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ENG 444 – African American Literature

Fall 2006

Course Syllabus

Required Texts

- *Black Voices: An Anthology of African-American Literature*. Abraham Chapman (Signet)
- *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs (Modern Library)
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Zora Neale Hurston (Harper)
- *Invisible Man*. Ralph Ellison (Vintage)
- *The Known World*. Edward P. Jones (Amistad)

Prerequisites

ENG 102

Catalog Description

The contribution of the African American to literature is considered from a historical standpoint. Major emphasis is on the twentieth century, with interpretation and analysis of four genres: poetry, drama, short story, and novel.

Course Objectives

African American Literature is a senior-level survey course, and as such, we're going to be surveying quite a bit of literature. This is a reading intensive course, so please prepare accordingly. The subject matter spans a very large temporal area, from the late-18th century to the present, a scope that will give you a broad sweep of the African American literary landscape, and in a variety of genres: slave narratives, poetry, short stories, novels, essays, and drama. We will read these texts not only within race-specific contexts, but also—and perhaps more importantly—as American literature. The objectives of this course are to give students an introduction to the vast array of prose, poetry, and drama that make up much of African American literature; to provide the opportunity to explore the diverse nature of this literature; to help students develop a deeper understanding of the ever-evolving issues involved in defining the American literary canon; and to encourage the reading of literature with a fine critical understanding and aesthetic appreciation that a 400-level course should provide.

Attendance

Be here! Much of your work will be done in class. Therefore, except in the most extraordinary cases, **you will be required to attend all class sessions**. If you know you have/will have an excused absence from class, please see me about this as soon as you can. You still need to make up the work you may have missed in class. And do arrive to class on time; tardiness can count as an absence. Attendance and class participation will help determine your overall course grade. **More than three unexcused absences can lower your course grade by at least one letter. Also, if**

you miss more than 15% of the scheduled classes (that's more than 6 classes) you cannot pass the course.

Evaluation

The course grade is largely determined by performance on major exams, a group presentation, and a final paper. Class participation will also be graded.

Grading Scale

A+=99, A=95, A-=90 B+=89, B=85, B-=80 C+=79, C=75, C-=70
D+=69, D=65, D-=60 F=59-0

The portions are weighted as follows:

3 Exams	65%
Group Presentation	10%
Final Paper	25%

Except for legitimate excused absences, **any paper turned in after the due date will result in a zero for the assignment.** Furthermore, unless there is an excellent excuse, the exams cannot be made up, so please make sure you do the readings and don't miss class.

Words of wisdom from your professor!



American Disabilities Act (ADA) Statement

Students requesting accommodations for disabilities must go through the Academic Support Committee. For more information, please contact the Director of Disability Resources & Services, Halladay Student Services Building, Room 303D, 303-886-5835.

Plagiarism and Cheating

- **Department policy:** Instructors in the Department of Literature and Languages do not tolerate plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. Instructors uphold and support the highest academic standards, and students are expected to do likewise. Penalties for students guilty of academic dishonesty include disciplinary probation, suspension, and expulsion. (Texas A&M University-Commerce Code of Student Conduct 5.b[1,2,3]).

- **Royal's addendum:** To intentionally plagiarize is to steal another's words or ideas as if they were your own. **Any student who blatantly plagiarizes (i.e., intentionally and directly lifting whole or partial material from any electronic or printed material) or cheats on an exam will automatically fail the course and should expect disciplinary action by the college.**

Student Conduct and Responsibilities

- **University policy:** All students enrolled at the University shall follow the tenets of common decency and acceptable behavior conducive to a positive learning environment.

- **Royal's addendum:** In order for everyone to get the most out of this course, classroom conduct is of the utmost importance. Therefore, you will be required to create and maintain a productive classroom environment with little in the way of disruption. Your overall grade could be put in jeopardy if you demonstrate inappropriate classroom behaviors. This includes the habitual disruption of the class through chit-chatting and talking out of turn, doing outside work during our classroom time, and bringing in active electronic devices (such as cell phones and pagers). Every day you enter the class, please turn off your cell phones and pagers.

Schedule

(Please note the weeks where exams and presentations are scheduled.)

Week 1: August 28 – September 1

- Introduction to class,
- Frederick Douglass, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Week 2: September 4 – 8

- *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, cont.
- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Week 3: September 11 – 15

- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, cont.
- Charles W. Chesnutt, "Baxter's Procrustes"

Presentation – Spotlight on Booker T. Washington

Week 4: September 18 – 22

- W.E.B. DuBois, selection from *The Souls of Black Folk*, and various poetry
- Paul Laurence Dunbar, various poetry
- Fenton Johnson, various poetry

Week 5: September 25 – 29

- Alain Locke, "The New Negro"
- Claude McKay, various poetry

Presentation – Spotlight on James Weldon Johnson

Exam 1

Week 6: October 2 – 6

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Week 7: October 9 – 13

- Jean Toomer, "Karintha," "Blood-Burning Moon," and various poetry
- Rudolph Fisher, "Common Meter"

Presentation – Spotlight on Nella Larsen

Week 8: October 16 – 20

- Sterling A. Brown, "A Century of Negro Portraiture in American Literature," and various poetry
- Arna Bontemps, "A Summer Tragedy," and various poetry

Week 9: October 23 – 27

- Langston Hughes, *Tales of Simple*, and various poetry

- Countee Cullen, various poetry

Week 10: October 30 – November 3

- Richard Wright, “The Man Who Lived Underground”
- Ann Petry, “In Darkness and Confusion”

Presentation – Spotlight on James Baldwin

Exam 2

Week 11: November 6 – 10

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Week 12: November 13 – 17

- *Invisible Man*, cont.

Presentation – Spotlight on Lorraine Hansberry

Week 13: November 20 – 24

- *Invisible Man*, cont.
- Robert Hayden, various poetry
- Gwendolyn Brooks, various poetry

Week 14: November 27 – December 1

- Paule Marshall, “To Da-duh, In Memoriam”
- Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*

Week 15: December 4 – 8

- *The Known World*, cont.

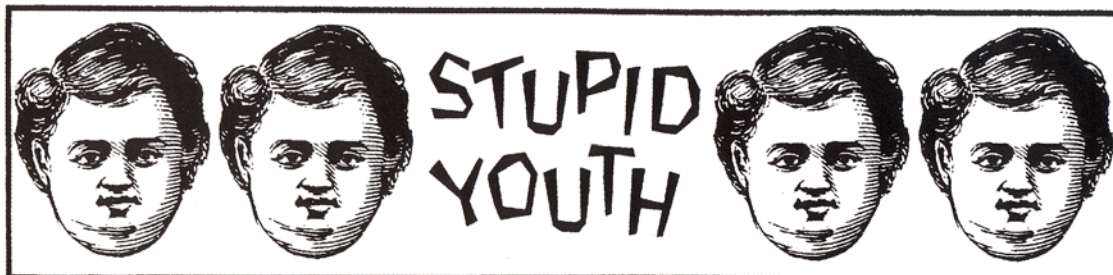
Presentation – August Wilson

Final paper due

Week 16: December 11 – 15

- **Final Exam Week**
Exam scheduled for Dec. 13, 8:00am – 10:00am

DON'T BE A



DO YOUR CLASS READINGS!

ENG 444 – Author Spotlight Presentation

There will be several group presentations this semester reflecting one particular African American author, someone who isn't covered by the class readings. Everyone in the group will be responsible for carefully studying the author, discussing him/her within the group, and taking significant part in the group oral presentation and formal write-up. I require everyone to rely not only on our class texts (some of the authors may be briefly covered in Chapman), but on outside sources as well, especially for information concerning the author's life and critical context. For your presentation, your group needs to make sure it does the following:

- Introduce the author, including:
 - Giving a brief overview of his/her life
 - Pointing out his/her major works of writing
 - The significance of his/her work within the larger context of American literature
- Present on what are considered the major writings of the author. For some authors there may be just one or two works that stand out. For others, there may be more to choose from. *Members of your group should read at least one significant work in preparing for this presentation.* Depending on the size of your group, it might be better to assign two or three among everyone, so that you have a better coverage of the author's body of writing. *Although only one significant work is required for this assignment, there is a much better chance for a better grade if more texts are covered.*
- Discuss the works by your author in terms of:
 - The place of the work(s) within the author's overall body of work.
 - The basic literary elements of the work, e.g., theme, character, plot, setting, point of view, symbolism, genre issues, poetic rhythm, rhyme, word choice, etc. In other words, what are those things that characterize the works
 - A brief overview of the criticism surrounding this author. In particular, you might want to look at:
 - how his/her works were originally received by reviewers when they first came out
 - what kind of controversies, if any, surrounded the author
 - how the author has been read within a particular community
 - what kind of scholarly criticism might be out there on the author
 - the way this author may (or may not) be used in the classroom
 - Some of the problems you might see in the author's works you chose to focus on—feel free to be critical in a constructive way.
- Since many of you are in education, it would be a good idea to speculate on how you would teach this author to high school or even junior high school classes. (Or, *would* you even consider teaching it to a high school or junior high school class?)

On the day of presentation, you should provide me with a 5-6 page formal essay, jointly written and edited by the group, that encapsulates the issues you bring up and discuss in class. The essay should be formatted according to MLA style, and include at least five critical sources (not counting the author's work themselves).

Remember that this is a group effort, which means that everyone in the group must participate in the class presentation as well as contribute to the writing/editing of the essay. So you'll need to assign responsibilities accordingly. (In other words, if someone's really good at doing research, that person can do a survey of the criticism. Or if one member is a good writer, she/he could write up an initial draft that can be critiqued by the others.) You will need to exchange contact information with your fellow group members and make arrangements to meet several times outside of class. Feel free to use any sort of media in your class presentation, but please keep in mind a couple of things: 1) if you choose to use visual media of any kind you *must* check with me at least a week before your presentation so that I can make arrangements with Media Services, and 2) make sure that the glitz or dazzle of any media that you use does not overshadow the content of your presentation.

ENG 444 – Paper Assignment

First, your class paper should reflect the historical scope of ENG 444—in other words, you must focus on an African American writer or text(s). I would prefer that you write on an author and a novel/story/poem that we've covered in class. However, if you have an idea for a work of literature that we haven't read as a class, then you need to talk with me about this.

Here are some strategies for getting started:

- In deciding on a paper topic, begin by thinking of a text (prose or poetry) that you particularly enjoyed reading (or maybe even enjoyed arguing against) and consider that as your literary focus. Remember, you're going to spend a good number of days and weeks dealing closely with this text, so choose something you can live with for a while.
- Next you will need to decide how you will approach your author/text. Think in terms of focusing on **one particular aspect** of your narrative or poem. Over a period of several days, engage in various pre-writing exercises (e.g., brainstorming, free writing, branching) and see what ideas occur to you.
 - In coming up with a specific focus, you could consider one of the basic literary elements found on our handout, "Strategies on Reading Literature." Keep in mind that in your paper you should concentrate on **one** literary element (for instance, either plot, or character, or irony, or imagery, etc.) and not feel that you have to cover several (plot *and* character *and* irony *and* imagery, etc.) in a laundry list fashion.
 - You can most certainly discuss more than one literary element, but keep in mind that only **one** should be your thesis focus. For instance, if you want to look at the way that a writer deals with characterization (such as his or her handling of the central protagonist), you might need to bring in a discussion of setting and symbolism to illustrate your main points. In other words, you would be using aspects of setting and symbolism *as it relates to* issues of character.
 - You can also think in terms of larger themes that would reach beyond the text. Here you might want to approach a narrative or poem in terms of a particular social, psychological, political, or cultural theme. You might consider these questions: What does your work say about a certain theme within its historical moment? What might the work reveal about the writer in his or her place or time? How might you apply your reading of this narrative or poem to contemporary cultural issues?
- After you decide on your paper's focus, you'll need to craft a well-written and finely-tuned thesis statement. This can be a working thesis at first, and as you write you may find that your thesis focus will shift. That's okay. But please keep in mind that when it comes time for your final draft, your paper should have one, **and only one**, central thesis and that your paper should follow its trajectory throughout.

When it comes to the finalization of your class essay, here are the basic guidelines that you will need to follow:

- Your essay must be typed.
- Your paper must be written in MLA style. Please refer to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th edition. **Every aspect of your paper must adhere to MLA guidelines.**
- It must be between 5-7 pages in length (not counting the Works Cited page).
- There must be a separate Works Cited page that contains all of the sources, and only the sources, that you cite in your essay.
- When citing (either in quote or paraphrase) your primary source, use the page numbers from our textbook (or line number, if you're quoting poetry...see the *MLA Handbook*). If you're citing a text outside of the one we're using in class, you would obviously use those page numbers.
- Although ideally there is no set limit as to the number of sources needed to write a good literary research essay, for this assignment you must utilize **at least three secondary sources**:
 - Your three sources must come from either a journal article, an essay from an edited collection of essays, or a part of a single-author book.
 - Avoid brief reviews.

- You *cannot* use any information found on the general World Wide Web (this does not include the full-text sources you can find through one of the many databases our library subscribes to...those are perfectly fine).
- Your three sources must be critical sources, *not primary sources* (such as another story or poem by the author you're writing on). You may use primary sources (other stories, novels, or poems), but they should not be counted as part of the three secondary sources.
- You paper must have one, *and only one*, thesis focus.

Please keep in mind that I am interested in what you have to say about a particular author and text(s), not what someone else has to say about your topic. In order to please your primary reader—me—you should keep in mind the following:

- *Avoid sustained plot summaries.* If you catch yourself doing nothing more than recounting the events of a narrative, stop yourself immediately. A literary research essay is not a summarization exercise. It's okay to recount or describe a particular scene or event, and you may need to do so contextually in order to set up a particular point you're making. But do not fall into the trap of pointless summarization.
- *Avoid lengthy quotes.* It's appropriate to quote from your primary, and even secondary, sources. But make sure that when you do quote, you do so because the author's words are of the utmost importance and a paraphrase will not do it justice.
- *Avoid spending too much time on your secondary sources.* You will need to incorporate what other critics have said into your own arguments, but you must never lose site of your own arguments. If you find yourself going into too much detail in summarizing your secondary sources, stop and think of ways to refocus your writing back on your thesis.
- It's okay to critique or disagree with the secondary sources that you use. Just do it in a civil and professional manner.
- Don't be afraid to make literary judgments. *Remember, in engaging in this act of writing, you become a literary critic.*
- Back up your arguments with textual evidence. *This is very important!* It's one thing to claim that an author is saying something; but your statement takes on more authority when you can demonstrate your point through the text itself.
- Make sure that you cite your sources appropriately and give credit to words or ideas that aren't your own. As stated in the syllabus, plagiarism is a capital literary offense. *Anyone caught doing so, off with their heads!!!!*

And on that happy note, enjoy doing your essay!