

ENG 242
American Literary Realisms

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Time: W/F 9:30-10:50pm
Room: Hathorn 314
Office Hours: W 3:00-4:00pm,
or by appointment

Course Description:

This course examines the aspiration to “realism” that is the predominate aesthetic and political impulse in American fiction at the end of the nineteenth century as it resurfaces in literary and media texts in the decades surrounding this last century’s turn. We will begin by trying to define realism as a literary genre before exploring its development in late nineteenth century America, and its relationship to social upheavals and technological developments in the early twentieth century. Turning to the late-twentieth century, we will consider how technological developments and cultural changes have affected our understanding of realism and “the real” through an investigation of recent fiction, documentaries, reality media and television, along with recent scholarly articles about these evolving aesthetic forms. Our goal will be to understand the ways in which “realism” is variously constructed by literary and media texts and what those various constructions say about our investment in “the real.”

Course Goals:

By the end of this semester, students should be able to discuss the relationship between “the real” and the aesthetic devices of “realism.” Students should be able to describe the relationship between these aesthetic devices and social or technological developments. Finally, students should be able to effectively summarize scholarly arguments; to write clear, thesis driven responses to course readings, supporting their claims with evidence from the texts; and to engage argumentatively with scholarly arguments about a text in both oral and written form.

Course Requirements:

1) Class Participation:

The main requirement for the class is an intense engagement with the readings, not only in writing but in class discussion as well. Because class discussion is an opportunity to practice the critical skills that we will be developing in the course, attendance and active participation at every class session are expected. Active participation entails doing the reading and being able to refer to the reading in class, as well as both listening and responding to myself and to one another. In grading your participation over the course of the semester, I will be looking for signs of initiative, involvement, collaboration, intellectual growth, and impact on the class. If you do not speak of your own volition **at least once a week**, you can expect to be called on. If **any** member of the class demonstrates that he or she has not done the reading, **pop quizzes** will be instituted and will form a significant portion of **every** class member’s grade. If you cannot attend a particular class, you must let me know in advance and make arrangements for another student to take notes and collect handouts on your behalf. Missing or being late to more than two classes will negatively affect your participation grade. Finally, because you must be able to support the claims they make about the texts with evidence from those texts, you must bring the reading to class every day **in printed form**—this means **printing the articles** on Lyceum and **buying the books** on the syllabus. No laptops or cell phones in class, please.

2) Weekly Writing and Discussion Questions:

By midnight each Tuesday (starting in **Week 3**), you must post a one-to-three paragraph informal response on the lyceum forum for that week. There will be ten opportunities to submit forum posts throughout the quarter, but you are only **required to submit eight**. Specific guidelines will be explained in class, but **three** of these posts must make an argumentative claim about a literary or visual text; **three** must summarize a scholarly article; and **two** must make an argumentative claim that engages with both a literary/visual text and a scholarly article. You will receive written feedback on all of your posts, so these posts are an excellent opportunity to practice the skills required for longer writing assignments. All posts that engage thoughtfully with the reading will receive a check (the equivalent of a “B”), but check-plusses (the equivalent of an “A”) will be given to posts that also demonstrate proficiency in the criteria laid out in class. Check-minuses (the equivalent of a “C”) will be given to underdeveloped posts. Late postings will not be accepted.

In preparation for class on Friday (starting in **Week 2**), you are also required to prepare one discussion question based on the day’s reading. Each question should refer to, and demand responses that refer to, specific moments in the texts (citing page numbers!). You should post your question on the lyceum discussion question forum for that week **by midnight each Thursday night. By 8am on Friday**, you must also select one question from among those posted that you would like to talk about in class that day. Do this by replying to the post of your choice and briefly explaining your reasons for wanting to discuss it in class. Part of our time on Fridays will be spent in small groups or as a whole discussing one another’s questions.

You are **never to consult the internet or other secondary sources** for ideas in devising your weekly writing responses and discussion questions. I am interested in seeing your ideas, not someone else’s. Presenting someone else’s ideas as if they are your own constitutes **plagiarism**.

3) Group Presentation

In the next few weeks, groups of two or three will be assigned to a particular day during the second half of the semester. These groups will be asked to present a 5-10 minute presentation on the texts that are part of that day’s reading, and to lead class discussion on that reading for a further 10-15 minutes. Much like your more sophisticated weekly writing assignments, these presentations should thoroughly summarize that day’s scholarly article, and then run class discussion by proposing an argument and then posing questions that engages with both the article and the literary/visual text, i.e. questions that the article raises about the text and/or questions that the text raises about the article. For example, you might identify new scenes in the text that the article might help us interpret, or scenes that contradict/complicate the article’s argument. To support your questions, it is essential that you have relevant places in the text ready to help direct class discussion. Each group must prepare a clear and visually appealing **handout or PowerPoint** to go along with their oral presentation (more on this later), and **must email this to me** as an attachment **by 9pm** the night before their presentation.

4) Formal Paper Assignments:

There are two formal paper assignments: a midterm (4-5 pages) and a final paper (7-10 pages). Prompts will be provided for the first paper, but the second will be a research paper on a topic of

your own devising. Prior to turning in this paper, you must submit a research proposal (250-500 words) accompanied by an annotated bibliography. All papers must be posted on lyceum. Late papers will be penalized by up to 1/3 of a letter grade for each day they are late.

5) Academic Honesty:

Intellectual honesty is fundamental to scholarship. Accordingly, the College views plagiarism or cheating of any kind in academic work as among the most serious offenses that a student can commit. Plagiarism occurs when one presents work—ideas and/or specific language—which is taken from another person who is not given due credit. If you are uncertain in any specific situation as to whether plagiarism may be involved, you should discuss the matter with me. **All students are responsible** for reading the College's statement on plagiarism, found here:

<http://abacus.bates.edu/pubs/Plagiarism/plagiarism.html#0>

For all members of the academic community, citing sources not only protects them and their ideas, but it helps them to know when they do have a new idea, or whether they have achieved a meaningful synthesis of other people's ideas. It also helps their readers, by providing means whereby he or she can verify their account, seek further knowledge on their topic, and understand how they arrived at their conclusions. To cite sources in your own work, please **follow carefully the MLA guidelines**, found here:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

6) Email:

You are required to check your Bates email regularly, as I will be emailing the class with information, updates, and reminders throughout the semester. In the event of an emergency class cancellation, I will also notify students via email.

Grades will be calculated as follows:

15%	Attendance and Participation
15%	Weekly writing & discussion questions
10%	Group presentation
20%	Midterm paper (4-5 pages)
10 %	Research Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (1-3 pages)
30%	Final paper (7-10 pages)

Course Readings:

Required Texts (available in campus bookstore):

James Nagel & Tom Quirk (eds), *The Portable American Realism Reader* (Dutton, 1997)

Edith Wharton, *House of Mirth* (Norton, 1990)

James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (Doubleday, 2003)

Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (Random House, 2001)

Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)

Required Films (available on reserve in Ladd, or via Netflix, Blockbuster, etc.):

Blair Witch Project (1999)

Reading Schedule:

You are responsible for completing the reading and viewing films/videos by the date specified.

Week 1

9/7 Introduction

9/9 Ian Watt, "Realism and the Novel Form" [Lyceum]
George Levine, from *The Realistic Imagination* [Lyceum]
Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect" [Lyceum]

Week 2 The Rise of American Realism

9/14 Harriet Beecher Stowe, selection from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) [Lyceum]
Mark Twain, "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" (1865) [Reader]
Joel Chandler Harris, "Free Joe and the Rest of the World" (1886) [Reader]

9/15 **First discussion question due by midnight on Thursday**

9/16 Charles Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth" (1899) [Reader]
William Dean Howells, "Editha" (1905) [Reader]
William Dean Howells, from *Criticism and Fiction* [Lyceum]

Week 3

9/20 **First weekly writing post due by midnight on Tuesday**

9/21 Henry James, "The Real Thing" (1893) [Reader]
Henry James, "The Art of Fiction" (1884) [Lyceum]
Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1909) [Lyceum]

9/23 Kate Chopin, "Desiree's Baby" (1893) [Reader]
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) [Reader]

Week 4 Realism and Social Critique

9/28 Edith Wharton, through Book 1, Ch. 9 of *The House of Mirth* (1905)
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, from *Women and Economics* (1900) [Norton HoM]
Thorstein Veblen, from *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) [Norton HoM]

9/30 Edith Wharton, through Book 2, Ch. 3 of *The House of Mirth* (1905)

Week 5

10/5 Edith Wharton, finish *The House of Mirth* (1905)

10/7 Stephen Crane, "An Experiment in Misery" (1894) [Reader]
Frank Norris, "A Deal in Wheat" (1902) [Reader]
Theodore Dreiser, "Curious Shifts of the Poor" (1903) [Reader]

- Week 6 Realism and Documentation**
- 10/12 Jacob Riis, from *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) [Lyceum]
 Upton Sinclair, Ch. 3 from *The Jungle* (1905) [Lyceum]
 Upton Sinclair, “The Condemned Meat Industry” (1906) [Lyceum]
- 10/14 Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (1922) [Lyceum]
 William Rothman, “The Filmmaker as Hunter” [Lyceum]
 Bill Nichols, from *Introduction to Documentary* [Lyceum]
- Week 7**
- 10/17 **Paper # 1 due on Lyceum by 5pm**
- 10/19-24 **NO CLASS – WINTER RECESS**
- Week 8 Reality TV and Mockumentaries**
- 10/26 *The Real World* (1992), Season 1, Episode 1 [Lyceum]
Laguna Beach: The Real OC (2004–2006), Season 1, Episode 1 [Lyceum]
The Comeback (2005), Episode 1 [Lyceum]
 Jesse Schlotterbeck, “What Happens When Real People...Cinematic” [Lyceum]
- 10/28 *Blair Witch Project* (1999)
 Higley, Weinstock & Banash, Intro and Ch. 5 from *Nothing That Is* [Lyceum]
- Week 9 Fake Memoirs and Autobiographical Fiction**
- 11/2 James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), pp. 1-109
 From transcript of the Oprah Winfrey Show, 26 Oct. 2005 [Lyceum]
- 11/4 James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*, pp. 113-215
 The Smoking Gun, “A Million Little Lies” [Lyceum]
 From transcript of the Larry King Live Show, 11 Jan. 2006 [Lyceum]
 Michiko Kakutani, “Bending the Truth in a Million Little Ways [Lyceum]
 From transcript of the Oprah Winfrey Show, 26 Jan. 2006 [Lyceum]
Recommended: Other fake memoirs, 2006-2011 [Lyceum]
- Week 10**
- 11/9 James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (finish)
 Timothy Aubry, “The Pain of Reading a Million Little Pieces” [Lyceum]
- 11/11 Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), all front matter
 & through pg. 123
 Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998) [Lyceum]
 Smith & Watson, “The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives,
 Extravagant Questions” [Lyceum]

Week 11

11/16 Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), through pg. 252

11/18 Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), (finish, including “Mistakes We Knew We Were Making”)

11/18 **Research Proposal and Annotated Bibliography due by 5pm**

Week 12

11/20-28 **NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING**

Week 13 Realism Revisited:

11/30 Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), pg. 1–75

12/1 Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), pg. 76–201

Week 14

12/7 Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), pg. 202–335

12/9 *The Wire* (2002–2008), Season 4, Episodes 1 and 13 [Lyceum]
Marshall & Potter, “I am the American Dream” [Lyceum]
Amanda Ann Klein, “The Dickensian Aspect” [Lyceum]
Ted Nannicelli, “It’s all Connected” [Lyceum]

Week 15

12/14 **Paper #2 due on Lyceum by 5pm**