Sex, Money and Power in American Literature

Thematic Overview

This online course, designed for students fulfilling their general education requirements, explores provocative works of American literature while developing crucial skills in the areas of critical thinking, reading and writing. These skills not only help students understand their world, but improve their ability to succeed in whatever major and career they choose.

Each of these eras offers unique opportunities to study our major themes, revealing the ways in which sex, money and power appear as “fault lines” in American literature, challenging the very idea of “America” as a land of opportunity for all. In Module I, the most important issue at stake is the identity of Christopher Columbus: was he a great hero who truly “discovered” America, or was he profit-seeking, slave-driving opportunist? Module II looks at American middle-class values at the dawn of the twentieth century, scrutinizing the discourse of moral superiority that helped members of the middle-class create a powerful vision of American society. Studying the work of literary naturalists, we’ll see how some American authors, writing in the wake of Darwin, challenge conventional morality by portraying humans as animals driven by instincts and appetites. In Module III, we study the lives and work of black Americans in the 1920’s, with a particular focus on how violence against African-Americans influenced the literary and artistic modernism of the “Harlem Renaissance.” As we read Jean Toomer’s Cane, a lyrical, imagistic, and sensual collection of short sketches and poems, our aim will be to learn more about how the distinctive literary features of Harlem modernism helped to represent the experience of black life in the United States. Students produce three short essays and three formal peer reviews of work submitted by other students.

Skills Overview

The primary aim of the course is to help you develop new skills in the areas of critical thinking and writing. Through the study of literature, the course will challenge you to read in new ways, as we make the transition from reading for pleasure to reading with a scholarly eye.

For many students, the idea of analyzing literature and writing critically at the college level is a terrifying one. Indeed, writing is, for many, a site of shame and dread, a fact that causes many promising students to keep themselves from achieving their full potential because they avoid literature classes like the plague. The truth of the matter, however, is that employers in the new global marketplace are, more than ever before, seeking out workers with superlative critical thinking and writing skills. Thus, it is increasingly important to foster these skills as part of the college experience. This course aims to give you the skills you need to succeed, while supporting you in your growth as a thinker and writer. This is not an easy class, but it’s the kind of course you literally can’t afford to do without.
Student Learning Outcomes

Students who complete this course will:

- Properly identify literary and rhetorical elements such as plot, tone, setting, metaphor, imagery, point of view, form, etc.
- Analyze the relationship between literary/rhetorical elements and the expression of literary meaning or content
- Describe the social, philosophical and/or scholarly significance of primary texts from three distinct literary-historical periods.
- Interpret literary texts.
- Produce several essays that defend an arguable thesis with close readings primary literary texts.
- Author respectful reviews of other students’ work.

Grading

Formal Essay 1 (1,250 words) 15%
Formal Essay 2 (1,250 words) 20%
Formal Essay 3 (1,250 words) 20%

Peer Review Essay 1 (400 words) 10% (total for all three peer review essays)
Peer Review Essay 2 (400 words) *see grade calculation note, below
Peer Review Essay 3 (400 words)

Reading Quizzes 35%

Acceptable file formats are: .doc; .docx; and .rtf.

Please review the Essay Grading Rubric in the “Important Course Information” section before submitting your first essay.

NOTE: Assignments that do not meet the minimum length requirements will not receive credit. Words counts are measured by MS WORD excluding all notes and bibliography.

*NOTE: Peer reviews will be graded as follows:

- If the review is submitted on time, meets the minimum length requirement, fulfills all of the obligations of a professional peer review (see the peer review instruction handout in the Toolbox), and does not contain excessive grammar, spelling or typographical errors, the grade will be a "95." (Occasionally, for an exceptionally helpful or well-written review, the grade may be higher.)

- If the review is submitted on time, meets the minimum length requirements, fulfills only some of the obligations of a professional peer review and/or contains numerous grammatical/spelling errors, the grade will be a "75."
• If the review is missing, does not fulfill the obligations of a professional peer review, contains substantial grammar/spelling mistakes, or does not meet the minimum length requirement, the grade will be a "0."

**Grading Scale**

The course is based on a traditional 100-point system. Each assignment will be assigned a numerical grade on a scale of zero to 100. The grading scale used to calculate letter grades is:

A  94-100  B-  80-83  D+  67-69
A-  90-93  C+  77-79  D  64-66
B+  87-89  C  74-76  D-  60-63
B  84-86  C-  70-73  F  59 and below

**How To Calculate Your Final Grade**

You can calculate your final grade easily using simple math. Just multiply your numerical grades by their assigned percentages, then add the points together. Use the grading scale above to determine how your point total translates into a letter grade. Here is an example:

Grades:

Essay One: 75 (x .15) = 11.25
Essay Two: 80 (x .20) = 16
Essay Three: 83 (x .20) = 16.6
Quiz Average: 68 (x .35) = 23.8
Peer Review Average: 95 (x .10) = 9.5

Total: 77.15. Using the scale above, this translates to a "C+." NOTE: I do not round grades (i.e., a grade of 79.6 would be a “C+” not a “B-”).

**Course Mechanics**

Our six week course is divided into three modules. Each module lasts for two weeks. During each module, you will:

• Read several works of literature.
• Read selected critical commentaries, written by established scholars, that address the literature you’ve read.

• Read skills-building materials that address the fundamentals of literary analysis and critical writing.

• Listen to one or more lectures by Dr. Tomso or one of the course’s teaching assistants.

• Take a multiple-choice quiz (of approximately 20-25 questions) testing your basic comprehension of the readings and lectures.

• Write a 1,250 word essay in which you critically analyze one or more aspects of a chosen literary work.

• Carefully read and review one your classmate’s essays and post a 400-word critical response to that essay on the course web site.

**Time Considerations**

Students who pass this course will be awarded 3 full hours of college credit for just six weeks of work. This means that the workload for this course is much heavier than an average college course. In fact, it’s almost double.

A general rule of thumb for standard courses is that you should budget 3 hours of work time every week for each hour of course credit. A regular 3-hour course would thus require 9 hours per week of reading, writing and/or research. Using this general rule, you can expect to DOUBLE this time commitment for a six week intensive course like this one. Now, in the interests of your sanity and mine, I haven’t built the course around an 18-hour work-week. The time commitment is more like 12-15 hours per week. Still, this is a serious commitment, and you should think carefully about your other responsibilities before continuing with this course.

*The benefit of this format is that, in just six weeks, you can knock out both a general education literature requirement and a Gordon Rule writing requirement. To do so, however, you have to have the time and the mental energy to keep up with the course.*

**Late Work**

Late papers and quizzes are not accepted.
Contacting the Professor/Receiving Feedback

Feel free to contact me if you need assistance. You can reach me via email at gtomso@uwf.edu. My office phone number is 850-474-2673.

My policy is to answer all emails within 24 hours, except on weekends and holidays. I often check email several times a day, so you will likely receive a reply from me quickly.

I usually return all graded assignments within one week. I personally assign all grades for the course. Formal essays will receive constructive, written feedback from me or the course TA’s.

Required Skills

Students enrolled in this course are expected to possess the following skills:

1. The ability to use the university email system, including opening and sending attachments.
2. The ability to use Microsoft Word 2007 or higher.
3. The ability to write sentences using proper English grammar and syntax.
4. The ability to use the university’s online learning system, “Desire 2 Learn.”
Reading List

Note: All Readings are available from within the course. Links to PDF files are located on the course content page.

Module I: Christopher Columbus and Narratives of “Discovery”


Selections by Columbus and Las Casas from The Norton Anthology:


Selections by Columbus and Las Casas from Symcox and Sullivan:


**Module II: The Animal Within: American Literary Naturalism**


Glaspell, Susan. Trifles. Etext Center At University of Virginia Library. Electronic Text Center. 1 Mar. 2008


**Module III: Harlem Modernism**


*(Note: this item is not on e-reserve; please go directly to the YouTube link above.)*


*(Note: For a complete list of the selections from *Cane*, see the introduction to Module III.)*