Survey of American Literature to 1865

Dr. Yael Ben-zvi
Department of Foreign Literatures and Linguistics
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
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Course # 132-1-1391
Monday 10:15-11:45, Building 97, Room 203
Thursday 10:15-11:45, Building 72, Room 502
Office hours by appointment
Building 74, Room 523, email: yaelbz@bgu.ac.il, office phone: 08-6461129

Course description
This class will introduce you to some of the prominent texts, writers, and themes that have shaped American literature by 1865. Our exploration of this field will be guided by recognition of the complex relations between the noun “literature” and the diverse forms of writing that we will study on the one hand, and between U.S. culture and the adjective “American” on the other. Since some of the writers whose works we will read hoped to create a national literature, we will consider this concept in relation to the ideological, political, cultural, and historical phenomena that shaped these texts. Major foci include Puritanism, the revolution, slavery, liberty, and transcendentalism. We will read works in multiple styles and genres and move rapidly from one text to the next. This pace may feel confusing, but it will enable you to become acquainted with the complexity of this literary tradition and the relations among some of the writers and works that comprise it.

Text
The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Beginnings to 1865. Volumes A (Literature to 1820), and B (1820-1865). Ed. Nina Baym, eighth edition (both volumes are available in one package at Tsomet Sfarim and in the library, and you may find a PDF file online or by asking third-year students).

Requirements
• Attendance is mandatory.
• Read the assigned text(s) prior to each class meeting (including prefatory biographical entries).
• Participate productively in class discussions (preparing questions and/or comments may help).
• Write six email questions with brief discussions; two exercises (3 pages each) and a final paper (4-5 pages).

Sources: Your written work will be based on your close reading of the primary texts. I recommend using a good dictionary, preferably the unabridged Oxford English Dictionary http://www.oed.com. You must document each source you consult as I do not tolerate plagiarism. You will find a number of resources on Moodle; use them to understand the issues we discuss, and ask questions whenever anything is not clear to you.

Grade distribution
Participation 10%
6 email questions and brief discussions (pass/fail) 10%
First exercise (3 pages) 10%
Second exercise (3 pages) 30%
Final Paper (4-5 pages) 40%
Course Schedule

25/2 M Introduction
Christopher Columbus, from “Letter to Luis de Santangel Regarding the First Voyage” (1493), 34-36.

28/2 T John Winthrop, from “The Journal of John Winthrop” (1632-43), 165-166; 177-186.


7/3 T Mary Rowlandson, from A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682), beginning-Ninth Remove; Sixteenth Removal-end, 256-69; 276-88. If the pdf file you use misses a few pages, read the missing part online.

11/3 M Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”; “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth”; “To the University of Cambridge” (1773); “To His Excellency General Washington” (1775-6), 762-6; 772-3.

14/3 T Thomas Jefferson
The Declaration of Independence (1776), 659-67
and from Notes on the State of Virginia (from “Laws”: on slavery) (1787), 669-673.

18/3 M Benjamin Franklin, from The Autobiography (1771, 1788-1790), 455-57; 480-508 (to “I was constantly kept unable to pay my Passage,” 508).

21/3 NO CLASS: PURIM


William Cullen Bryant, “Sonnet—To an American Painter Departing for Europe” (1829), 126.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, from Nature (1836), introduction-ch. 1, 211-17.

Henry David Thoreau, from Walden, or Life in the Woods (1854):
from ch. 1, 961-64; 981-91 (to “the face of the earth”);
1001-2 (from “Near the end of March” to “chips which I had made”);
1003-4 (from “At length, in the beginning of May” to “purpose as the Iliad”);
1005-8 (from “I have thus a tight” to “carried a peck of corn to mill”);
and ch. 2, 1023-33.

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845), preface-ch. 7, 1170-1201.

NO CLASSES: PESSAH BREAK

Douglass, Narrative of the Life, ch. 8-ch. 11, 1201-35.

Yom Hashoah: class will begin at 11:00 sharp

Harriet Beecher Stowe, from Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly (1852), ch. 1-7, 805-27.

First exercise due. Submit by 10:00 to yaelbz@bgu.ac.il

NO CLASS: TAKE YOUR WEDNESDAY CLASSES TODAY!

NO CLASS: YOM HAATZMAUT

Stowe, from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, ch. 9-14, 828-65.

Stowe, from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, ch. 20-end, 865-904.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (1850), “The Custom-House” (You may skip the part from 456, the paragraph that starts with “I doubt greatly,” [7th ed. p. 1358] to 464, from the paragraph that begins with “Such were some of the people.”). 450-76.

Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, ch. 1-6, 476-505.
27/5 M  Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ch. 7-12, 505-537.


6/6 T  Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855), 1424-27; 1509-25.

10/6 M  Walt Whitman
From “Song of Myself” (1881 version) sections 1, 2, 5-6, 10, 13, 16-17, 19, 24, 33, 41, 44, 49, 51-52, pages 1310-14; 1330- the pages of the sections listed above.
“Live Oak, with Moss” (written 1850s), 1416-20.

13/6 T  Second exercise due. Submit by 10:00 to vaelbz@bgu.ac.il
Emily Dickinson
“Title divine, is mine”; “I’m ‘Wife’ - I’ve finished that -”; “A Clock stopped”; “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”; “Wild nights - Wild nights!”; “Of all the Souls that stand create”; “There’s a certain Slant of light”; “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain”; “This world is not conclusion”; “One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -”; “The Soul Selects her own Society”; “I dwell in Possibility -”; “Because I could not stop for Death”; “This is my letter to the World”; “The Brain – is wider than the Sky -”; “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”; “Shall I take thee, the Poet said” (1858-1885), 1659-65 and the pages of the poems listed above.


20/6 T  Davis, “Life in the Iron Mills”
Conclusion

31/7  Paper Due
Instructions for Writing Questions and Brief Discussions

These short assignments will enable you to start engaging with the texts you read. You are required to write questions and brief discussions on eight of the texts that we will read in this class (one question per class meeting). Email your question and discussion to me before the meetings in which we will discuss the text you write about. It is best to write a question when something in the text interests you, and it is best to look for something that may interest you in each text.

If you want to write a question on Bradstreet’s “The Flesh and the Spirit,” for example, email that question and your discussion of it to yaelbz@bgu.ac.il no later than 10:00 on Monday, March 4, and preferably earlier. (If I don’t get your message for any reason, you will not get credit for it.)

Each question should focus on the significance of a specific word or phrase in the text. Use the question to explore themes that the text develops. Discussion length: 5-7 sentences.

Examples:

**Question:** “What is the significance of the word ‘victory’ in Columbus’s description of his voyage?”

**Discussion:** “The term ‘victory’ suggests that the voyage is represented as a successful war (35). Although the letter does not describe actual war, the theme of war explains Columbus’s references to the people he called ‘Indians’ and to their lands. Columbus ‘take[s] possession’ of the islands and people as if he conquers them, and he expresses implicit surprise that ‘no opposition was offered to [him],’ as though war is the context for interpreting the encounters that the text describes (35). Later, the reference to ‘Indians, whom [he] had already taken,’ represents these ‘Indians’ as prisoners of war who are ‘taken’ against their will to serve the victor’s purposes.”

**Question:** “What is the significance of the phrase ‘nothing but an island’ in Columbus’s letter?”

**Discussion:** “The words ‘nothing but’ suggest that the letter represents islands as less important than continents, to which Columbus refers by the term ‘mainland’ (36, 35). This contrast contributes to the theme of value as Columbus evaluates the lands and the people he sees. The distinction between “island” and “mainland” echoes others that indicate different values, such as that between “hamlets” and “cities or towns” (35). The letter emphasizes this theme through the repetition of adjectives such as “many,” “innumerable,” and “great” (35, 36). However, at some points even quantity is not enough to establish value as Columbus states that he found “an infinity of small hamlets and people without number, but nothing of importance” (36). The letter thus suggests that even large quantities of small things, like islands or hamlets, is less important than smaller quantities of larger things, like continents and cities.”

Focusing on the significance of a particular detail will help you formulate productive questions for literary analysis, so you should avoid the following directions:

- Factual questions, e.g., “To whom did Columbus write the letter?”
- Yes/no questions, e.g., “Did Columbus see trees on the islands?”
- Questions whose answers appear in the text, e.g., “Why was the first island named ‘San Salvador?’”
- Questions that focus on authorial intent, e.g., “What did Columbus mean by the term ‘victory?’”

Answering such questions does not require a close reading of the text, so they will not help you develop your analytical skills. If you submit such questions in advance I may ask you to revise your work. These kind of questions cannot get a passing grade.