Fall 8-15-2012

ENG 3702-001: American Literature

Christopher Hanlon
Eastern Illinois University

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The latter part of the nineteenth century in America witnessed a period of literary development bringing literary appreciation in the U.S. much closer to the mass standards of our own time. Consider this: when asked, most American readers today can indicate what novel they’ve most recently read. But ask those same readers to simply name a recent collection of poems and nine times out of ten you’ll get a blank stare. The ascendancy of long-form narrative constitutes a pendular swing from the literary tastes that dominated the early nineteenth century in America, when the word “poetry” was used to encompass all of what we now mean by “literature.” Emerson hardly even read novels—he regarded them as simply not very serious, a kind of waste of time—but described the work of poetry reverentially. Flashing forward fifty years, open up almost any major anthology covering the period we’re studying, and you won’t find a single poem until Edwin Arlington Robinson comes on scene at about the turn of the century. This is not to say there weren’t poems being written in America throughout the fifty years prior to that—in fact, Whitman wrote more words for Leaves of Grass after the Civil War than before (putting through another four editions), just as Melville wrote most of his poetry during this period. But for whatever reason, those figures are more typically thought of as belonging to antebellum literary history, just as professional literary historians now tend to recollect this period as having born witness to a great shift toward narrative—and indeed, during this era the novel in particular seems to have supplanted other forms as the most refined delivery system for the suspension of disbelief.

Our own mass standards of literary taste have inherited much of this bias for long-form narrative, and that inheritance is visible not only in the pages of the New York Times bestseller list, but also in the absorption with which so many Americans now attend to fiction like Mad Men, The Newsroom, or The Hunger Games. Certain aesthetic developments of the latter part of the nineteenth century—including “Realism,” but we will do well to avoid overstating the dominance of Realist thought during the era, as if suddenly after the Civil War writers stopped “doing” Romance and started doing Realism instead—now seem to offer explanatory power as to why writers like Mark Twain or Frank Norris told stories the way they did. Other developments in neurology and cognitive science overlap with the advent of forms of psychological realism in the works of aesthetes such as Edith Wharton and Henry James, and we’ll study those intersections as well. But late nineteenth-century literature is ultimately too complex to be explained in terms of one or two cultural circumstances, and complicating things further is the fact that the canon we will study developed against a backdrop of accelerating social and political change. During this period America became a global imperial power, gaining territories in the Caribbean and the Philippines and re-fashioning itself after the image of its old European antagonists in the process. The project of Reconstruction—the re-integration of the old Confederacy back into the federal union and the transformation of millions of former slaves into (nominal) full-fledged citizens—spawned reactionary political movements including the advent of Jim Crow laws in the South as well as new white supremacist movements such as the Ku Klux Klan. Turning from the western horizon, more Americans than ever were moving to cities like San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, spaces far from the ideals of agrarian citizenship Thomas Jefferson had prophesied as the basis of U.S. democracy but that would foment new forms of multi-cultural imagination and anxiety. And while the overworked and impoverished people living in those urban spaces would eventually form unions to secure for their members shorter hours and better pay, this was also an era that bore witness to the concentration of massive wealth in the hands of very few.
It will be our task this semester to take some stock of these transformations, because as serious students of literature we know the potential value of understanding texts in light of the historical circumstances surrounding their production. But rather than being mere historians who put dates and events into the service of accounts that ostensibly explain the past—"solving" the past, in a way, or making it a set of answers rather than questions—our job this semester is to study the ways in which the literature of this era articulated problems. These problems include: the nature and value of "individualism" in a society that has consolidated itself into cities and factories; the relation between public and private spheres in a democratic society increasingly dominated by corporate capital; the tensions and antagonisms occasioned by unprecedented levels of immigration; the meaning of Darwinistic thought for a culture increasingly divided between the affluent and the poor; and the reconsolidating of white supremacist forces during and after Reconstruction. We will also sustain a conversation about the aesthetics of these texts, the techniques they embody as well as the artfulness they convey, even as we attempt to identify in that constellation the genome of our own tastes and predilections as twenty-first century readers.

Course Requirements and Policies

Final Grades this semester will be determined in accordance with this formula:

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Periodical Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exam #1</td>
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<td>Exam #2</td>
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<td>Final Essay</td>
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<td>Participation</td>
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The periodical project gives you the chance to conduct original research into the literary culture of the era, getting to know what sort of fiction or poetry Americans were reading in popular periodicals. Learning about what kinds of literary texts were popular, and learning what American readers were saying about those texts—for instance, how they configured those texts against the events and concerns of the day—will help you to develop a much more sophisticated sense of the intellectual history of the era than you would gain by simply reading the sort of works that tend to make it into the Norton Anthology. In other words, by going "outside" the literary canon, we'll get to know that canon a lot better, honing a sense of how works by writers like Crane, Chopin, Wharton, or Twain stood alongside other forms of literature these writers undoubtedly knew and that in any case formed much of the public discourse of their culture. Ultimately, this project will take form in an essay of five pages long (or about 1250 words in addition to a complete bibliography), in which you develop a contention about one of the works on our syllabus by placing that work in conversation with other, less known, contemporaneous works. The essay will be due on October 10, but students will also have a chance to report on their findings in class on October 7. This project will require students to spend serious time in various electronic literary archives available through Booth Library—most certainly the American Periodicals Series and the two Making of America archives—and I assume that all English majors in this course are by now familiar with these tools. A handout, forthcoming, will offer further details and advice concerning this project.

A final essay of approximately eight pages or 2000 words will be due on the last day of class, and will allow you the chance to develop your own argument concerning any work from our syllabus, using whatever
critical approach you like, but deploying the standards of close reading, argumentation, and documentation that define our field. Students inclined to develop historicist approaches are encouraged to do so, but in such cases may not work with the same texts as for the periodical assignment. For this essay students are also required to use secondary critical works, and to turn in a one-page project proposal outlining the scope, purpose, and method of the essay by 26 November at the latest. A handout on this assignment will detail these requirements further.

Two examinations, a midterm to be held on October 10 and a final on December 13. Each of these exams will be designed to assess the quality of your reading as well as your ability to contextualize works of the era.

Participation in discussion: The course will be conducted primarily as a discussion course (supplemented with occasional lectures from me). As you surely know by now, such a course is only truly successful if a high percentage of students participate; it can be unappealing if the discussion turns into a dialogue between the professor and a small handful of students. To make the discussion run well: (1) you should plan on participating—at least making a comment or asking a question—every day; (2) 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); (3) 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. If given, occasional reading quizzes will be brief, designed to encourage everyone to keep up with the reading, and will also help me to determine participation grades.

One last note on participation: Participating well doesn’t simply mean talking a lot—it means frequently making comments showing that you are engaged in a process of careful, close reading. Idle talk—the kind that simply does not indicate close engagement with the materials we’ll be studying—does not help move the conversation forward, and hence does not help one to gain a high score for participation.

I want to be utterly clear about this: Good participation does not require you to come to class knowing all the “answers,” but it does require you to understand certain things about a text. For instance, one cannot participate competently if one does not understand the events that make up the plot of a work of fiction, or the literal argument of an essay. When we meet to discuss our readings, I will assume that everyone understands the literal level of “what happened” in the text; from this elementary level of understanding the words on the page, we will aim toward a more fulfilling grasp of the text’s place in the period we’re studying. In our conversations, I expect you to remember what you’ve learned and to put that into conversation with what is at hand.

Attendance will be taken for each class. I expect every student to attend all class meetings. That said, unforeseen events may very occasionally interfere with our ability to meet obligations, and for that reason students are allowed two absences in order to use when illness, schedule conflicts, or family or personal emergencies prevent them from attending. But with three 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, 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. To be absolutely clear on certain issues that seem to come up perennially: in the horrific event of a death in a student’s immediate family, I expect that such a student will miss class, and that he or she will use these two grace absences I allow you. In the event of your required participation in an EIU sports event, I similarly expect that you will use these two absences. These are the sort of conflicts and eventualities for which I permit you these two absences, no questions asked. Lastly: in no case may a student accumulate more than four absences, either excused or unexcused, and still pass the course—if illness or other extenuating circumstances cause you to miss more than four classes, you should petition for a withdrawal.
One very last word related to attendance: I ask that students who have not read the text on the day it is to be discussed not bother coming. Such students cannot contribute anything valuable to the discussion, and in any case it is dishonest for them to crib from the efforts of others by listening in on their conversations. Always read the assigned materials carefully, but if for some reason you have not, don’t bother showing up.

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 is irritated by it and reacts badly.

Late papers will be penalized for their lateness. If they are very late, they may not be accepted at all. I am not unbending in this policy in the case of extreme circumstances, but in order to be granted an extension, students must contact me, with a compelling case to make, at least two days before the paper’s due date.

Academic honesty: 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 including, at a minimum, a failing course grade.

Students are responsible for reading all of the material on this syllabus on the date assigned whether or not the work is actually discussed on that date. Students are cautioned that many of the readings are lengthy. I urge you to begin these readings as soon as possible. Occasionally, I will pass out brief, photocopied materials not represented on the syllabus; these are to be read by the next class.
Required Texts:


Additional readings available through Booth Library electronic reserve:
http://www.library.eiu.edu/ereserves/ereserves.asp
password: ch3702

Reading Schedule:

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon Aug 20</td>
<td>Introductions, course overview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed Aug 22</td>
<td>Mark Twain, &quot;How to Tell a Story&quot; (1895), Norton pp. 218-21</td>
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<td>&quot;Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses&quot; (1895), Norton pp. 221-30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon Aug 27</td>
<td>Twain, <em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em> (1885), Norton pp. 28-101</td>
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<td>Wed Aug 29</td>
<td><em>Huck Finn</em> pp. 101-14</td>
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<td>Plessy v. Ferguson, United States Supreme Court (1896), e-reserve</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon Sep 3</td>
<td>Labor Day, no class meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed Sep 5</td>
<td><em>Huck Finn</em> pp. 114-26</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Kate Chopin, &quot;Desirée's Baby&quot; (1893), e-reserve</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon Sep 10</td>
<td>No class meeting, but read:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Huck Finn</em> pp. 126-33</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Joel Chandler Harris, &quot;The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story&quot; (1881),</td>
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<td>Norton pp. 426-27</td>
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<td>Harris, &quot;Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr. Fox&quot; (1881), Norton pp. 427-29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wed Sep 12</td>
<td><em>Huck Finn</em> pp. 133-42</td>
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<td>Charles Chesnutt, &quot;The Goophered Grapevine&quot; (1887), Norton pp. 617-24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon Sep 17</td>
<td><em>Huck Finn</em> pp. 142-51</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Booker T. Washington, chaps 1, 14 from <em>Up From Slavery</em> (1900), Norton</td>
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<td>pp. 581-89; 595-603</td>
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Edith Wharton, Frank Norris, and Greed

Mon Sep 19  *Huck Finn* pp. 151-63
W. E. B. Du Bois, chaps. 1, 3 from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1900), Norton pp. 714-28

Mon Sep 24  *Huck Finn* pp. 163-75
Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth" (1898), Norton pp. 624-32

Wed Sep 26  *Huck Finn* pp. 175-83
Thomas Dixon, selections from *The Clansman* (1905), e-reserve

Mon Oct 1  George Bellows *Bath Members of This Club* (1909), e-reserve
D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), in-class viewing

Wed Oct 3  *Huck Finn* pp. 183-217

Mon Oct 8  Edwin Arlington Robinson, read all the poems in the Norton, pp. 941-47
Periodical essay due, beginning of class

Wed Oct 10  Midterm examination


Wed Oct 17  *House of Mirth* pp. 87-151
John Singer Sargent, *Madam X* (1884), e-reserve
Sargent, *Lady Agnew of Lochnau* (1892-93), e-reserve

Mon Oct 22  No class meeting, but read *House of Mirth* pp. 151-78

Wed Oct 24  *House of Mirth* pp. 178-201
Thorstein Veblen, chaps. 3, 4 from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), e-reserve

Mon Oct 29  *House of Mirth* pp. 201-29
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, from *Women and Economics* (1898), e-reserve

Wed Oct 31  *House of Mirth* pp. 229-45

Mon Nov 5  *House of Mirth* pp. 246-64
Chopin, "The Storm" (1898), Norton pp. 464-67

Wed Nov 7  *House of Mirth* pp. 264-305

Wed Nov 14  Stephen Crane, “The Blue Hotel” (1898), Norton pp. 768-87
Crane, “The Open Boat” (1897), Norton pp. 743-60
Hamlin Garland, “Under the Lion’s Paw” (1889), Norton pp. 646-55

Mon Nov 19,  Fall break; no class meetings
Wed Nov 21

Mon Nov 26  Final essay proposal due (1 page)
Frank Norris, McTeague (1899), chaps. 1-10
Charles Schreyvogel, Defending the Stockade (1900), e-reserve
Frederick Remington, The Fight for the Waterhole (1903),
e-reserve

Wed Nov 28  McTeague chaps. 7-15
Jacob Riis, selections from How the Other Half Lives (1890),
e-reserve

Mon Dec 3   McTeague chaps. 11-22
William Jennings Bryan, Speech to the Democratic National
Convention of 1896, e-reserve

Wed Dec 5  Final essay due beginning of class

Final examination is on Thursday, 13 December, 2:45-4:45 pm,
in Coleman 3150.