ENG 5009-021: 19th Century American Poetry

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English 5009
19th Century American Poetry
Summer, 1997

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Texts: Anthology of American Literature, McMichael, ed.
The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, Johnson, ed.

General Introduction:

The purpose of this course is to provide you with a general overview of 19th century American poetry with particular emphasis on the works of Whitman and Dickinson. We will also be studying the context, both historical and intellectual, from which the poetry grew. Our final goal will be to discover what is indeed "American" about this poetry that begins sounding very British and concludes with "the blab of the pave," Whitman's notion of street-talk.

What is the American version of the English language and how did the poetry of our previous century both reflect and contribute to its emergence?

Course Procedure:

This class is a seminar, not a lecture. Each of you will be expected to participate in each meeting in both informal and formal ways: the former by sharing your ideas and by asking questions; the latter by two 15-20 minute presentations described below. A seminar works to the degree that each member is curious and eager. Simply doing the reading is not enough--wonder about what you've read; find parallels and contrasts; be willing to be wrong.

Reading Schedule:

Specific assignments will be made in class. Our discussions will always lag behind the reading. Don't allow yourself to.

1. The Declaration of Independence
2. Selections from Bryant and Poe
3. Selections from Emerson
4. Selections from the "Brahmin" poets: Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Whittier
5. Selections from Whitman
6. Selection from Dickinson

We will weave the seminar reports in and around the readings. Remember and note: you are reading poetry (mostly) in here, and doing so requires a different kind of attention than does reading most prose. You are reading not just for idea/meaning but also for sound, image, and figures of speech.
Requirements:

1. daily attendance and informal class participation;

2. two oral presentations, 15-20 minutes each:
   a. a synopsis and assessment of a major critical work for the time/poet;
   b. an extra-literary report on an historical/cultural/intellectual topic
      from the list below or a similar topic approved by me;

3. two 4-5 page papers (typed, double-spaced):
   a. an analytical paper on an approved topic; no critical apparatus;
   b. an argumentative paper that begins with a quarrel with an established
      critical notion;

4. a comprehensive final exam.

Grades:

I do not grade by a mathematical system that assigns percentages to the above
requirements. Instead, I will evaluate your overall performance, taking into
account your actual grades and my sense of your eagerness to push your ideas
beyond notes from class and critics and to make those ideas your own.

Report Topics (a partial list in no specific order):

1. major political events, e.g., elections, bills signed, land purchases
2. immigration and ethnic demography
3. slavery: morality vs. economy
4. inventions and inventors
5. music and visual art
6. the railroad
7. Webster's dictionary
8. popular science/beliefs
9. fashions, furniture, food
10. utopian visions
11. religions and cults
12. labor and management
13. women's suffrage
14. medicine and health
15. early education/the public school
16. the gold rush
17. communication
18. oratory
19. the "Indian": real and imagined
20. the wilderness

When you choose a topic, we should get together to discuss what, where, and why.
No paper is required here, though you'll certainly want to present from notes
and quotes; please stay to the 15-20 minute time and be prepared to answer some
questions afterward as we prepare to ask them.