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ENG 1092G-096: Composition and Literature, Honors

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Spring 2009

Literature & Composition for honors students



Professor Christopher Hanlon
3811 Coleman Hall

Department of English
Office Hours: T, R 9:30-11 am

English 1092 is a class intended to help you grow as a writer and a thinker by providing you the opportunity to work in a sustained, focused way with creative literature. This semester, we will focus upon two poets now considered central to the American literary tradition: Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. Though they lived during the same era, Dickinson and Whitman appear in many ways to have been very different sorts of people. Dickinson lived her life in the remote village of Amherst, Massachusetts, and came out of a conservative religious tradition. She never married, and though she wrote over 1775 poems during her lifetime, she only saw eleven into publication, and she died in obscurity. Whitman was born in New Jersey, was a flamboyant self-promoter who considered himself the poetic bard of his nation. By the end of his life, he was nationally known for his writing.

While we get to know these two writers in a loose, wide-ranging way, we will also become *very* familiar with their state of mind—and also the state of their culture—during two signal years. For Whitman, the key moment is 1855, the year he made his public debut with the publication of his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the volume that gained him not only notoriety as a kind of bohemian (Dickinson found him so shameful she pretended not to have read him) but also respect as a radically creative new poetic voice (after reading the 1855 edition, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in a letter to Whitman, “I greet you at the beginning of a brilliant career.”). For Dickinson, the year of note would be 1862, during which, for some reason, Dickinson wrote 366 poems, more than a poem a day. These 366 poems represented an aesthetic leap forward for American poetics; taken together, their gnomic form, disruptive rhythms, and jarring rhymes provide the launching pad for the modernist aesthetic of the twentieth century. But there would be no letters from Emerson to take note of what Dickinson was accomplishing in her writing, because she kept it largely to herself, and after the year was over, her writing tapered off to more modest levels. Over the course of our study of Dickinson, we will try to discover what prompted this enormous literary output.

In 1855, the United States was fast approaching the political deadlock that would result in the secession of eleven Southern states. In 1862, the country was embroiled in the Civil War, and Americans were realizing the war would be much bloodier than had been expected. Dickinson and Whitman would each respond in their own way to what Lincoln called the crisis of the “House Divided,” and we will learn much this semester about the political causes and ramifications of the war itself. Working together, we will also learn a lot about the American mind of 1855 and 1862, and what we learn will help us to draw conclusions—and write compelling essays—about Emily Dickinson’s and Walt Whitman’s poetry. Thus, this course will equip you to carry out advanced research in American literature and culture while also helping you to develop the skills of synthesis, organization, and exposition that are the credentials of every successful university-level writer. Along the way, you’ll get to know two of the most extraordinary people who ever lived.

Course Requirements & Policies

This is a writing-centered course. While much of our activity in this course will involve reading and then trading ideas concerning that reading, our primary activity this semester will be writing. Outside of class, you will be asked to complete drafts of your essay projects for other class members to read and then critique, and our time in class will sometimes be conducted as writing workshops. We will also spend time in class writing in other ways, and some of this writing will be collected and graded while some will not. I will sometimes lecture, though I will more often promote discussion by offering you writing prompts to complete in class. This is because as a professional writer, I believe that writers develop their craft by writing. The more time we commit to actually writing, and the more time we commit to discussing that writing with other writers, the more we will develop and hone our individual talents and perspectives.

Four major assignments will determine the bulk of your grade this semester. The due dates for the final drafts of three essay assignments appear on the course syllabus, as do the due dates for preliminary drafts. An in-class presentation will also factor into your grade, which I will determine at the end of the semester using this formula:

Participation	10%
In-class writing.....	10%
In-class presentation	15%
Essay #1	20%
Essay #2	20%
Essay #3	25%

In-class presentations will be given by one or two class members and will focus upon an historical context that may prove useful as we attempt to place Dickinson's and Whitman's poetry within its cultural surround. These presentations should strive to do two things: (1) they should educate the class about the issues, events, and ideas connected with the presentation topic, and (2) they should hazard some hypothesis or set of hypotheses concerning the connection between Dickinson or Whitman's writing and the presentation's subject matter. Handouts with bibliographies (composed in accordance with MLA citation format) should accompany these presentations, so that class members can leave with useful notes and a guide for further research. When one student makes a presentation alone, it should last about 15 minutes. When two students make the presentation together, it should last about 25 minutes and both presenters should take equal charge of the proceedings.

Our three essays will connect the poetry we read with the historical circumstances of its production. In this way, these essays will forward a thesis-driven argument about that poetry and how it produces meaning. The first essay will be approximately six pages long, will focus upon Whitman and is due on February 19 (a preliminary draft will be due on February 10). The second essay will also be about six pages long, will focus upon Dickinson, and will be due on March 26 (with a preliminary draft due on March 12). The last essay will ask you to develop a statement about both poets, and to call upon sec-

ondary scholarship as you do so. That essay will be due on the last day of class, April 30, and will be eight to ten pages long.

Class Citizenship

I expect students to model strong class citizenship in this course, working hard to press forward as we read and discuss the literature of the antebellum period. To be a strong class citizen: (1) you should read, and as you read you should form ideas, draw connections, raise problems, and take notes on what you're thinking; (2) you should plan on participating—at least making a comments or asking a question—every single day; (3) you should be careful not to dominate discussion (i.e., those of you who are not shy should give other students an opening to participate), and you should participate with tact and civility (take other people's remarks and questions seriously, don't interrupt, respond courteously, etc.). The grade for participation will depend upon meeting all these criteria. I will tend to lavish encouragement on students who engage as strong class citizens. I will tend to become annoyed with students who never have anything to offer or who seem feckless. And leaving my displeasure aside, being a successful, hard-working participator virtually guarantees that the rest of the course will go well for you. Showing up sullen and silent all but guarantees you won't foster the kind of engagement you need to do well with these difficult texts. I should also mention that students who hold forth without having read aren't fooling anyone.

Attendance

With two absences, students will be considered overcut. Overcutting may result in the reduction of the final course grade by a grade or more, depending upon frequency. In the case of an excused absence (as defined by EIU university-wide policy), your excuse must be made in writing, accompanied by the appropriate documentation, and given to me no later than the first class meeting following the absence. This is the *only* way to avoid losing credit for an absence—voicemail messages and so on do not replace written documentation. In no case may a student accumulate more than three absences, either excused or unexcused, and still pass the course—if illness or other extenuating circumstances cause you to miss more than three classes, you should petition for a withdrawal.

Etc.

Students who habitually show up for class a few minutes after it's started should find a professor who's into that and take their course instead. This professor finds it irritating and reacts badly.

Generally, I don't give extensions. That said, there are of course sometimes truly insurmountable circumstances that absolutely prevent a student from completing a paper on time. In such cases, students will provide a full account in writing, and I may then decide to give an extension. But note that in such instances, I will expect to see the extra time reflected in the final draft—assignments that have been given an extension are read with an even more demanding eye than those that have not. Lastly:

in order to be granted an extension, students must contact me at least two days before the assignment's due date.

Students are of course responsible for knowing Eastern Illinois University regulations and policies regarding academic honesty. Plagiarism, even if unknowing or accidental, can result in your failing the course and in further action by the university. Please note the English Department's statement on plagiarism:

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's own original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignments, of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.

If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, feel free to ask me to clarify. Also, please make a point of noting the following: I will not tolerate any form of academic dishonesty in this course. If I come to suspect misconduct of any kind, I will become dogged about rooting it out, and if my suspicions are confirmed, I will dispense appropriate penalties.

Lastly, you are not welcome to e-mail me while you are a student in this course. When you have a question, problem, or concern, I want to sit down with you and discuss for as long as you need. That's why I keep office hours. I also want to talk with you about interesting ideas you have this semester, just as I want to talk with you—personally—about the readings we take on. But e-mail is simply not a medium through which I can teach you. When you need to communicate with me, attend my office hours, make an appointment for an alternative time, call me at my office (581.6302), or if it's very important and the other avenues have not worked, call me at home (348.6144). We'll talk.

Very lastly: I suppose the most important thing I have to say at the outset is that since you are all honors students, I expect more from you than from other undergraduates. I expect that you will show initiative, pluck, that you will strike me as intellectually excitable, that you will have opinions and be more or less garrulous about those opinions and intent upon developing them beyond their nascent form. While I don't expect you to have all the answers about a text when you come to class—because I don't have all the answers either—I do expect that you will come to class having *fought* to understand as much as possible. These are the qualities that make honors students different, not their desire for As and Bs.

Required Texts

Emily Dickinson. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*. 1855 edition.

Caleb Bingham, ed. *The Columbian Orator*. 1797.

Joseph Gibaldi, ed. *The MLA Guide to Writers of Research Papers*.

Schedule

1855:
Walt Whitman's
Leaves of Grass

Tues 1/13 Introduction
Thurs 1/15 Read Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852)
Bring Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator*

Tues 1/20 Read Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
Thurs 1/22 Continue discussion of *LOG*

Tues 1/27 Report: Walt Whitman's biography
Thurs 1/29 Report: Major events relating to slavery, 1840-49

Tues 2/3 Report: Major events relating to slavery, 1850-55
Thurs 2/5 Report: Landscape Painting of the 1840s and 50s

Tues 2/10 Report: American Transcendentalism
Thurs 2/12 **Essay 1, first draft due**

Tues 2/17 Report: The postal system and abolition, 1840-55
Thurs 2/19 **Essay 1 due**
Bring Dickinson, *Complete Poems*

1862:
366 poems by
Emily Dickinson

Tues 2/24 Read all the 1862 poems in Dickinson
Thurs 2/26 Continue discussion of Dickinson
Tues 3/3 Report: Emily Dickinson's biography
Thurs 3/5 Report: Amherst, Massachusetts

Tues 3/10 Report: Congregationalist Christianity
Thurs 3/12 Report: Poetry in *The Atlantic Monthly*

Tues 3/17, Spring break
Thurs 3/19

Tues 3/24 Report: Birds and Birdsong in the antebellum period
Thurs 3/26 Report: The Civil War in 1862

Tues 3/31 Report: Bringing the war to Amherst: Battlefield photography and journalism
Thurs 4/2 **Essay 2, draft 1 due**

Tues 4/7 Writing workshop
Thurs 4/9 **Essay 2 due**

**Independent
Project**

Tues 4/14 no class meeting—conferences in my office
Thurs 4/16

Tues 4/21 no class meetings—conferences in my office
Thurs 4/23

Tues 4/28 In-class progress reports, Essay 3
Thurs 4/30 **Essay 3 due**