

English 2326
American Literature
Fall 2025
MW 12:30-1:50

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office hours by appointment

American Literature: The Art of the Possible

From its very beginnings, the United States was imagined as a land of possibility – a place where people could reinvent themselves, where ingenuity and hard work would be rewarded, where history could be made rather than just endured. To some extent that's true. But as soon as we make that statement, we have to acknowledge the contrary – that freedom was not a universal birthright; that "we the people" did not refer to everyone; and that what was possible for some was impossible for many.

It is in the space between the mythology and the reality of "America" that American literature, at its best, has always thrived. Our most important authors are those who have thought deeply about what it means to be an American, and they grappled with both the promise and the failings of the country. In many ways, the literature these writers produced can be regarded as a kind of national conscience, measuring the distance between where we are now and where we could be, and ought to be.

While that is the preeminent theme that will run through our readings this semester, we will also explore a number of other issues and histories that it involves: the immigrant experience; the long shadow of slavery; political and social reform; the changing human relationship to the natural environment; and more. We will also investigate how a variety of major literary forms – such as the autobiography, the epic poem, and the novel – enabled authors to express different aspects of American experience. By the end of the semester, you will have obtained a good overview of American literature and a deeper understanding of the United States' complex cultural history.

Required Texts:

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1787) (Dover, 2016)
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) (Dover, 2016)
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855 Edition* (1855) (Dover, 2007)
Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) (Vintage, 2022)
Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and "The Imported Bridegroom"* (1896) (Dover, 1970)
Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918) (Vintage, 2018)
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929) (Penguin, 2003)
Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008) (Vintage, 2009)
John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (1937) (Penguin, 1993)
Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) (Grove Press, 2013)

Please make sure to get the real, physical, hard-copy editions of these books rather than some digital version. Mark them up as you read (underlining, taking notes in the margins, etc.), and always come to class with the book we're discussing that day.

Grade Distribution:

Unit Assessments 35%

At the end of each of our five thematic units, there will be an in-class written assessment that will consist of a number of factual and short-answer questions about the material, along with a more general prompt regarding your thoughts about the readings.

Creative/Critical Project 25%

There are a number of different options for this assignment, ranging from personal essays to creative works to interdisciplinary analyses. A complete list, with full descriptions, is available on our Canvas page. You may turn in this project at any point during the semester.

Final Exam 20%

The final exam will be comprehensive (though avoiding nit-picky details), and will test your knowledge of the major themes and issues of both the readings and class discussions.

Participation 20%

This means not just attendance, but your proactive contribution to class discussions and activities. To get a good grade for participation, you should: 1) bring to each class period the book we're reading for that day; 2) try to answer questions that I pose to the class, even if you're just exploring an idea; and 3) work productively with your student partners when I have you doing something together in class.

Calendar:

Week 1:

Mon. Aug. 18 Introduction
Wed. Aug. 20 Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, pp. 1-30

Unit I – Self-Creation

Week 2:

Mon. Aug. 25 Franklin, pp. 31-72 (through Part Two)
Wed. Aug. 27 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, pp. vii-26 (preface through ch. 7)

Week 3:

Mon. Sept. 1 **Labor Day – no class**
Wed. Sept. 3 Douglass, pp. 26-69 (chs. 8-11)
Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ch. 1

Week 4:

Mon. Sept. 8 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," from *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 21-68
Wed. Sept. 10 Whitman,
* Unit I assessment

Unit II: New Americans

Week 5:

Mon. Sept. 15 Abraham Cahan, *Yekl*, pp. 1-64 (chs. 1-6)
Wed. Sept. 17 Cahan, pp. 64-89 (chs. 7-10)

Week 6:

Mon. Sept. 22 Cather, *My Ántonia*, pp. 1-106 (Book One)
Wed. Sept. 24 Cather, pp. 107-136

Week 7:

Mon. Sept. 29 Cather, pp. 137-235
Wed. Oct. 1 Cather, pp. 236-272
* Unit II assessment

Unit III: The Modern Style

Week 8:

Mon. Oct. 6 Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, pp. 1-95 (chs. 1-9)
Wed. Oct. 8 Hemingway, pp. 96-132 (chs. 10-12)

Week 9:

Mon. Oct. 13 Hemingway, pp. 133-211 (chs. 13-17)
Wed. Oct. 15 Hemingway, pp. 212-256 (chs. 18-19)
* Unit III assessment

Unit IV: African American Experience

Week 10:

Mon. Oct. 20 Nella Larsen, *Passing*, pp. 1-84 (Parts One and Two)
Wed. Oct. 22 *Passing*, pp. 85-120 (Part Three)

Week 11:

Mon. Oct. 27 Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, pp. 1-78
Wed. Oct. 29 Morrison, pp. 79-118

Week 12:

Mon. Nov. 3 Morrison, pp. 119-196
Wed. Nov. 5 * Unit IV assessment

Unit V: Outsiders and Misfits

Week 13:

Mon. Nov. 10 John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, pp. 1-65
Wed. Nov. 12 Steinbeck, pp. 66-107

Week 14:

Mon. Nov. 17 Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, pp. 1-75
Wed. Nov. 19 Alexie, pp. 76-129

Week 15:

Mon. Nov. 24 **Thanksgiving – no class**
Wed. Nov. 26 **Thanksgiving – no class**

Week 16:

Mon. Dec. 1 Alexie, pp. 130-242
 * Unit V assessment
Wed. Dec. 3 Conclusion

Final exam: Wednesday, Dec. 10, 10:30am – 12:30pm

Course Policies

Attendance: Since this is a discussion-oriented class that depends on the active participation of all students, attendance is required. Over the course of the semester, you may take 3 absences for any reason. After that, your participation and/or semester grades may be reduced. If you accumulate 8 or more absences, I reserve the right to assign an F for your semester grade.

Communication: In communicating with the class as a whole, I'll use either Canvas or MyUNT, so be sure to check your UNT email address for announcements or other class information and documents. If you need to contact me with a question or personal issue regarding the course, please email me directly at finseth@unt.edu.

Electronic Devices: Please do not use smart-phones, iPads, or laptops in class. I want our focus to be on what we're reading, and on our conversation with each other. While taking notes in class is obviously important, this is best done by first reflecting on the ideas or issues that are being discussed, and later writing down whatever summaries, insights, or questions you may have.

Grades: For various reasons, I will not be using the Canvas grade-book. Instead, I will use an Excel spreadsheet to record all grade information and to calculate final grades. If you have any questions about your grades, therefore, don't check Canvas, but definitely feel free to ask me.

Strategies for Succeeding in this Class

Do all the reading. This sounds obvious, but it is the prerequisite for doing well in any class.

Keeping up with the assigned reading will not only give you a better sense how all the material fits together, but will enable you to be much more engaged in class. And if you make it a habit to read every day, you'll be amazed at how much you can get done.

Read actively. This means several things: thinking about the ideas you're encountering in the material; making connections to other works; and underlining important passages and/or making notes in the margins of your books. It also means that you should read the actual physical books, not digital versions (unless absolutely necessary). Emerging research shows that comprehension and retention decrease when we read something off a screen.

Study the material. Literary studies is a discipline that promotes critical thinking, ethical and social awareness, and a deeper understanding of how language and other forms of representation work. And a professional discipline requires *actual* discipline: effort, energy, attention, time. Studying the material, just as you would in a science class, will pay off not only in your performance in this class, but also in your long-term intellectual development.

Attend every class. The reason is not just to avoid grade penalties, but because there's a tremendous amount one learns simply by being physically present and absorbing everything that's being said (by me and by other students).

Take notes. It might seem easy to remember stuff at the time, but even 2 or 3 weeks is an eternity when it comes to remembering important ideas, or the details of a work, or specific terminology, or points of argument and analysis.

Start your written work early and always take the time to revise it. Nobody, including myself, produces their best work, or even good work, in a day or two. I recommend starting at least a week in advance, and recognizing that what you first produce is only a draft – one that will need significant reworking to bring out its potential.

Artificial "Intelligence": The only permissible use of generative AI writing tools in this class involves surface-level editing (e.g., spelling, syntax, grammar checking). The assignments for the course have been developed to help you grow as a writer and thinker without the use of these technologies. Your written work must be the product of your own ideas, your own self-expression, your own intellectual struggle. You are the author of your work and therefore take responsibility for it. In accordance with the UNT Honor Code, the unauthorized use of GenAI tools is prohibited. Using GenAI content without proper credit or substituting your own work with GenAI undermines the learning process and violates UNT academic integrity policy. If you're unsure whether something is allowed, please seek clarification.

My Position on Technology and the Humanities:

It will come as a surprise to absolutely nobody that technology has transformed the ways in which the humanities – literature, philosophy, history, art – are taught. From "hypertext" to Canvas to digital editions to online archives to "artificial intelligence," new forms of accessing, producing, and disseminating information about the long history of human creative achievement have changed both students' and teachers' experience in certain fundamental ways. In some respects, this impact

has been positive, but on balance, in my view, society's increasing dependence on screen technology has been destructive to higher education, to the capacity for deep reflection, and to the spirit of learning.

The most talked-about problem is that AI can seduce people into letting it do their work, especially their writing, for them. But the crisis goes far beyond simply cutting corners or cheating. The most profound threat is that human beings, by outsourcing their self-expression to machines and algorithms, will compromise the very qualities that make them human – their language, their capacity for reasoning, their thoughts and feelings and judgments and values. It is for that very reason that the humanities are more important today than ever before! Through the study of art, literature, philosophy, history, and culture, we enrich our imaginations, expand our capacity for empathy, and develop a deeper understanding of what really matters in life. And we learn how to communicate clearly and persuasively, how to be curious and to learn, how to evaluate evidence critically, how to appreciate beauty. The highest functions and most profound insights of the human mind can never be replicated by technology, no matter how sophisticated it may be.

So as we read through a bunch of American literature this semester, we will do so in the context of some fundamental philosophical and personal questions: How do we imagine a college education fitting into the broader scheme of one's life? What really matters in life? How do we define our purpose as human beings? What do we, as individuals, have to offer the world that is distinctly our own?

In more practical terms, your job in this class will be to absorb the material and reflect on it; to think critically and creatively; to use your *natural* intelligence to approach interpretive problems; to express your own views, judgments, and ideas. In evaluating your work, I will de-prioritize the traditional critical essay produced on a computer (which can no longer be trusted to be entirely human in origin), while placing a higher premium on the kinds of individual thought and social engagement that only human beings are capable of. Finally, while we use certain features of Canvas as a convenience, your class experience won't be run primarily through that platform; Canvas will remain a definitively secondary presence to our regular work.

UNT Policies

Academic Integrity: Academic dishonesty is defined in the UNT Policy on Student Standards for Academic Integrity. Any suspected case of Academic Dishonesty, including plagiarism, will be handled in accordance with University policy and procedures. You can find the policy and procedures at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003>.

ADA Policy for Students with Disabilities: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the [ODA website](https://disability.unt.edu/) (<https://disability.unt.edu/>).

Student Behavior in the Classroom: Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. Visit UNT's [Code of Student Conduct](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students/conduct/index.html) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students/conduct/index.html>) to learn more.