity in the academic experiences both in and out of the classroom. Any student found guilty of dishonesty in any phase of academic work will be subject to disciplinary action. The University and its official representatives may initiate disciplinary proceedings against a student accused of any form of academic dishonesty, including, but not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, collusion and the abuse of resource materials.

Americans with Disabilities Act:

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. They should then make arrangements with their individual instructors so that appropriate strategies can be considered and helpful procedures can be developed to ensure that participation and achievement opportunities are not impaired.

Religious Holidays:

Section 51.911 (b) of the Texas Education Code requires that an institution of higher education excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, and in travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence, and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence.

Visitors in the Classroom:

Unannounced visitors to class must present a current, official SHSU identification card to be permitted into the classroom. They must not present a disruption to the class by their

attendance. If the visitor is not a registered student, it is at the instructor's discretion whether or not the visitor will be allowed to remain in the classroom.

This instructor does not discourage visitors in the class as long as I am informed of the visit prior to class.

Instructor Evaluations:

You will be asked to complete a course evaluation at the end of this semester.

Code of Conduct:

Classroom rules of conduct for the University can be found at

<http://www.shsu.edu/students/guide/dean/codeofconduct.html>.

Section 5.2.22 defines classroom disturbances.

- Cell phones must be turned off prior to entering this class.
- No movies, photos, tape recordings, or artists' renderings of the instructor or anyone else in the class are allowed without prior permission from the instructor.
- I do not allow open laptops in this classroom or the use of handheld portable electronic devices.
- All luggage must be stowed in the overhead compartments.
- According to University policy, no alcoholic beverages, firearms, or weapons of mass destruction allowed in the classroom.

Important: This syllabus is your contract for this class. If you have any questions about policy, grading, or the overall purpose of the course, refer back to this document.

Schedule

Jan.	17	Introductions/Civil War Letters
	22	Walt Whitman's "Drum Taps" (handout)
	24	Mark Twain's <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (32-100)
	29	Mark Twain's <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (100-215)
	31	Mark Twain's <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (215-263)
Feb.	5	Group Presentations The Controversy over the Ending: Toni Morrison and assigned readings
	7	Henry James' "Daisy Miller: A Study" (Heath)
	12	Quiz - 1 Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby" (Heath)

- 14 Stephen Crane's "A Mystery of Heroism" (Heath)
Ambrose Bierce's "Chickamauga" (Heath)
- 19 W. E. B. Du Bois' "The Dawn of Freedom" (handout)
- 21 Paul Laurence Dunbar's Writings (Heath)
Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "Sister Josepha" (Heath)
- 26 **First Paper Due**
Mark Twain's "Grief and Mourning for the Night" (handout)
Charles Eastman's "The Ghost Dance War" (Heath)
- 28 Gertrude Bonnin's (Zitkala-Sa) "The School Days of an Indian Girl"
(Heath)
- Mar 4 Poetry of Robert Frost (handout)
e. e. cummings (handout)
- 6 The Attack of the Modernists: Prufrock et al. (handout)
- 10-15 **Spring Break**
- 18 **Quiz 2**
Ernest Hemingway "Soldier's Home" and "In Another Country" (handout)
Excerpts from The Devil's Dictionary (handout)
- 20 Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1-128)
- 25 Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (finish)
- 27 James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" (handout)
- Apr. 1 **Second Paper Due**
The Crucible
- 3 Allen Ginsberg and Beats (handout)
- 8 Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1-68)
- 10 Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (69-145)
- 15 Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (145-finish)
- 17 M*A*S*H, "Deluge"
Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" (handout)

- 22 Natasha Tretheway's *Native Guard*
- 24 Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1-105)
Blue Cloud's "The Old Man's Lazy"
- 29 **Quiz 3**
Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (106-180)
Sherman Alexie's, 13/16ths
- May 1 Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (181-297)
Cheryl Walker's "Like the Trails of Ndaakinnna"
- 6 Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (finish)
Simon Ortiz's "Fort Carson"
- 8 **Last Day of Class**
Final Paper Due