

ENG 241 Introduction to African American Literature

CRN 12336, 4 credits, Fall 2021

Monday and Wednesday 4-5:20pm, 195 Anstett Hall

Professor Thorsson, thorsson@uoregon.edu

Office Hours: Tuesday 10am-1pm via Zoom <https://uoregon.zoom.us/j/97948555325>

Course Description

This course is a survey of writings by African American authors from the 1940s to the present. Studying fiction, essays, and poetry, we will read representative texts to consider whether there are specific formal and thematic elements that characterize an African American literary tradition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We will consider how these texts fit into or defy ideas about race, gender, and class on the one hand and classifications of genre, period, and literary style on the other. We will study relationships among these works to uncover how they reflect on, depend on, or revise one another. We will look for relationships between these works and other art forms such as music and visual arts. This means that as we read each text closely, we may also listen closely to a relevant speech, poetry reading, or piece of music. The goal of this course is to help you engage with African American literature, improving your writing, reading, and critical thinking skills in the process. This class requires substantial reading and writing and vigorous participation.

This course satisfies two Core Education group requirements: Arts & Letters and U.S. Difference, Inequality, Agency.

This course counts as a lower-division elective for the English Minor and the English Major.

Learning Outcomes

The goal of this course is to help you engage with African American literature, improving your writing, reading, and critical thinking skills in the process. To that end, you will:

1. Read literary and cultural texts with comprehension and with an understanding of their conventions.
2. Draw on relevant information to situate texts within their cultural, political, and historical contexts.
3. Perform critical, formal analyses of literary or other cultural texts.
4. Write focused, analytical essays in clear prose with correct grammar and correct citation.
5. Employ logic, creativity, and interpretive skills to produce original, persuasive arguments.

Required Texts

There is one required book for this course: the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, third edition, volume two (2014), edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Valerie Smith, ISBN: 9780393923704. Our book is available at the UO Bookstore, Knight Library course reserves, and online retailers. **For this class, you need volume two only of the current 2014 edition of the Norton.**

All other assigned readings on the schedule below are in the files section of the Canvas website for our class.

Reading, Participation, and Attendance

You will spend much of the time you devote to this course actively reading our assigned texts. Active reading means reading with a pen in your hand, taking notes, writing down observations and questions you have about the text, and looking up words you do not know or that the author is using in a surprising way. Have the assigned readings with you at each class meeting, in hardcopy if possible, and be prepared to discuss them.

You will earn your participation grade by taking part in discussions, group work, in-class writing, reading aloud from a text, and other activities that will take place during our class meetings. I will offer you a variety of ways to contribute to our learning community and am confident that each of you will earn full credit for participation.

If you miss class for any reason, it is your responsibility to keep up with the readings, get notes for that day from a classmate, and then see me in office hours if you have questions about the material you missed. I will not record attendance and will not penalize students for missed classes, but please be aware that it will be very difficult for you to learn the material or do your best work in this class if you miss more than two class meetings.

Office Hours and Email

I am available in office hours on Tuesdays 10am-1pm via Zoom at <https://uoregon.zoom.us/j/97948555325> to talk with you about our readings, assignments, or anything else. These office hours are for you and I encourage you to use them! You can make an appointment in advance or drop in during office hours. Please be aware that you may need to wait in the Zoom waiting room if I am with another student.

I am also available via email (thorsson@uoregon.edu). Please use email rather than Canvas messages to communicate with me. I will usually respond to emails within 24 hours during the week and will take longer to respond on the weekend. When you email me about any matter, please include your full name and that you are an ENG 241 student.

Learning During a Pandemic

In this class, we will work together to meet our learning objectives and to find inspiration, provocation, intellectual challenges, laughter, and solace in literature. We will be patient and flexible with each other as we build our learning community.

I will use Canvas to post course materials, send announcements, collect assignments, comment on assignments, and post grades. To contact me directly, please use email rather than Canvas messages.

Whether we meet in person, online, or both, I will not record our class meetings. You do not have permission from me or from each of your classmates to record our class meetings. Our collaborative task is to make ENG 241 a space for rigorous, respectful study and discussion of challenging material. This work is by us and for us, not for recording or sharing.

In the case of the current pandemic and in the case of any emergency that disrupts academic activities, our course requirements, assignments, due dates, and grading percentages are subject to change. I will communicate any changes as soon as possible.

As we navigate our work to learn during a pandemic, I understand that each of us has and will continue to face a variety of losses, challenges, and changes in our lives. I am here to support your learning however I can. Please do not hesitate to see me in office hours Tuesdays 10am-1pm via Zoom at <https://uoregon.zoom.us/j/97948555325> or email me (thorsson@uoregon.edu) about any obstacles to your learning that come up this term.

Class Content and Respectful Discussion

In this class, we are studying literature of the United States in its historical and political contexts. This means that we will read about and discuss racist and sexual violence. There are incidents of both in our readings, some of which include explicit language and graphic sexual acts, both consensual and not. Please consider whether the content of the course may be disturbing to a degree that interferes with your learning. We will not use the n-word in this class, even if it appears in our texts. We will not use the f-word in this class, regardless of a person's perceived sexual orientation or gender expression. When reading aloud from a text, for example, we will simply pause for a beat or say "n" or "n's." We will work together to apply this policy to other slurs and biased language as needed over the course of the term.

UO Resources

Online tutoring is available through UO's Online Writing Lab (OWL), a free service that allows UO students to submit work via an online portal and receive detailed feedback within 24 hours. Log in at <https://owl.uoregon.edu/>

Please let me know about any accommodations that will help make this class accessible to you. If applicable, please request that the Accessible Education Center (aec.uoregon.edu/) send me a letter outlining your approved accommodations. An AEC letter helps me implement accessible course design, but I do not require documentation to make accommodations.

The University Student Conduct Code (dos.uoregon.edu/conduct) defines academic misconduct. Students may not commit or attempt to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. Students should acknowledge and document all sources of information. If there is any question about whether an act constitutes academic misconduct, see me.

The UO Basic Needs Resource Guide (<https://blogs.uoregon.edu/basicneeds/>) is the place to go for help with basic needs such as food security, housing security, healthcare, and access to technology.

SAFE (safe.uoregon.edu) is a resource for members of the UO community who experience sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you wish to speak to someone confidentially, you can call the 24-hour hotline 541-346-SAFE to be connected to a confidential counselor to discuss your options and get support.

The UO Counseling Center (<https://counseling.uoregon.edu/>) offers support for well-being and mental health of students via telehealth and in-person appointments, drop-in hours, and availability of mental health professionals at any time via phone at 541-346-3227.

Grading

Participation	20%
Close Reading #1 (2-3 pages)	25%
Close Reading #2 (3-4 pages)	35%
My Chosen Text (2-3 pages)	20%

100 = A+ = 4.3	77-79 = C+ = 2.3
93-99 = A = 4.0	73-76 = C = 2.0
90-92 = A- = 3.7	70-72 = C- = 1.7
87-89 = B+ = 3.3	67-69 = D+ = 1.3
83-86 = B = 3.0	65-66 = D = 1.0
80-82 = B- = 2.7	65 or below = F = 0

Assignments

We will discuss each assignment in detail as it approaches and we will practice the skills needed for each assignment in class before that assignment is due. Assignments must be submitted via Canvas as a Microsoft Word document or PDF by the beginning of class on the due dates listed below. Each assignment will open for submission on Canvas one week before it is due and close one week after it is due. I will mark late assignments down by 1/3 of a letter grade (B becomes a B-) for each day they are late.

Please format your work according to current MLA guidelines, including 1-inch margins, correct citation and quotation, numbered pages, and a works cited page. For help with correct MLA format, consult me, the examples on your close reading handout, a research librarian, the *MLA Handbook*, or [Purdue University's Online Writing Lab](#).

I am happy to meet with you in office hours to talk through your plans for any of our assignments. I will offer verbal feedback about each assignment to the whole class at the end of a class meeting, usually one week after an assignment is due. This is a chance for us to identify common strengths and areas where you are working to improve as readers, thinkers, and writers. I will also provide brief individual comments and grades on each assignment, usually one week after it is due. Please be sure to read my assignment comments on your work in Canvas.

Close Reading #1 (2-3 pages) Due to Canvas by 4pm on Wednesday, October 20th

Your close reading #1 will analyze a short passage of your choice from any of the texts on our syllabus. Your close reading must include observation and analysis of both form and content in your chosen passage. It may or may not include an interpretive argument. It may or may not use one or more secondary sources. The passage you are analyzing should appear in your close reading, either at the top of the assignment or in the body of your text (see examples on close reading handout). As you write your close reading, look at the handout with examples and your notes from our collaborative close reading work in class. Offer your own insights rather than simply rehashing what we have said in class. If you get stuck or find you have little to say about

your chosen passage, reread the passage, list new observations, and analyze those observations. If your passage doesn't give you enough to work with, choose another one. The purpose of this assignment is for you to practice close reading, a fundamental skill of literary analysis and a form of critical thinking.

Close Reading #2 (3-4 pages) Due to Canvas by 4pm on Wednesday, November 10th

Your close reading #2 will analyze a short passage of your choice from any of the texts on our syllabus. Close reading #2 must observe and analyze both the form and content of your chosen text and it must include an interpretive argument about your chosen passage or the text it comes from. It may or may not use one or more secondary sources. The passage you are analyzing should appear in your close reading, either at the top of the assignment or in the body of your text (see examples on close reading handout). As you write your close reading, look at the handout with examples and your notes from our collaborative close reading work in class. Offer your own insights rather than simply rehashing what we have said in class. If you get stuck or find you have little to say about your chosen passage, reread the passage, list new observations, and analyze those observations. If your passage doesn't give you enough to work with, choose another one. The purpose of this assignment is for you to use your close reading skills to make a clear, persuasive, interpretive argument in writing.

My Chosen Text Assignment (2-3 pages) Due to Canvas by 4pm on Monday, November 29th Come to class prepared to tell your classmates about your chosen text.

Choose any one text from our *Norton Anthology of African American Literature, volume two* (2014) that does not appear on our syllabus. Read your chosen text carefully. Your My Chosen Text assignment should say why you chose the text you did, describe the text you chose, and say whether or not you think it should be on our ENG 241 syllabus and why. The purpose of this assignment is for you to apply what you have learned about the African American literary tradition to a text of your choice; to practice making clear, interpretive arguments both in writing and verbally; and for you and your colleagues to offer one another informed recommendations for further reading.

Schedule

Week One

M 9/27

Introduction
Syllabus

W 9/29

Ann Petry, chapter one of *The Street* (1946) (p 168-179)

Week Two

M 10/4

Ralph Ellison, from *Invisible Man* (1952) (p 258-279)
Close Reading Handout

W 10/6

Ralph Ellison, from *Invisible Man* (1952) (p 258-279) (continued)

Week Three

- M 10/11 Gwendolyn Brooks, all poems (1945-1960) (p 326-343)
Meter Handout
Optional: listen to Gwendolyn Brooks reading "We Real Cool" (1960)
here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaVfLwZ6jes>
- W 10/13 Gwendolyn Brooks, all poems (1945-1960) (p 326-343) (continued)

Week Four

- M 10/18 Paule Marshall, "Reena" (1962) (p 959-971)
Passive Voice Handout
- W 10/20 Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1964) (p 594-607)
Close Reading #1 (2-3 pages) Due

Week Five

- M 10/25 Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement" (1968) (p 784-787)
Amiri Baraka, "Black Art" (1969) (p 703-704)
Jayne Cortez, "How Long Has Trane Been Gone" (1969) (p 771-773)
- W 10/27 Toni Cade Bambara, "Gorilla, My Love" (1972) (p 842-846)

Week Six

- M 11/1 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973) (p 989-1027)
- W 11/3 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973) (p 1027-1067)

Week Seven

- M 11/8 Audre Lorde, "Power" (1976) (p 642-643)
June Jordan, "Poem about Police Violence" (1978) (p 764-765) and "Poem about My Rights" (1980) (p 766-769)
Optional: listen to June Jordan reading "Poem about My Rights" here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUSTxhYu7-4>
Optional: watch "June Jordan at the Brockport Writers Forum" (1981)
here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ii4y8MKcrwk>
- W 11/10 Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984) (p 1067-1071)
Optional: watch Toni Morrison on *60 Minutes* here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7vXnbEd8z4>
Close Reading #2 (3-4 pages) Due

Week Eight

M 11/15 Colson Whitehead, from *John Henry Days* (2001) (p 1491-1507)

W 11/17 Nafissa Thompson-Spires, "The Heads of The Colored People" (2018)
PDF in files section of our Canvas site here:
<https://canvas.uoregon.edu/courses/185765/files?preview=11966988>

Week Nine

M 11/22 Danielle Evans, "The Office of Historical Corrections" (2020) (p 163-211)
PDF in files section of our Canvas site here:
<https://canvas.uoregon.edu/courses/185744/files?preview=11974014>

W 11/24 Danielle Evans, "The Office of Historical Corrections" (2020) (p 211-265)
PDF in files section of our Canvas site here:
<https://canvas.uoregon.edu/courses/185744/files?preview=11974014>

Week Ten

M 11/29 Discussion of Your Chosen Texts
My Chosen Text Assignment (2-3 pages) Due

W 11/1 Conclusion