

## AMS 206: American Character

T, Th, 9:30-10:45am / ten Hoor 103

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### **Spring 2004**

Office hours:  
T, Th 11:00am-1:00pm  
or by appt.

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Ever since the initial contacts between Europeans and Native Americans in the New World, questions as to what characterizes America and its people continue to arise and shape the debates about our culture and society. This course seeks to evaluate the meanings, ideals, beliefs, values, and purposes of “American character.” Using primary sources dating approximately from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to late-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we will explore the ideological and cultural implications of how Americans view themselves. What do Americans share in common? What makes Americans exceptional from the rest of the world? How do the definitions of American character change over time? What are the aspirations and anxieties behind the American Dream?

Several historical periods and cultural episodes will frame the course structure and content. Through these eras and issues, the class will attempt to unravel some of their ideals and promises, failures and complications, paradoxes and contradictions. Are Americans moral or profane? High-minded or vulgar? Careless or concerned? Individualists or group-oriented? Prejudiced or open-minded? Traditional or radical? Nostalgic or future-oriented? How do these themes intersect with notions of race, class, and gender? These and other questions should spark our inquiries and investigations into American character through an interdisciplinary approach. That is, we will examine and discuss what constitutes American character through autobiographies, novels, oral histories, films, paintings, and other cultural expressions.

The overall objectives of this course include: 1) developing critical thinking skills from an active engagement with the course material; and 2) forming a more sophisticated appreciation for the complexities of American culture.

### **Learning Outcome**

At semester’s end, students will be expected to: 1) manufacture their own definitions of what American Character is; 2) debate the usefulness of the phrase “American Character;” and 3) make thematic connections among different types of cultural artifacts.

**Required texts:** (available at the Bama Bookstore on University Blvd. or Bryant Dr.):

- 1) Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.
- 2) Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.
- 3) F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby.
- 4) Studs Terkel, American Dreams: Lost and Found.

**Web readings:** (The additional reading material is located at the following web links):

Benjamin Franklin, Selections from Poor Richard's Almanac.  
[http://www.ku.edu/carrie/docs/amdocs\\_index.html](http://www.ku.edu/carrie/docs/amdocs_index.html)

Benjamin Franklin, Selections from The Autobiography.  
<http://earlyamerica.com/lives/franklin/index.html>

Thomas Jefferson, Letters.  
<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/tj3/writings/brf/jeflxx.htm>

Thomas Jefferson, Selections from Notes on the State of Virginia.  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JEFFERSON/toc.html>

Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience."  
<http://eserver.org/thoreau/civil.html>

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments"  
<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/seneca.html>

Langston Hughes, Selected Poems.  
<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C0E01>

Edna St. Vincent Millay, Selected Poems.  
<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C070308>

### **Course requirements:**

**1) Two (2) in-class exams (75 min., 15% each > 30% total):**

The exams will consist of three parts: 1) multiple-choice questions, 2) comparative identifications, and 3) an interpretive essay question. The exams are scheduled for **Tuesday, Feb. 10** and **Tuesday, March 16**.

**2) Final exam (2½ hrs. > 30%):**

The final exam is scheduled for **Friday, May 7 at 8:00-10:30am**. Like the in-class exams, it will consist of multiple-choice questions, comparative IDs, and an interpretive essay. The essay will require comparative analyses of the readings.

**3) Class participation (40% total):**

Much of the class time will center on discussing the readings and other course material. Therefore talking, and the quality of it, is absolutely essential. Keeping current on the class readings, film viewings, etc. is naturally expected. **On five (5) particular days of class discussion, students will also be expected to post and bring in questions on the readings. The instructor will use these questions to facilitate class discussion.**

**Additionally, as part of class discussions, students will post their responses to the readings on the course website about six (6) times during the semester.** Students will be assigned to a particular group of approximately 5 members. Each group will post brief responses (250-300 words) to the assigned readings, or to each other's responses, questions, etc. These assignments are not so much formal essays as informal responses – therefore, students may write in the first person to reveal how or what they're thinking, what questions

or problems they had, or other issues of this nature. The postings will be evaluated on a scale of 0 to 4 (4 being the highest grade). These on-line exercises are tools to help students engage in deeper discussions with each other about the course material to enhance critical thinking skills. **The assignments are due BEFORE 9:30am on each of the specific days of discussion. No postings will be accepted after those particular days of discussion.**

### **Things to keep in mind:**

#### **1) Attendance Policy:**

Regular attendance for this course is mandatory. Consistent class attendance only helps student learning and performance on exams, papers, and other assignments. Granted, students may have to miss class for reasons of personal or family health matters, or other situations that may arise when students have to miss class. It is, however, the sole discretion of the instructor to decide what constitutes a valid absence. Students are allowed up to 3 absences for the semester. The final course grade will be lowered one full grade level (i.e., a “B+” becomes a “C+”) for each unexcused absence afterward. The number of excused absences may be exceeded due to extraordinary circumstances such as medical reasons (these absences must have proper documentation). What should be kept in mind is that these set limits are not devised to punish individual students, but to protect the majority of those who do make a continual good faith effort throughout the semester.

#### **2) Policy on Academic Misconduct:**

All acts of dishonesty in any work constitute academic misconduct. In a learning environment designed to foster independent and critical thinking, plagiarism is especially one of the most invidious of sins to commit. At its most basic level, plagiarism is intellectual theft. Copying from already published texts, paraphrasing another student’s work, or taking material from the internet without citing the original sources are all acts of academic dishonesty and will not be tolerated. To read a more developed definition of what comprises plagiarism in all of its variations, please go to the following link maintained by Georgetown University: <http://www.georgetown.edu/honor/plagiarism.html>. It just takes about 10-15 minutes to read and contains valuable information about citing sources, unintentional plagiarism, paraphrasing, internet use, and other such issues. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with this material. Should acts of plagiarism be detected, the Academic Misconduct Disciplinary Policy will be followed.

#### **3) Classroom Decorum:**

Please pay attention to what is going on in the classroom and avoid what I call the “rocking chair mentality.” That is, don’t just passively sit back in class and let the material waft over you. Actively read, question, and discuss the material. Listen to others’ opinions. On another front, shun behavior that disturbs others. Carrying on conversations with or passing notes among fellow students while the instructor or any student is speaking to the class is discourteous and immature. Sleeping, having cell phones go off, reading newspapers, doing homework for other classes, or packing up notebooks while the instructor or any student is addressing the class also fall under this category. If any of these or other disruptive behaviors arise, the particular student(s) may be asked to leave the classroom. Some students may think or ask, “If I’m paying for my education (or my parents/guardians are), why shouldn’t I be able to do what I want?” (i.e., like talking in class, missing class, leaving early, not finishing the reading). Paying for the tuition costs at this university does not entitle anyone to do whatever they want. If a person pays for a ticket to see a football game at Bryant-Denny Stadium and insists on bringing in a prohibited item with him, that person

will not be admitted even though he paid for admission. Other public venues have rules that restrict certain behaviors for the benefit of all. Please remember that a classroom is at heart a community in which individual students learn from one another as well as from the instructor. In the end, standards of behavior and learning strengthen the overall credibility of the degree students earn.

**4) Reading & Writing Assignments:**

Complete the reading and writing assignments by their due dates. Students will get the most from their college education (and their tuition payments!) when they do the required work for class on a regular basis. By not finishing a day's assigned reading or not handing in written work on time, a student is merely taking away from the classroom learning environment and wasting his or her own time as well as the instructor's. Certain situations may arise in which students are prevented from finishing assigned work, but only under special situations such as illness. The key to staying on top of the workload is to PLAN AHEAD. The instructor holds all students enrolled in the class to this responsibility.

**5) Make-up Exams:**

An exam missed during the semester can be made up only at the AMS Departmental Make-Up Day on Tuesday, April 20 at 3:30pm in ten Hour 103.

**6) Disability Access:**

To request accommodations, please contact Disabilities Services (348-4285). After initial arrangements are made with Disabilities Services, contact me through the mail (P.O. Box 870214, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487), by phone ([205] 348-9767), or by e-mail (etang@tenhour.as.ua.edu).

**COURSE SCHEDULE:**

Jan. 8: Introduction

Jan. 13: Discussion: Defining American Character

**Part 1: Revolutionary Foundations**

This first section examines how two of the most influential revolutionary founders, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, established the cultural and ideological groundwork for the United States. The period begins with the American colonies declaring their independence from the British Empire in 1776, and ends with Thomas Jefferson's election to the presidency and his ideals thereafter.

Jan. 15: Lecture: "The American Enlightenment"

Jan. 20: Discussion: Benjamin Franklin (online):

a) Autobiography (ch. 1)

b) Poor Richard's Almanac (1739, 1741)

Jan. 22: Discussion: Franklin, con'd (online), Autobiography (ch. 8)

**\*[online discussion questions]**

Jan. 27: Film Viewing: "Thomas Jefferson" (1743-1776)

Jan. 29: Discussion: Thomas Jefferson (online), Letters to:

- John Randolph, Aug. 25, 1775 (Reconciliation or Independence)

- Edmund Pendleton, Aug. 26, 1776 (Virginia Constitution)
  - Giovanni Fabbroni, June 8, 1778 (Music & Culture)
  - Marquis de Chastellux, Sept. 2, 1785 (Climate & American Character)
  - James Madison, Oct. 28, 1785 (Property & Natural Right)
  - Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803 (The Morals of Jesus)
  - Martha Jefferson, Nov. 28, 1783 (Advice to Daughter)
  - Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Nov. 24, 1808 (Education of Grandson)
- \*[online writing #1 due]**

Feb. 3: Discussion: Thomas Jefferson, con'd (online):

- Notes on the State of Virginia (Query 18: Manners)
- Benjamin Banneker, Aug. 30, 1791 (Hope for “Our Black Brethren”)
- Henri Gregoire, Feb. 25, 1809 (The Negro Race)
- Edward Coles, Aug. 25, 1814 (Emancipation & Younger Generation)
- John Holmes, April 22, 1820 (“A Fire Bell in the Night”)
- Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826 (Last Letter: On Liberty)

Feb. 5: Review for first exam

Feb. 10: **First in-class exam**

## **Part 2: Reforming America**

This part analyzes the growing movements for social reform within an expansive nation celebrating its Manifest Destiny. The period begins with a financial panic in 1837 which devastated rich and poor alike, and ends with the Compromise of 1850, a political measure that drew the nation ever closer to civil war. Here, we look at three reformers: the Transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and the women’s rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Feb. 12: Lecture: “Transcendentalism & the Market Economy”

Feb. 17: Discussion: Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (online)

**\*[online discussion questions]**

Feb. 19: Lecture: “Reforming Society: Abolition & Women’s Rights”

Feb. 24: Discussion: Frederick Douglass, Narrative of Frederick Douglass (Preface to ch. 8)

Feb. 26: Discussion: a) Douglass, Narrative (ch. 9 to Appendix)

b) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Declaration of Sentiments” (online)

c) Thomas Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence” (on Stanton website)

**\*[online writing #2 due]**

## **Part 3: New Frontiers**

Within this section, we will look at how the West presented new opportunities and eventual limits for the nation through Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. The period begins in 1876 with the centennial celebrations of the nation’s birth, as well as Twain’s initial efforts at writing his novel. The period ends in 1893 with historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s lecture on the frontier’s importance at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, an event designed to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’s “discovery” of America.

Mar. 2: Lecture: “Imagining the West”

Mar. 4: Discussion: Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (chs. 1-22)

**\*[online discussion questions]**

Mar. 9: Discussion: Twain, Huckleberry Finn (chs. 23-31)

Mar. 11: Discussion: Twain, Huckleberry Finn (chs. 32-Chapter the Last)

**\*[online writing #3 due]**

Mar. 16: **Second in-class exam**

#### **Part 4: Modern Sensibilities**

This part evaluates what Americans have called “The Jazz Age” or “The Roaring Twenties.” The period begins with the end of World War I, and ends with the stock market crash that sent the nation into the Great Depression. Perhaps no other writer has captured the hopes and despair of this era more than F. Scott Fitzgerald. Also, we will look at Langston Hughes, an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, one of the most popular modernist poets in the 1920s.

Mar. 18: Film Viewing: “New York City” (The 1920s)

Mar. 23: Discussion: F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (chs. 1-5)

**\*[online discussion questions]**

Mar. 25: Discussion: Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (chs. 6-9)

**\*[online writing #4 due]**

Mar. 30, Apr. 1: No class (Spring Break)

Apr. 6: Discussion: Langston Hughes, poems (online):

- “I, Too, Sing America”
- “Let America Be America Again”
- “Theme for English B”

**[optional extra credit online writing due]**

Apr. 8: Discussion: Edna St. Vincent Millay, poems (online):

- “The Plaid Dress”
- “Renascence”
- “Second Fig”

**\*[online writing #5 due]**

#### **Part 5: American Dreaming**

This last section presents the dreams, visions, and desires of ordinary Americans. The period begins with the film “The Candidate” (1972), in which a young and naïve man runs for the U.S. Senate to make a difference, only to discover the darker side of politics. The course ends with the patchwork of dreams and disappointments voiced by a multitude of Americans during the 1960s and 1970s, as captured by Studs Terkel, a journalist and oral historian who has been called our modern-day Walt Whitman.

Apr. 13: Film Discussion: “The Candidate”

Apr. 15: Discussion: Studs Terkel, American Dreams (selections)

**\*[online discussion questions]**

Apr. 20: Discussion: Terkel, American Dreams (selections)

Apr. 22: Discussion: Terkel, American Dreams (selections)

**\*[online writing #6 due]**

Apr. 27: Discussion: Terkel, American Dreams (selections)

**[optional extra credit online writing due]**

Apr. 29: Conclusion and Review

**Final exam: Friday, May 7, 8:00-10:30am**