

African American Studies

Course Description:

Through your studies of American literature and history in Literary Explorations I and II and American Studies, you have encountered some African American writers and historical figures, probably including Phyllis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Lorraine Hansberry, Martin Luther King, Jr., and even some writers of the Harlem Renaissance. In this course, we will build on that knowledge, discovering and focusing on the African American experience, the lived and literary identities it creates, and the historical context for all of this.

In this survey course, you will sample from a range of genres, including short fiction, novels, non-fiction, slave narratives, essays, and even oral literatures like songs and folktales. Many of these writings helped shape American history, from slavery and Civil War to Reconstruction, to the struggle for Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter.

By the end of this course, you will have a better understanding of African American literature and its principle concerns with identity, equality, and freedom. You will also have knowledge of the black contribution to American history. While building on the skills of close reading, critical thinking, and persuasive writing you have developed in the English and history core courses, you will also contemplate how these writers reiterate, revise, and reflect on one another and how their ideas connect to broader trends and topics in literature and the world, not about race only, but about gender, education, and class, as well.

Students will be taking the course for either history or English credit and their choice will affect which assignments will be completed and which grading scheme will be utilized.

INSTRUCTORS:

Dr. Eric Smith

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Meeting Days, Time and Room(s)

TBD

Text(s) / Materials:

You will be expected to bring your current reading packets (critical essays, short stories, and novellas), whether in paper or .pdf form, to class, and your copies of our core texts as we read and discuss them:

Computers will be used regularly, as this class strives to be paper-free (as much as can be done practically), so be sure to bring it and your power supply regularly. Also, a copy of whatever our current reading is (when available in print) and a writing utensil for marking that reading are crucially important.

Essential Content:

English Learning Standards:

This course will focus on a range of concepts central to the English team learning standards, but most particularly:

G. Students studying English at IMSA will use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g. for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information) by: [NCTE-12]

G.7 writing in both expressive and transactional modes. [SSL-I.A, IV.B]

History Learning Standards:

Analyze the complexity of constructing public policy in an atmosphere of ethical pluralism.

Examine the nature of political and economic power, its sources and its justification, and its relationship to dominant ideologies.

Students studying history and social science at IMSA evaluate the roles of different groups in the political institutions and social fabric of multicultural societies over time

Express both written and oral opinions clearly and elegantly and defend them with the use of primary evidence.

Instructional Design and Approach:

Literature is, at its core, an articulation of the history of ideas. As such, it is both part and product of history, anthropology, philosophy, art, psychology, science, and other fields. Our examination of literature – both fiction and nonfiction - will thus study it through these various lenses, while also fostering an appreciation for its aesthetic value and approach. We will explore literature through reading, writing, discussing, researching, and – sometimes – performing it. Activities and assignments will range from individual to small group to broad class discussion. With every reading, students should challenge themselves to consider three questions: do I like this, what does this mean, and why is it important today?

Students will gain a richer historical understanding for the production of this literature as well as the context for a number of other key events in American history.

Participation

My expectation is that, at least once per class, you voluntarily respond to a question or comment from your teacher or another student. I want this class to be based on your questions and discussions about them. As to why participation in class is important beyond your grade, consider these statements from some of today's business leaders:

“We are routinely surprised at the difficulty some young people have in communicating: verbal skills, written skills, presentation skills. They have difficulty being clear and concise; it’s hard for them to create focus, energy, and passion around the points they want to make.”

-- Mike Summers, VP for Global Talent Management at Dell

"I want people who can engage in good discussion—who can look me in the eye and have a give and take. All of our work is done in teams. You have to know how to work well with others. But you also have to know how to engage customers—to find out what their needs are. If you can't engage others, then you won't learn what you need to know."

-- Clay Parker, engineer and president of the Chemical Management Division of BOC Edwards

"People who've learned to ask great questions and have learned to be inquisitive are the ones who move the fastest in our environment because they solve the biggest problems in ways that have the most impact on innovation."

-- Mike Summers, VP for Global Talent Management at Dell

All quotations taken from "Rigor Redefined" (2008) by Tony Wagner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Notes...

I expect you to take notes in this class. If I think a topic is important enough to put on the board, or to have groups research and present, it's probably important enough to be on an assessment and something I expect you to know. It would also be wise to take notes as you read.

...and Laptops

The default position for your laptop in this class is closed. This means, from the moment class starts, unless I ask you to use it, I don't expect to see it open. We will use the laptops frequently for in-class work and research and even for online readings, but to the greatest extent possible, this will be a laptop-free class. Here's why:

Researchers have repeatedly found that students who use laptops in class learn less than their "disconnected" peers (see Cornell's 2003 study "The Laptop and the Lecture"). Studies at Princeton and the University of California have found students who take notes on laptops performed worse on evaluations such as quizzes than those who took notes by hand "even when laptops are used solely to take notes, they may still be impairing learning because their use results in shallower processing" ("The Pen is Mightier than the Keyboard," 2014).

But laptop use in class harms more than just the user – it also negatively impacts students seated nearby. Sana, Weston, et al (2013) found that:

participants who multitasked on a laptop during a lecture scored lower on a test compared to those who did not multitask, and participants who were in direct view of a multitasking peer scored lower on a test compared to those who were not. The results demonstrate that multitasking on a laptop poses a significant distraction to both users and fellow students and can be detrimental to comprehension of lecture content.

Therefore, I require that you please keep your laptop closed during class unless you have been specifically asked to use it, and I would encourage you to keep it closed in other classes, as well.

If you have a special need that requires accommodation in this area, please see me.

Student Expectations:

To succeed in this class, you must: arrive on time, be prepared by having read AND prepared to discuss or ask questions about the assigned materials (not just online summaries), be active in discussion, and demonstrate originality, thorough research, and comprehensive thought on papers and assignments. Being funny doesn't hurt, either.

ENGLISH CREDIT: Course Work / Assessment:

Writing (60%)

Slave Narrative Essay (15%)

Abolitionism Essay (15%)

Harlem Renaissance/Jazz Age Essay (15%)

Final Essay (15%)

Harlem Renaissance-Black Arts Presentations (10%)

Participation (20%)

Reading Quizzes (10%)

HISTORY CREDIT: Course Work / Assessment:

Students taking the course for history credit.

Writing (59%)

Slave narrative essay (13%)

Abolitionism essay (13%)

Harlem Renaissance/Jazz Age research paper (20%)

Final essay (13%)

Harlem Renaissance-Black Arts Presentations (11%)

Participation (20%)

Reading Quizzes (10%)