

AAEN 253
The African American Novel

Professor: Mollie Godfrey
Email: mgodfrey@bates.edu
Office: Pettigrew 205
Mailbox: Pettigrew 210

Time: M/W/F 11:00am-11:55am
Room: Pettengill G50
Office Hours: M/W 3-4pm,
or by appointment

Course Description:

This survey of novels by African Americans takes at its starting point the curious status of the novel in literary and political history. On the one hand, the novel has always been a very popular literary form with the potential to reach large audiences. On the other hand, the novel has also been considered a standard of artistic achievement: even successful authors—such as prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, dramatist Lorraine Hansberry, and short-story writer Charles Chesnutt—all aspired to and were encouraged to publish novels. For African American writers fighting for political equality, these facts have made the novel an ideal tool for critiquing racial oppression both at large and within the arts. But these facts have also made the novel a hotly contested arena in African American politics, as artists and critics have debated how best to exploit the novel's political and popular potential without damaging their own reputations and self-conceptions as artists.

In this course, we will consider a series of stylistic innovations in the African American novel—from sentimentalism to postmodernism—by asking how and in what way these styles do political work. What kinds of political claims does each style make possible? What kinds of claims do they sacrifice? To do this, we will pair major novels in each genre with contemporaneous critical essays that not only argue for the political power of that genre, but which repudiate the political claims of prior genres. Our goals will be to understand the political ramifications of aesthetic choices, and to understand how political debates often drive those aesthetic choices. We will conclude the course with a recent book—Percival Everett's *Erasure*—that dramatizes many of these conflicts in a contemporary setting while making stylistic innovations of its own. Course requirements include active engagement with the reading demonstrated through daily class participation and the writing of weekly discussion board posts, weekly in-class discussion questions, a short midterm paper, and a longer final paper.

Course Goals:

By the end of this course, students will be able to: 1) analyze, describe, and discuss the relationship between stylistic innovations in African American novels and those novels' historical and political context; 2) by way of their analysis of this relationship, discuss the political ramifications of literary techniques considered more broadly; and 3) practice and develop their skills in the analysis of textual evidence and argumentation.

Course Requirements—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—which entails listening and responding to one another—at every class session are expected.

Students who are late to class will be marked as absent, and students who do not speak of their own volition **at least once a week** will either be called on, or their grade will suffer. 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 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**. No laptops or cell phones in class, please. A grading rubric for class participation will be handed out in class and posted on lyceum.

Course Requirements—Weekly Writing and Discussion Questions:

By 9pm each Sunday *or* Tuesday night (your choice, starting in **Week 3**), students will post a one-to-three paragraph response to the day's reading on the lyceum weekly writing forum for that week. These responses offer you the opportunity to connect previous class discussions to the new reading, or to propose new lines of inquiry for our Monday and Wednesday discussions. You are expected to read everyone's posts, so you are encouraged to respond to one another's posts and turn this forum into a dialogue. You will receive written feedback on all of their 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 (equivalent to a "B"), but check-plus (equivalent to an "A") will be given to posts that demonstrate proficiency in the central skills of argumentative writing by 1) making a contestable claim about a text or texts 2) supporting that claim with evidence from the text and 3) explaining the significance of that claim. A check-minus (equivalent to a "C") will be given only on those rare occasions when posts are consistently underdeveloped. There will be ten opportunities to submit forum posts throughout the quarter, but students are only **required to submit eight**. Late postings will not be accepted.

In preparation for class on Friday (starting in **Week 2**), you are also required to prepare two or three discussion questions based on the day's reading. These questions should refer to, and demand responses that refer to, specific moments in the texts (citing page numbers!). You should post your questions (each one as a unique post) on the lyceum discussion question forum for that week by 9pm each Thursday night. By midnight on Thursday, you are then responsible for selecting one question from among those posted that you would like to talk about in class on Thursday. To select this question, please reply to the post of your choice, briefly explaining your reasons for wanting to discuss it in class. Part of our time on Fridays will be spent in small groups 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.

Course Requirements—Group Presentation

By Friday of **Week 2**, all students must enter in their journal on lyceum the top three novels that they would like to present on in class, in order of preference. You may choose from among any of the primary novels that we will be reading between Week 5 and Week 11, and will be assigned to groups of two based on your preferences.

Starting in **Week 5**, these groups will be asked to present a brief (10 minute) presentation on the novel you have chosen, and to lead class discussion on that reading for a further 5-10 minutes. For this presentation, you will be asked to find at least two reviews of the book written at the time it was published—one from a white or mainstream newspaper or magazine, and one from a black one—to briefly summarize these reviews for the class, and to present an argument about those reviews and what light you feel these reviews shed on the novel and/or its historical context. Much like your most polished weekly writing assignments, these presentations should advance a contestable and significant argument that is supported by evidence from the text/s. However, you should also push further by opening up questions or problems for whole class discussion, questions that follow from your initial claim. When thinking about what kinds of questions to ask, students should consider what kinds of questions have been most interesting and stimulating in previous class discussions. Try starting with simple questions—questions you feel you know the answer to—and then following up with more complex ones that you yourself are not sure about. You should also have relevant places in the text ready to help direct class discussion. Each group must also prepare a clear and visually appealing **handout or PowerPoint** to go along with their oral presentation, and **must email this to me** as an attachment by 9pm the night before their presentation.

Course Requirements—Formal Paper Assignments:

There are two formal paper assignments: a midterm (5-6 pages) and a final paper (8-10 pages). Paper prompts, derived from student-generated discussion questions, will be provided, but students are welcome to use ideas developed in weekly writing assignments as the basis for these papers provided that those ideas help them to address the prompt. 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. Paper topics and a grading rubric will be handed out in class and posted on lyceum.

Course Requirements—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. Students who are uncertain in any specific situation as to whether plagiarism may be involved 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 your 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/>

Course Requirements—Email:

Students are required to check their 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 & participation	20%	Group presentation
15%	Weekly writing & discussion questions	20%	Midterm paper (5-6 pages)
		30%	Final paper (8-10 pages)

Required Texts (available at the Bates Bookstore in Chase Hall):

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*
 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
 Richard Wright, *Native Son*
 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*
 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
 Percival Everett, *Erasure*

All other readings will be available on lyceum in the “Additional Readings” folder.

Week 1: Sentimentalism

- Mon, 1/10: Introduction
- Wed, 1/12: William Lloyd Garrison, preface to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)
 Harriet Beecher Stowe, selection from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)
 Harriet Wilson, selection from *Our Nig* (1859)
- Fri, 1/14: Frances Harper, selection from *Iola Leroy* (1892)
 Charles Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth” (1899)

Week 2: Modernism

- Mon, 1/17: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (no class)
- Wed, 1/19: Jessie Fauset, “The Sleeper Wakes” (1920)
 Alain Locke, “New Negro” (1925)
- Fri, 1/21: Nella Larsen, Ch. 1-11 of *Quicksand* (1928)

Week 3:

- Mon, 1/24: Nella Larsen, Ch 12-25 of *Quicksand* (1928)
- Wed, 1/26: Zora Neale Hurston, introduction to *Mules and Men* (1935), Ch. 1-4 of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

- Fri, 1/28: Zora Neale Hurston, Ch 5-12 of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)
- Week 4:**
- Mon, 1/31: Zora Neale Hurston, Ch 13-20 of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)
- Wed, 2/2: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)
Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937)
- Fri, 2/4: **Naturalism**
Richard Wright, Book 1 of *Native Son* (1940)
- Week 5:**
- Mon, 2/7: Richard Wright, Book 1 of *Native Son* (1940) (start reading Book 2)
- Wed, 2/9: Richard Wright, Book 2 of *Native Son* (1940)
- Fri, 2/11: Richard Wright, Book 3 of *Native Son* (1940)
- Week 6:**
- Mon, 2/14: Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)
Richard Wright, “How Bigger Was Born” (1941)
- Wed, 2/16: Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)
James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), “Many Thousands Gone” (1951)
- Fri, 2/18: Ralph Ellison, prologue of *Invisible Man* (1952), “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” (1953)
- Midterm paper (5-6 pages) due by midnight on Friday, 2/18***
- Week 7: Winter Recess (no class)**
- Week 8: Symbolism and Realism**
- Mon, 2/28: Ralph Ellison, Ch. 1-4 of *Invisible Man* (1952)
- Wed, 3/2: Ralph Ellison, Ch. 5-9 of *Invisible Man* (1952)
- Fri, 3/4: Ralph Ellison, Ch. 10-11 of *Invisible Man* (1952)
- Week 9:**
- Mon, 3/7: Ralph Ellison, Ch. 12-15 of *Invisible Man* (1952)
- Wed, 3/9: Ralph Ellison, Ch. 16-19 of *Invisible Man* (1952)
- Fri, 3/11: Ralph Ellison, Ch. 20-epilogue of *Invisible Man* (1952)
Larry Neal, “The Black Writer’s Role II: Ralph Ellison’s Zoot Suit” (1970)

Week 10:

Mon, 3/14: James Baldwin, “Seventh Day” & “Florence’s Prayer” *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)

Wed, 3/16: James Baldwin, “Gabriel’s Prayer” & “Elizabeth’s Prayer” from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)

Fri, 3/18: James Baldwin, “The Threshing Floor” from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)

Week 11:

Mon, 3/21: James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)
Larry Neal, “The Black Writer’s Role III: James Baldwin” (1966)
Toni Morrison, “Rediscovering Black History” (1974)
Toni Morrison, Preface to *Beloved* (1987)

Wed, 3/23: **Postmodernism**
Toni Morrison, Part I: Ch. 1-8 (pg 1-100) of *Beloved* (1987)

Fri, 3/25: Toni Morrison, Part I: Ch. 9-18 (pg 101-95) of *Beloved* (1987)

Week 12:

Mon, 3/28: Toni Morrison, Part II of *Beloved* (1987)

Wed, 3/30: Toni Morrison, Part III of *Beloved* (1987)

Fri, 4/1: Percival Everett, Pg. 1-62 of *Erasure* (2001)

Week 13:

Mon, 4/4: Percival Everett, Pg. 63-131 of *Erasure* (2001)

Wed, 4/6: Percival Everett, Pg. 132-210 of *Erasure* (2001)

Fri, 4/8: Percival Everett, Pg. 211-65 of *Erasure* (2001)
Colson Whitehead, “The Year of Living Postracially” (2009)

Week 14: *Final paper (8-10 pages) due by midnight on Wednesday, 4/13*