

Tel Aviv University

Department of English and American Studies

Nineteenth-Century American Bestsellers and Popular Culture

Maya Merlob

2018-2019

BA elective 0626.2568

Summer Semester

Tues 2-4

Rosenberg 001

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Reception hours: by appointment

This course seeks to bring to scholarly attention texts which have, for the most part, been excluded from the literary canon of American culture. While the canon has vastly expanded in recent years to include texts written by the social and racial 'Other', it has remained largely unreceptive to popular literature, operating under the assumption that it lacks literary merit.

Why is the bestseller considered inferior in terms of its literary and cultural significance? What makes a text successful? What are the criteria for defining success in the world of literature? We will take up these questions as we read texts popularized in nineteenth-century America and explore the ways they appealed to the taste and values of an emerging mass reading public.

Grades

10%- Attendance and participation.

45%- 2 responses.

45%- Final paper- due date TBA.

Responses

Choose 2 of the 3 dates marked **** and submit a 1-2 page paper presenting your **interpretation** of the text. A response is a short essay, which discusses a certain aspect of the text in a very narrow form albeit in a highly clear manner. Responses are to be submitted **BEFORE** we discuss the text in class so as to encourage original thinking about it.

Each response should be sent by mail prior to class with the response as an attachment titled “Name, Response 1 or 2,” for example: Maya Merlob Response1.

General Requirements

All students enrolled in this class must be familiar with the works and topics discussed in the preliminary survey of American literature. Hence, they must all have successfully completed the “Introduction to American Literature” course.

Materials

All the materials for this course are available online (Moodle). Students are required to access the materials for each class. If a student is unfamiliar with the electronic system, it is his/her responsibility to approach the lecturer or other reliable source for technical assistance.

Requirements

1. **Attendance and Participation**: All students must attend and take an active role in class. It is absolutely imperative to come to class prepared with the texts assigned for each class. Students are required to read the texts beforehand. The students' preparation as well as their ability to engage in a discussion about the texts will account for 10% of the final grade.
2. **Responses**: Throughout the semester students are required to submit short written responses on the texts due the day of submission. Three dates are possible for submission, out of which the students will choose two. For those interested in improving their grade, an optional third submission is possible for the fourth date, with the highest two marks to be taken into consideration. All responses should be 1-2 pages long and should be written in a clear and concise manner, allowing space for students to express their opinion and original thinking. The two responses account for 45% of the final grade.
3. **Final Paper**: A final paper will be assigned towards the end of the semester. The final paper is to be 4-5 pages long and will require students to engage in a literary interpretation based on the topics and themes discussed throughout the semester. It accounts for 45% of the final grade.
4. **Plagiarism**: There is no need to consult secondary sources. If a student chooses to, s/he may cite the source appropriately. Failing to give proper credit to a source used is considered plagiarism and will be dealt according to the departmental instructions.

Plagiarism is a serious offense which this course, as well as the entire Department, will not tolerate.

Schedule

- 5.3 Introduction:** Canonicity, Popularity, and Literary Success.
- 12.3 The Tall Tale-** Mark Twain “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” 1865
- 19.3 Popularity and Patriotism:** Edward Everett Hale “The Man Without a Country” 1863.
- 26.3 New England Horror:** William Austin “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” 1824.
- 2.4 ****Sensationalism and the Popular Press: Crime and Mystery:** Anonymous, “The Murderess” 1838. Selections from Edgar Allan Poe's “How to Write a Blackwood Article” 1838. In-class reading: The Hoaxes and humbugs of Poe and P.T. Barnum.
- (9.4 Election Day- No Class)
- 30.4 ****Reform Literature- the Temperance Movement:** Timothy Shay Arthur, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, and What I Saw There* 1854. Pp. 3-23, 32-53.
- 7.5 Arthur-** Continued pp. 131-52.
- 14.5 Advice Literature and Self-Culture: character and industry:** Benjamin Franklin, Henry Ward Beecher, William A. Alcott. **The Male Body:** Walt Whitman, “Manly Health and Training” 1858. **Sexual Reform:** Sylvester Graham, anonymous tracts.
- 21.5 Literary Success and Failure:** Theodore Sedgwick Fay "The Poor Author" 1832
- 28.5 ****Sentimentalism and the Woman Writer:** Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall* (Selections) 1854
- 4.6 Fern, Ruth Hall**
- 11.6 Fern, Ruth Hall Conclusion**