

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

ENG 115 Fall 2008

MWF 11:15-12:05, Bartlett 125

Teaching Associate: Eric Fortier

American Experience will examine major American works in autobiography, the novel, film, and music, from the colonial period to the present day. While some attention will be paid to placing these works in historical context, our primary focus will be on formal analysis – on the artwork as a complex of decisions made by an artist (or artists) about its form. We will familiarize ourselves with some of the basic elements of narrative, cinematic, and musical form and devote most of our time to constructing – rather than, say, discovering – the meanings of these texts.

Fundamentally, then, this is a course in interpretation. It proceeds from the assumption that texts mean nothing until they are *read* – which is to say *interpreted* or *made sense of*. To focus our interpretive efforts, we will be considering these texts as more-or-less self-conscious vehicles of something (a feeling, an idea, a dream, a myth) called “American.” We will ask such questions as *What vision of America does this work present?* *How is America defined by these authors and characters?* *What expectations do they put on America, and what are the obstacles to their success?*

Like any text, “America” means nothing until it is read. But some texts (and some people) ask us to defer to an interpretation of America that neglects our experience, or misrepresents it, or fails to account for the evidence, or fails to persuade us, to challenge us, to inspire us, to *move* us. The texts in this course will provide us not only with other peoples’ interpretations of America, but also with evidence for our own interpretations, which we will use to question, refine, and articulate our own understandings of American experience.

GOALS:

- a) to acquire facility with some basic terms of literary, cinematic, and musical analysis and discussion
- b) to hone analytical and rhetorical skills, and to demonstrate these skills orally and in writing
- c) to cultivate a nuanced and complex understanding of “American Experience,” and of ourselves as Americans

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Books (available at Amherst Books):

William L. Andrews, ed., *Classic American Autobiographies* (Signet, \$7.95)

Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Penguin, \$13.95)

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Penguin, \$9.95)

CDs (available at Newbury Comics):

The Band, *The Band*

Sly & the Family Stone, *Stand!*

Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*

R.E.M., *Automatic for the People*

Films:

Stagecoach (dir. John Ford, 1939, 96 minutes)

A Face in the Crowd (dir. Elia Kazan, 1957, 125 minutes)

Lone Star (dir. John Sayles, 1996, 134 minutes)

American Movie (dir. Chris Smith, 1999, 107 minutes)

We will watch the films in class. If you miss a screening of a film, or want to take a second look (which I highly recommend if you are writing a paper on it), you may view it at the Du Bois Library's reserve desk, 3rd floor, during the following dates: *Stagecoach*: 9/24 to 10/8; *A Face in the Crowd*: 10/3 to 10/17; *Lone Star*: 10/22 to 11/5; *American Movie*: 12/5 to 12/19.

Additional short readings will be distributed in class.

ASSIGNMENTS:

- a) **Reading.** This means attentive, careful reading (or watching or listening). Keep a notebook next to you as you read, and spend some time making notes, reflecting, and preparing comments or questions to discuss in class. If everyone prepares two observations for each class, we'll never have to suffer through painful silences.
- b) **Participation.** Participation means being prepared for, and contributing to, the discussion, as well as listening attentively to your classmates' contributions.
- c) **Quizzes.** Regular quizzes will be given to verify comprehension of the texts. You won't need to study for these; if you are reading (or watching or listening) with care and attention, you will do fine. Quizzes will be pass/fail and may not be made up.
- d) **Short Papers.** Three short (3-page) papers will be your opportunity to demonstrate your analytical and rhetorical skills. Paper topics will be assigned two weeks in advance.
- e) **Final Paper.** You have two options for the final paper. You may write a 5-page critical paper which traces some theme through at least three of the works we have discussed (e.g., multiracial families in *Lone Star*, *Stand!*, and *The Marrow of Tradition*; career ambitions in Franklin's *Autobiography*, *A Face in the Crowd*, and *American Movie*). Or you may write an 8-page autobiographical paper in which you examine how a text (in any media, discussed in this class or not) has contributed to, challenged, enriched, etc. your understanding of America or of your own American experience (please discuss such papers with me before beginning). Final papers will be due in my mailbox by the end of finals period.

GRADING BREAKDOWN:

45 % Short papers (15 % each)

25 % Final paper

20 % Participation

10% Quizzes

GRADE EQUIVALENTS:

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	F
100 - 93	92 - 90	89 - 87	86 - 83	82 - 80	79 - 77	76 - 73	72 - 70	69 - 67	66 - 60	59 and below

OTHER POLICIES:

- a) **Contacting Me:** During the week, I will respond to your emails within 24 hours; over the weekend, I am less regular. If time is of the essence, feel free to call my cell phone. Please don't slide anything under my office door - I'm likely to miss it. If you need to leave something for me, use my mailbox on the 4th floor of Bartlett.
- b) **Office Hours and Extra Help:** My office hours are your time. If you have any questions about, or difficulties with, the work in this course, or just want to chat, I invite you to come see me. As writing is a key component of this course, I strongly recommend that each of you visits me to discuss paper topics and get my feedback on your drafts. In addition, I encourage all students (no matter how good a writer you are) to take advantage of the Writing Center. Located in the Learning Commons of the W. E. B. Du Bois Library, the University Writing Center is a free tutorial service where you can receive feedback on your writing at any stage in the writing process. Access the Writing Center website and schedule appointments at www.umass.edu/writingcenter/index.html
- c) **Attendance:** You are allowed three absences, which I suggest you reserve for illness or emergency. For each subsequent absence, your course grade will drop by one third of a letter. Documentation of illness or emergency must be delivered to me immediately upon your return to class. If you know in advance that you will not attend class, please let me know as soon as possible.
- d) **Tardiness:** We have a lot of ground to cover in three and a half months, and every minute counts. If you enter the room after class has begun, I consider you tardy. Three tardies will count as one absence. If you arrive more than fifteen minutes late, or leave more than fifteen minutes early, I consider you absent.
- e) **Late Work:** All work is due in class on the specified date. Exceptions will be made only in the case of documented illness or emergency. Your grade on an assignment will drop by one full letter for each day late. Work received more than three days late will not receive credit.
- f) **Plagiarism:** It is fine to use other people's words and ideas in your writing, as long as you acknowledge the source. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism includes (but is not limited to) inadequately citing or paraphrasing a quotation, purchasing a paper online, copying another student's homework, and submitting work you wrote for another class. Suspected cases of plagiarism will be handled according to the University's Academic Honesty Policy, which can be found at www.umass.edu/dean_students

- g) **Classroom Environment:** When in class, please be circumspect in your words and behavior. Forget about how you *intend* them -- if there is a possibility that your words or behavior may be *perceived* as disrespectful, offensive, intimidating, or threatening, please refrain. A student whose behavior consistently interferes with other students' learning or my teaching will be asked to withdraw from the course.
- h) **Food & Cell Phones:** Drinks in lidded containers are fine, but please don't bring food into the classroom. Please recycle and/or otherwise dispose of your refuse. Cell phones, iPods, and other electronic gadgetry should remain off during class.
- i) **Accommodations:** Please contact me to arrange disability-related accommodations.

SCHEDULE

This schedule is subject to change. Any changes to due dates will be announced at least one week in advance.

DAY	IN CLASS	WORK DUE
W 9/3	introduction	read syllabus, obtain texts
F 9/5	elements of narrative form	Rowlandson, <i>A True History</i> (skip Preface & Removes 6,7, 9-12,14-18)
M 9/8		Franklin, <i>Autobiography</i> 71-134
W 9/10		Franklin, <i>Autobiography</i> 135-184
F 9/12		Franklin, <i>Autobiography</i> 185-228
M 9/15	add/drop period ends	Douglass, <i>Narrative</i> 230-275
W 9/17		Douglass, <i>Narrative</i> 275-308
F 9/19		Douglass, <i>Narrative</i> 309-327
M 9/22	watch <i>Stagecoach</i> ; paper topics distributed	
W 9/24	watch <i>Stagecoach</i>	

F 9/26	finish <i>Stagecoach</i> ; discussion; elements of cinematic form	
M 9/29	discuss <i>Stagecoach</i>	
W 10/1	elements of cinematic form	
F 10/3	watch <i>Lone Star</i>	
M 10/6	watch <i>Lone Star</i>	first short paper due
W 10/8	finish <i>Lone Star</i>	
F 10/10	discuss <i>Lone Star</i>	
TU 10/14	Monday class schedule discuss <i>Lone Star</i>	
W 10/15		Chesnutt, <i>Marrow</i> introduction & 1-78
F 10/17		Chesnutt, <i>Marrow</i> 79-165
M 10/20	paper topics distributed	Chesnutt, <i>Marrow</i> 166-209
W 10/22		Chesnutt, <i>Marrow</i> 210-273
F 10/24		Chesnutt, <i>Marrow</i> 274-329
M 10/27	elements of musical form	<i>Stand!</i>
W 10/29		<i>Stand!</i>
F 10/31		<i>It Takes a Nation of Millions</i>
M 11/3		<i>It Takes a Nation of Millions</i> ; second short paper due

W 11/5		<i>The Band</i>
F 11/7		<i>The Band</i>
M 11/10	paper topics distributed	Cather, <i>Ántonia</i> introduction & 3-111
W 11/12	no class: Tuesday schedule	
F 11/14		Cather, <i>Ántonia</i> 113-172
M 11/17		Cather, <i>Ántonia</i> 173-219
W 11/19		Cather, <i>Ántonia</i> 221-273
F 11/21	discussion & synthesis	
M 11/24		<i>Automatic for the People</i> ; third short paper due
W 11/26		<i>Automatic for the People</i>
F 11/28	no class: Thanksgiving recess	
M 12/1		watch <i>American Movie</i>
W 12/3		watch <i>American Movie</i>
F 12/5		finish <i>American Movie</i>
M 12/8		discuss <i>American Movie</i>
W 12/10	discussion & synthesis	
F 12/12	evaluation & reflection	