

ENGL 254.001
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ENGL 254: PAST/PRESENCE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

American literature is a literature of immigrants that constitute the so-called “melting pot” of people of different races with roots from diverse places. This course focuses on the literature of African-Americans, the demographic with perhaps the most peculiar of experiences and circumstances. Atrocious acts including slavery, denial of civil rights, and other forms of discrimination, sometimes sponsored and sustained by the government, have characterized the general experience of Black Americans, and it is in tandem with these challenges that Black America has still contributed significantly to making America a world superpower.

One of the central concerns for this course involves the implications of processing experiences via the lens of imaginative writing. In order to engage with this question, we will examine a selection of literary works from different periods in Black American history: poetry, drama, short stories, speeches, and novels from slavery, the Civil War, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement, which has gained significant traction in current times.

Ultimately, we will aim to understand ways in which the imagination of literary artists can enhance, complicate, or even undercut lived experiences.

Course Aims/Goals

This course fulfills the Course Attributes GEF Area 6, GEC Objective 5, and GEC Objective 7, which concern Artistic Expression, and American Culture. According to WVU, this course should help you to apply methods and principles of critical and creative inquiry to American texts through close reading and writing exercises, as well as via extensive discussions and research. Ultimately, we will work with the assumption that the single most important currency in this class is a combination of what you think, and the willingness to test it.

Required Texts – Available at the WVU Bookstore and the Book Exchange

- James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
- Billie Holliday, *Lady Sings the Blues*
- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Required Texts – Available on eCampus and in the WVU Online Library

- Excerpts from work by various authors including Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and Lauryn Hill.

Recommended Resource

Please check the OWL Purdue Website: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/> for everything related to MLA documentation.

Course Requirements*

- **Participation – in-Class/Online (15%)** – A literature class “works” when we actively engage with texts both inside and outside the classroom. You all have an opinion based on your own experiences and observations, and the class will be richer if you share them. Your participation grade is therefore informed by the thoughtfulness of your responses (written and/or oral), respect for others’ submissions (even if you don’t agree with them), group work, and your **overall engagement in class activities**. Respectful, engaged participation in class discussion will boost your final grade, while a lack of positive participation may lower it.

I also understand that some of you are not very comfortable speaking up in a classroom setting, and the alternative will be for you to post a question about the text for the day on eCampus BEFORE a particular class. These posts should demonstrate clear connections to the text for the particular class day and generate discussion in class.
- **First Word (5%)** – At the beginning of each class starting from August 23, at least one student will give a brief presentation (averaging 5 minutes) about the text/author/period for the day. In your presentation, you can say a few words about the author, time-period, text, a contemporary to the author, and/or why you think the author/text should be (or not be) included in the syllabus. (Almost) anything goes!
- **Quizzes (10%)**: These will be unannounced short-answer questions that focus on textual details and close reading, typically with a specific question.
- **Proposal (25%)**: You will draft a proposal that informs your audience of the direction in which you want to take your final paper.
- **Class Presentation (10%)** – You will talk to the class about the project you have worked on. We will agree on the format for this presentation.
- **Final Paper (35%)** – We will decide on a format for this paper, which will be the culmination of a semester’s worth of research, writing, and argument.

***The rubric for each course requirement will be discussed in class during the first week, and then shared on eCampus for easy reference.**

Course Policies

- **Attendance**: This is a participatory class. **You may miss three classes (a week and a half of class) without penalty. Missing more WILL diminish your overall grade.** Lateness is rude and disrupts discussion and small group work. If you are more than 15 minutes late, your lateness will count as half of an absence (two times being late =

one absence). **The only excused absences are for University-sponsored activities (e.g. class fieldtrips and sports related events).**

- **Texts in Class:** Bring the required reading material to class in either electronic or print formats in order to cite directly from the works and to find references easily. **Be sure to complete the assigned reading before class.**
- **Late Coursework:** Turning in your work late will impact negatively on your grade for the course requirement in question, and will be accepted in very limited circumstances. **There will be no room for late submission of your final paper.**
- **Inclusivity Statement:** The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please check <http://diversity.wvu.edu>
- **Plagiarism:** WVU's policy regarding plagiarized work can be found online at: <http://studentlife.wvu.edu/studentconductcode.html> (see Section B of Article III). We will discuss plagiarism in class, but it is your responsibility to be familiar with the WVU policy.
- **Conduct:** I expect all members of the class to be respectful of each other and me, regardless of religious, social, or political differences. I will not condone discriminatory remarks regarding race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, health, economic status, etc. Disruptive behavior may negatively impact your class participation grade and, if egregious enough, result in your expulsion from the class. Be mindful that the best way to participate in class is to both talk and listen to what others have to say. I don't expect class members to agree, but I do expect that you will acknowledge other points of view.
- **Eberly Writing Studio:** The WVU English Department has this great resource in Colson Go2. You should definitely check them out, especially since you will be writing a research paper.
- **Office Hours:** My office hours offer a chance for us to benefit from one-on-one interactions. Drop in between 12:00-1:45pm on Tuesdays and I will be more than glad to discuss anything related to the course. Alternatively, email me (I will do my best to respond within 48 hours on a weekday) so we can discuss issues or arrange a time to meet.

CLASS SCHEDULE (Subject to Slight Changes, which will be announced beforehand)

Thursday, August 18: Introductions; Syllabus Overview; Researched Arguments

Tuesday, August 23: Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”, “On Virtue”; Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (Chapters 1-2)
(Last day to Register, Add New Courses, Make Section Changes, Change Pass/Fail and Audit)

Thursday, August 25: Venture Smith, *The Life and Adventures* (Chapters 1-2); Frederick Douglass, *Autobiography* (“Preface”)

Tuesday, August 30: Jean McMahon Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (Part 2); Frederick Douglass, *Autobiography* (Chapters 9-10)

Thursday, September 1: Susan Wildemuth, “Elizabeth Keckley & the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt”; David Walker, “Walker's Appeal” (Article 1)

Tuesday, September 6: Group Presentations on Langston Hughes Poetry; Preliminary Research

Thursday, September 8: Paul Laurence Dunbar “We Wear the Mask”, “Little Brown Boy”; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chapters 1-6)

Tuesday, September 13: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chapters 7-14)

Thursday, September 15: Library Visit (Class in Downtown Library)

Tuesday, September 20: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chapters 15-20)

Thursday, September 22: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Chapter 15); James Baldwin, “Everybody's Protest Novel”

Tuesday, September 27: Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”; Maya Angelou “Caged Bird”, “Men”

Thursday, September 29: James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (“My Dungeon Shook”); Amiri Baraka, “As a Possible Lover”

Tuesday, October 4: Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues* (Chapters 1-9)
(Wednesday October 5 is Mid-Semester)

Thursday, October 6: Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues* (Chapters 10-17), “Strange Fruit”

Tuesday, October 11: Ralph Ellison, “Living with Music”; Richard Wright, “The Man Who Was Almost a Man”

Thursday, October 13: Toni Morrison, “Motivation for Writing”; Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Foreword – Chapter 3)

Tuesday, October 18: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Chapters 4 – 9)

Thursday, October 20: Class Presentations

Tuesday, October 25: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Chapters 10 and 11)
(Wednesday, October 26 is the Last Day to Drop a Class)

Thursday, October 27: Langston Hughes “Harlem”; Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Act 1)

Tuesday, November 1: Class Presentations

Thursday, November 3: Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Act 2); Evie Shockley, “du Bois in Ghana”; Audre Lorde, “Coal”

Tuesday, November 8:
ELECTION DAY (NO CLASS)

Thursday, November 10:
In-Class Workshop

Tuesday, November 15: Lauryn Hill, “Lost Ones”; Tupac, “Changes”, “Keep Ya Head Up”

Thursday, November 17: Jesse Williams Speech; Boondocks “Return of the King”; Dave Chappelle, “Clayton Bigsby”

November 19 to November 27 is Fall Recess (NO CLASS)

Tuesday, December 6:
Wrap up
(Last Day to Withdraw from the University)

December 13
Turn in Final Research Paper