

The Sacred and Profane in American Literature

ENGL 130

Fall 2009

Meeting: TR 9:00-10:15 in Root 201

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Course Description from the Registration Catalog

Explores the interplay between the sacred and the profane in American literature. We will read texts that exhibit varying degrees of religious or secular overlay, from narratives suffused with religious symbolism and motifs to the spiritual void expressed by Modernism.

Expanded Course Description

American literature and culture have their roots in the sacred, but contemporary fiction and society are predominantly secular. In this course we will explore both the sacred and the profane in literature. Though at times we might describe these two spheres as what Stephen Jay Gould dubbed “separate magisteria,” the pattern in literature and society is frequently that of great overlap. The texts that we will read in this course exhibit varying degrees of religious or secular overlay, from narratives suffused with religious iconography and motifs to the spiritual void expressed by Modernism to contemporary fusions of the sacred and the profane. Though we will begin our readings in the nineteenth century—when the literary text most frequently alluded to was the Bible—we will focus primarily on twentieth-century American literature.

Course Objectives

In this course you will:

- Gain familiarity with key texts and themes in American Literature.
- Challenge monolithic expectations about what constitutes the religious and the secular in American Literature and society.
- Read texts closely.
- Consider the multiple levels of context in which words and texts are meaningful.
- Improve critical thinking and writing skills.

In this course you will refine your writing skills. Strive to:

- Read all writing closely, including as the toughest reader of your own work.
- Develop a clear, precise, and well-defined thesis statement.
- Develop and support your thesis with evidence and persuasive reasoning.
- Subordinate additional ideas and commentary to your main argument.
- Structure your paragraphs optimally with clear and smooth transitions.
- Appreciate the nuances of diction.
- Mind the mechanics and grammar of formal written English.

Revise as re-vision—writing as a process of discovery and critical thinking.

Course Requirements and Grading Breakdown

Leading Class Discussion	10%
Paper 1	10%
Paper 2	15%
Paper 3	15%
Paper 4 (Final Paper)	30%
Class participation, pop quizzes, and attendance	20%

Required Texts

Writing About Literature: A Portable Guide by Janet E. Gardner (Second Edition)
The Elements of Style by Strunk and White

The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, Shorter Seventh Edition. Edited by Richard Bausch and R. V. Cassill (Paperback 2005)

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself by Frederick Douglass. Eds. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (Norton Critical Editions 1996)

The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway (Scribner 2006)

Parable of the Talents by Octavia E. Butler (Warner 2007)

Recommended Texts

The Everyday Writer by Andrea A. Lunsford (Paperback Edition; Third Edition)

A Note on Text Editions

You must purchase all Required Texts for the course. Unfortunately, I cannot allow anyone to use (exclusively) an online version of any course text as this would leave you with no hard copy of the text with which to follow along in class. For the same reason do try to purchase the particular edition of each text that I have indicated above — the alternate page numbering alone of another edition can impair your ability to follow along and fully participate in class discussion. That said, if you have an alternate edition of the text, bringing it as a supplement to the edition that we are using in the class is a great idea and can greatly enrich our discussion of the text.

Film

Da Vinci Code

Books on Course Reserve

I have placed the following texts on two-hour reserve at the Daniel Burke Library. You will find the first group of titles on this course reserve list helpful for improving your writing and critical thinking skills.

Writing Books:

Writing without Teachers by Peter Elbow. 1998.

They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein

Films on Reserve:

Da Vinci Code

Dogma

Electronic Course Reserves

Over the course of the semester I may place new materials on electronic course reserve through the campus library. These materials will be required reading. Whenever an electronic reserve reading—indicated by the abbreviation (E)—appears on the Course Schedule of readings, print it out and bring it with you so that you can follow along in class when we discuss the reading.

Course Website

No course website is available at this time. If one is made available later in the semester, you will be given instructions on how to enroll in the site.

Paper Formatting

All assignments handed in are to be in 12 point font, double-spaced, and paginated. As should go without saying, use normal margins. In the upper left-hand corner should appear, single-spaced, your name, the course number (ENGL 268), and the date—each having its own line. Each paper should have a title. Center the title so that it will stand out better.

Use as your guide the model MLA-formatted student paper on page 138-42 of the Gardner booklet or in the “MLA Documentation” section of Lunsford’s *The Everyday Writer*. These model papers clearly demonstrate everything from the upper left-hand corner layout to what the bibliography should look like. They also demonstrate such principles as organization of the paper and the method and style of writing literary criticism.

Buy a stapler. Any paper that you hand in should be stapled together in the upper left hand corner. Unstapled sheets get lost, and this may cause me to assume that you have only written half a paper.

Use MLA style citation: (<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/printsources.html>). MLA style is compatible with the Hamilton College Style Sheet, which provides additional, indispensable information: (<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/style>). All papers must have a Works Cited.

Assignments must be handed in *in class* on the day that they are due. Late assignments lose one letter grade for each day that they are late. Keep copies of all your work.

Expect papers to be shared with other class members for peer editing, group projects, and class discussion. Student papers might also be shown to other instructors, writing advisors, and the like. I will ask your permission first if using your work as a model paper to show students in other courses.

A word about content: your paper should offer your own unique ideas, insights, and arguments. Don’t just repeat what we discussed in class. You can start with a topic

that we discussed in class but your thesis must be your own. It should present the reader with *your* argument. This is one of the key differences between class discussion (or even different types of writing, such as reading responses or pre-discussion notes) and the writing of a formal paper. Good class discussions are those in which everyone engages with what their fellow classmates have said in class. In a formal paper, the way to engage with the larger scholarly and other conversations about the text is through citation. In class discussion our ideas often merge together. In a formal paper, particularly of literary criticism, written sources are usually privileged over oral ones and you need to cite those who have influenced your own thinking.

In your formal papers you will want to cite and interpret primarily passages from the literary text that you are writing about, and secondarily from sources such as academic journals in the field. Thus, the most compelling—not to mention most original—papers tend to explore topics and themes beyond those covered in class. That said, bear in mind that in this class you will always be writing about a particular literary text, and this will impose some natural boundaries on the both the scope of the paper and your choice of paper topic.

As experienced writers, you already know that the secret to writing success is to start early. If you wait until the night before a paper is due before committing anything to paper, it will invariably not be a very good paper. Also know that you do not have to wait until we finish discussing a text in class before you can start writing about it. Rather than relying on class lecture for your ideas, read the text on your own and start writing about it early. You can then use class discussion of the text as a tool to refine your thinking about what you have already written in drafts of your paper.

A Note on Evaluation

It is sometimes assumed that merely fulfilling the requirements for the course, or a particular assignment, merits a default grade of A. This is not the case. Simply fulfilling the minimum requirements for a paper or the course is likely to get you an average grade, which would be in the C range. Higher grades are based on the exceptional quality of your work. I also reward the development of your thought and writing whenever this is apparent. Papers that offer particularly unique, compelling, or insightful arguments are almost certain to earn higher grades than most, as are papers that evince an exceptional degree of research and thought.

Do NOT think of a grade of B or C (or whatever) as having been derived by the “deducting” of points from what “began”—by virtue of merely having been handed in—as an A. The “point deduction” model may apply to a multiple choice test in, say, an introductory physics course, but it is not how writing is evaluated in most humanities courses. You might find the following breakdown helpful in orienting your expectations about what letter grades represent on all assignments in this course:

A—excellent overall

B—good with some excellent aspects

C—adequate

D—mostly adequate with some unacceptable aspects

F—unacceptable overall

Class Participation

This is a reading, writing, and discussion course, not a lecture course. Come to class prepared to talk about the text. Read the text closely, engaging in mock dialogue with the text as you read. Asking questions of the text as you go through it will bring you to class with many questions, observations, and arguments about the reading to share with the community of literary critics, readers, and writers that the class will provide.

Note that the model of class discussion that we are striving for is one in which you engage not only with the readings, but also with each other's ideas. Keep in mind that mere volubility is no substitute for apt, substantive, and well thought out comments. In fact, since there is seldom enough time to do justice to each text or topic, brevity is often as important as clarity and precision whenever speaking to the rest of the class. That said, most students speak too little rather than too much. What we will strive for in this course is vibrant and robust class discussion in which everyone is fully engaged and participating.

I may occasionally require that you write 150-200 word pre-discussion notes to hand in before class. Or I may ask you to bring to class one or two discussion questions about the reading. In-class writing might also be assigned. And sometimes you may be asked to prepare a presentation, either individually or in small groups, for a subsequent class.

Pop quizzes may be given at any time. As long as you have read the text the quiz will be easy. Any detailed questions that I might ask will be readily answerable if you have read the text carefully. If, on the other hand, you are relying on Spark Notes, a website summary, the film version of the book, or someone else telling you the plot—instead of reading the text for yourself—you will not expect to find the questions well beyond your grasp.

As a discussion course, attendance is critical. The first two absences will not be counted against you but all subsequent absences will negatively impact your grade in the course. The **two free absences should** easily cover medical, family, or other emergencies in most cases, so there is no need to present the instructor with “sick notes” or to make excuses for absences after the fact, though I may inquire about the nature of prolonged absences. *Missing a total (cumulative, not just consecutive) of **three weeks or more of class constitutes a failing grade in the course.*** All students are responsible for announcements made in class as well as material covered in class. So if an absence is unavoidable, make arrangements with another student to find out what you missed in class.

Tardiness and leaving class early are disruptive to your fellow students. Realize that either may be counted as a full absence, particularly if the problem becomes excessive over the course of the semester. If you absolutely cannot complete the class without leaving for a drink of water, to use the restroom, or whatever, I only ask one thing of you: don't re-enter the classroom. Instead, in consideration of your fellow students, quietly collect all of your things and take them with you when you leave. This will likely be counted as an absence.

As a discussion class, open laptops are not allowed. Cell phones should be silenced and put away before class and may be confiscated for the duration of the class if used (including for texting) during class.

Office Hours and Email

I'd much rather see you and get to know you in person than as an email. As such, I encourage you to take full advantage of my office hours, whether for simple queries or more substantive questions and discussion. Email is a poor substitute for live interactions, which are both more fun and more productive. (And of the two, only office hours are appropriate for discussing paper ideas and thesis statements.) Feel free to drop by without an appointment anytime during scheduled office hours.

Documentation and Plagiarism

Obvious cases of academic misconduct such as plagiarism, cheating, or collusion constitute violations of the Hamilton Honor Code. In such cases the student will be referred to the Dean of Students.

A few words about plagiarism and documentation might be instructive. Though there are gray areas as to when one should cite and when a paraphrase is adequate, we all recognize blatant plagiarism when we see it. As for the gray areas, cite your sources. That is the simplest advice I can give you, and the hallmark of scholarly work. We all stand on the shoulders of giants; we all benefit from the ideas of others. Many of our best ideas are common knowledge, societally and globally shared. It is hard to imagine an idea that does not owe something to someone else's brilliant thoughts too. A class like this is partly about finding your own voice. When you write down the great ideas that others have undoubtedly thought before you, you should do so in your unique voice. If your great idea (or your agreement with some great idea, or the realization that somebody else has stolen your idea before you even thought of it) was inspired by a passage in a book you just read two days ago you will have to be more mindful of your wording. Your thinking and writing should be your own: make sure it hasn't been supplanted by the thought and phrasing of the book's author. **When in doubt, cite.** If your paraphrase is not clearly in your own words and voice—perhaps because the kernel of truth you wish to glean gets lost as you deviate from the original wording—then cite your source.

Documentation is particularly important when using online sources. Academic journals accessed online need to be cited. Ideas taken from other online sources also need to be cited, particularly given the wide-ranging reliability of online sources. Papers that rely excessively on superficial web searches (such as simply paraphrasing websites that come up on a Google Search) are likely to receive a very low grade. Papers that engage in such shoddy scholarship without citing their sources are even more at risk.

Writing Center and Writing Resources

The Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center is an academic support service available to all Hamilton College students. The Writing Center is an indispensable resource whenever writing papers for this course. In addition to a library of helpful writing books, the Writing Center offers one-on-one assistance with writing. Check their website (<http://www.hamilton.edu/writing>) for hours, policies, and contact information. I also encourage you to take advantage of the extensive writing resources available through the Writing Center website. Here is one good starting point: (http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/tips_guides.html).

Another indispensable resource is the Hamilton College Library. In addition to print resources, many literary resources are available online. To explore some of these

you can click on “Academic Search Premier” or “LexisNexis Academic” from the library’s homepage (<http://onthehill.hamilton.edu/library/home.html>).

Special Accommodations

If you have a documented disability requiring academic adjustments or accommodations please bring me your documentation and speak with me during the first two weeks of class.

Course Schedule

The date that an item appears on the syllabus is the date that it is **due in class**. *Email submissions are not accepted without the prior approval of the instructor*, which will only be granted in extenuating circumstances. Readings are sometimes referred to by their title, and sometimes just by author name. “(E)” designates readings on electronic course reserve through the library. “(N)” designates The Norton Anthology.

Lengthier readings will be spread out over several days but informed class discussion requires familiarity with the entire text from the first day that it appears on the syllabus. The syllabus sometimes indicates when we will be focusing class discussion on a particular section of text. I may periodically announce in class a chapter or section to pay particular attention to for the next class. As you have probably already discovered in your college careers, staying ahead of the readings is much more productive and less stressful than falling behind on them.

Week 1 COURSE INTRO: WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

8/27 First Day of Class. Course Intro; Student Questionnaire (E)

Week 2 PURITAN ALLEGORY AND THE PERSONIFICATION OF EVIL

9/1 Gardner chapters 1-2; **Quiz on Syllabus**

9/3 **Paper 1 due** (2pp book review, book of your choice).

“Young Goodman Brown” (N 325-34)

Week 3 WRITING SEQUENCE

9/8 “Young Goodman Brown” cont.

Thesis Paragraph due (Bring **2 copies** to class. Literary criticism of “Young Goodman Brown”—topic of your choice.). “Peer Evaluation Sheet” (E).

9/10 **Draft of Paper 2 due.** (4pp. Bring **2 copies** for in-class peer-editing workshop.)

Gardner chapters 3-4.

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 4 RELIGION AND SLAVERY

9/15 **Peer Editing comments due** (bring **2 copies**.)

In-class Oral Conferences with Peer Reviewers.

9/17 *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* 1-38; (E): “Self-Evaluation,” “Instructor’s Symbols and Abbreviations on Essays,” “Symbols for Common Errors” (Baker), “Academic Standards for Analytical and Evaluative Writing.”

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 5

9/22 **Paper 2 due** (4pp). *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* 39-80; Sowards (E).

9/24 *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 6 FREE WILL and GOD AND NATURALISM

9/29 “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (N 529-55)

Start thinking about Paper 3 and make Writing Center appointments.

10/1 “The Open Boat” (N 189-206)

*(Finish Paper 3 draft and get to Writing Center if you haven’t done so already.)

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 7 MODERNISM: THE TRANSVALUATION OF THE SACRED & PROFANE

10/6 *Sun Also Rises* 1-71; “Ten Keys to a Clear and Graceful Style” (E).

10/8 *Sun Also Rises* 72-156; “Mid-Semester Check-Up” (E).

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 8

10/13 *Sun Also Rises* 157-228.

Paper 3 due. (4pp. Literary criticism of “Bartleby” or “The Open Boat.”) **Staple Writing Center conference Acknowledgment Form and comment sheet** to the last page.

10/15 FALL BREAK. No class.

Week 9

10/20 *Sun Also Rises* 229-251

10/22 *Sun Also Rises*

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 10 SHORT STORY UNIT: THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

10/27 “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (N 616-27)

10/29 “Conversion of the Jews” (N 682-92)

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 11

11/3 “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (N 454-58)

11/5 “Cathedral” (N 75-85)

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 12 GOD IS CHANGE: FUTURISTIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

11/10 *Parable of the Talents* 1-91

11/12 *Parable of the Talents* 92-182

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 13

11/17 **Thesis Paragraph due** (Bring **2 copies** to class. Literary criticism of *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, *Sun Also Rises*, or *Parable of the Talents*—topic of your choice.).

Parable of the Talents 183-275

11/19 *Parable of the Talents* 276-348

Class Presentation and Discussion

Week 14

11/24 THANKSGIVING BREAK. No Class.

11/26 THANKSGIVING BREAK. No Class.

Week 15

12/1 **Draft of Paper 4 due.** (6pp. Bring **2 copies** for in-class peer-editing workshop.)

Parable of the Talents 349-408

12/3 **Peer Editing comments due** (bring **2 copies**.)

In-class Oral Conferences with Peer Reviewers.

Week 16 FILM UNIT: THEOLOGY AND REBELLION

12/8 Film: *DaVinci Code*.

12/10 Film: *DaVinci Code*; Last Day of Class.

Final Exam Date (**check exam schedule**):

Final Paper (Paper 4) Due (6pp. Literary criticism, topic of your choice, on any one of the following texts: *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, *Sun Also Rises*, or *Parable of the Talents*. The Final Paper is due on the day—and at the beginning of the scheduled hour—of the final exam. The Final Paper can be thought of as a “take home final exam,” and you may hand it in early if you wish. Check the Registrar’s schedule for final exam date, time, and location.)