Politics & Literature:  
Literature and Democracy in America

Government 3655  
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Course description and aims

What is political authority and how is it constituted? How does narrative both shape and contest established political identities? How and why do political actors in the present negotiate the legacies of past injustice (for example, slavery, colonialism, state violence)? To what extent does the past shape and determine our political present (our sense of self, our relations with others)? Where might we find the cultural resources for resistance and/or political transformation? These are some of the moral and political questions we will pursue in this course. Rather than turning to philosophical treatises or normative argumentation for orientation, however, we will turn instead to prominent works of literature. The course will explore the contributions of literature - scripture, novels, essays, short stories, and poetry - to the study of politics, and to the formation of a more thoughtful, critical citizenship. The focus this semester will be on the dynamic relationship between American literature and American democracy, with a special emphasis on exceptionalism, individualism, and the legacies of violence and racial injustice.

Course mechanics

This is a lecture course, but time will be allotted every meeting for classroom discussion. Every student should come to class prepared to engage in lively conversation based on the week’s reading. In addition to bringing the pertinent texts to class, students will be asked to write 5 short (1 page) reader responses over the course of the semester. Students may choose the texts to which they would like to respond, and reading prompts will be provided for all course readings. The 1 page reader responses should avoid summary, and instead critically engage a particular question or theme. Responses will be turned in at the beginning of each Tuesday class and counted as a part of the final participation grade (10% of the total); participation in sections and lecture will comprise the remaining participation grade. In addition to these short writing assignments, students will be asked to complete two in-class assignments and two 7-8 page papers. A list of paper topics will be distributed in class one week before each paper is due. All papers must include direct textual citation and notes. The in-class assignments will each be worth 10% of the final grade. The papers will each be worth 35%. There is no final exam.
Books to purchase

Available at Cornell Bookstore:

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays*
William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*
Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*
Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories*
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*

Readings marked * are available on blackboard electronic reserve.

Weekly Readings

**Week 1:**

January 20 – Introduction: Literature and Political Inquiry

January 22 – The Book of Exodus: Narrative and Collective Identity

http://www.online-literature.com/bible/Exodus/

**Week 2:**

January 27 – The Book of Exodus: Liberation or Freedom?

http://www.online-literature.com/bible/Exodus/

Michael Walzer, Exodus and Revolution (handout)
Edward Said, Freud and the Non-European (handout)

January 29 -  Exodus and American Exceptionalism

John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630)*

**Week 3:**

February 3 –  A Conservative Views the American Revolution

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1831)*
February 5 – The Presence of the Past: Hawthorne’s Custom House

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

**Week 4:**

February 10 – Shame and Politics

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

February 12 – Democracy, Conformity, and American Individualism

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841)
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835) (handout)

**Week 5:**

February 17 – Perfectionism and America’s Declaration of Independence

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837)

February 19 – Determination and Freedom: Emerson’s Ambiguities

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fate” (1860), “Experience” (1844)

**Week 6:**

February 24 – Solitude and Citizenship: Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)
Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden* (handout)

February 26 – Confronting “the Wild”

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

**Week 7:**

March 3 – Reading (in) *Walden*

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)
In-class assignment #1

March 5 – Poetic Democracy
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

**Week 8:**

March 10 – Public Love and the Crisis of Union

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* “Calamus” (1860)

March 12 – Literature and the People: What is a Democratic Aesthetics?

Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas” (1871)

First paper due in class.

**Week 9: SPRING BREAK**

**Week 10:**

March 24 – Democracy’s Others: Bartleby

Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853)

March 26 – Authority and the Ship of State

Herman Melville, “Billy Budd”

**Week 11:**

March 31 – Billy Budd and the Vicissitudes of Political Judgment

Herman Melville, “Billy Budd”

April 2 – The “Hive of Subtlety”: Race and Revolution

Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1856)

G.W.F Hegel, “The Master Slave Dialectic” (1807)*

**Week 12:**

April 7 – “Why Moralize Upon It?” Melville and the Presence of the Past

Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1856)

April 9 – Race and Repudiation: Faulkner

William Faulkner, “The Bear” (1942)
Week 13:

April 14 – Technology and the Mastery of Nature

William Faulkner, “The Bear” (1942)

April 16 – Race and Recognition

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Week 14:

April 21 – White Supremacy as Hegemony

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

In-class assignment #2

April 23 – Brotherhood and Democratic Sacrifice

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Week 15:

April 28 – IM: Political Identity or Identity Politics?

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

April 30 – Speaking for Others “on the Lower Frequencies”: Democratic Futures

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Final paper due in class.