ENG 5009-001: Ralph Waldo Emerson

Christopher Hanlon
Eastern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_spring2013

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_spring2013/114

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the 2013 at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring 2013 by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
One of the most central and influential figures in U.S. literary history, Emerson is also among the very most contested and protean. This is to say that he is always “timely,” because the concerns that circulate in his writings have seemed so available for the kind of reinterpretation that reflects the contexts in which his readers imagine themselves. Aside from being an exhilarating stylist, he thus makes for an apt study in critical citizenship, the sort of readerly practices that characterize thoughtful participation in democratic society.

Our study of Emerson will focus upon his texts, and reading them closely will constitute most of our activity together this semester. But another object of our study will concern the ways in which Emerson has been read, since dealing with the debates that have surrounded Emerson will help to underline the sense in which readers who write about texts always deliberate the shape of our society and our possible relations with one another. And so just as we’re going to challenge ourselves to read closely a difficult, if rewarding and highly canonical, writer, we’re also going to take on the challenge of following a complex exchange among highly invested readers.

Keep in mind that my emphasis upon the latter task will be a part of my effort to help you as graduate students to situate yourselves as new members of the field of professional literary studies. It will help you to make the transition from a mindset proper to undergraduate work to a more advanced level by compelling you to grasp the skills and methods that distinguish the habits of professional literary historians. As an undergraduate, you learned to rely upon the research of such scholars as you developed your own arguments about literature. But as a graduate student, you have decided to become one of those scholars. That means, among other things, that you’ll be responsible for understanding the arguments other scholars generate and for articulating your own thoughtful assessments of those arguments.

But it will also entail a shift in your relationship with literary textuality so as to privilege the examination of primary materials. And so we’ll also spend significant time this semester examining Emerson’s texts as he wrote them—getting to know his handwriting, for one thing, but also discerning the differences between what Emerson wrote, what he published, and what his editors have rendered as his official texts. All of this will help us toward our ultimate goal this semester, which is also the goal of originality that is itself so often the core goal of Emerson’s account of self-reliant consciousness: to find that idea that is yours and yours alone and also the language to do that idea justice.
In addition to coming to class and keeping pace with the readings, each student will be required to complete the following tasks this semester:

1. **Oral presentations**: Each seminar member will be assigned a contemporary critical essay about Emerson on which to report to the rest of the class at some point during the semester. In these reports, presenters are responsible for (1) presenting their material to the class in a way that summarizes the argument therein and that facilitates discussion, and (2) hazarding some ideas about how the critical work might re-shape our understanding of Emerson—or, possibly, and if you're very confident, how its perspective might be limiting in certain ways. Meeting this second criterion requires that presenters either take the critical framework of the essay to bear upon a passage from Emerson not discussed in that essay, or bring that framework into productive dialogue with another work of criticism we have already read as a class. Since the critical works will be complex, reporters should supply one-page handouts outlining the argument and highlighting key passages. (These should not provide a "script" for the presentation, however—presenters should not simply read from a text for their report. Instead, you should show the ability to "talk to" the material. In other words, you should understand the essay well enough to talk about it on your feet.) All seminar members must read the critical essay before the class meeting during which it is discussed. Presentations will begin during week 6; they should last about fifteen to twenty minutes; and they should generate a discussion afterward. (15%)

2. **Annotated edition of an Emerson work**: This semester I will supply members of our class with photographs of manuscripts written by Emerson, used by him as notes for his lectures, and housed today at the Houghton Rare Books Room at Harvard University. Working with these facsimiles, class members will work through the challenges of Emerson's handwriting and use the historical resources we have available to us in order to produce annotated scholarly editions of these texts. To prepare for this undertaking we will study the techniques and protocols of today's preeminent editors of Emerson. Producing editions of these texts will not only teach you some of the challenges and pleasures of working with primary materials; it will also represent a genuine contribution to the field that will be helpful to other readers of Emerson. (25%)

3. **Annotated bibliography**: On some issue of concern in the field of Emerson Studies. Completing this research will credential you for writing a proposal in pursuit of the research essay. (20%)

4. **Research essay**: Prepared according to MLA format, approximately 20 pages long, and focused upon the issues pursued in the annotated bibliography above. Additionally, each student will submit to me a proposal for this research paper, due on April 10 and conforming to guidelines I will distribute. (40%)

5. **Participation in discussion**: Ours is a graduate seminar, and so I assume that everyone will appear weekly as strong class citizens, prepared and eager to participate energetically in a
demanding discussion. As you surely know by now, participating well doesn’t simply mean talking a lot—it means fostering a dialogue, frequently making comments showing that you are engaged in a process of careful reading and reconsideration of that already read, and showing that you are attuned to what others in the class say and to what is in the text. Tangents, anecdotes, and unprofessional digressions are fine—even essential for a certain kind of productive engagement—but when they are conducted in the absence of serious consideration of what is on the page, they can be self-aggrandizing, a kind of ruse, and distracting to our collective sense of purpose.

Attendance policy: Don’t miss class.

Late assignments: Generally, I don’t give extensions. That said, there are sometimes truly unavoidable, 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.

Required Texts

Aside from Lawrence Buell’s biography *Emerson* (2004), which I’ve made available to you through TRS, most required texts are available through Booth Library’s electronic reserve (http://www.library.eiu.edu/ereserves/ereserves.asp). The password is ch5009. A very few remaining texts I will hand out in class or email to you.

On cd, I am also supplying you photographs I have taken of some of Emerson’s manuscripts. The copyrights to these unedited documents belong to the Houghton Library of Harvard University, and no portion of them may be published without the Houghton’s permission. I will advise students who generate publication projects from this course and who seek permissions concerning these materials.

Lastly, I have also placed on 3-hour print reserve the ten-volume *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, the standard edition amongst Emerson scholars. I have also reserved for you the 12-volume *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, as well as some other standard scholarly editions of texts not covered in either of these two collections: *Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, and the *Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. I’ve also reserved some signal biographies and works of criticism, but the main purpose of the print reserves is to give you reliable access to all extant scholarly editions of Emerson’s works. A complete list of the reserved items is at the reserves desk.
Reading Schedule:

Wed Jan 9  Introduction, course overview  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841)

Wed Jan 16  No class meeting—I’m giving a paper at the University of Manchester.


Wed Jan 30  Emerson, “The American Scholar,” “The Divinity School Address”
Buell, *Emerson*, chaps. 4-7

Wed Feb 6  Selections from Emerson’s *Essays: Series One* (1841):
“Circles,” “Friendship,” “Compensation,” “History”

Emerson, “Emancipation in the West Indies” (1844)

Wed Feb 20  “Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law” (1851); “Seventh of March Speech on the Fugitive Slave Law” (1854); “American Slavery” (1855)
John Carlos Rowe, “Hamlet’s Task: Emerson’s Political Writings”

Wed Feb 27  Emerson, “Speech on the Affairs in Kansas” (1856); “The Assault on Mr. Sumner” (1856); “Remarks at a meeting for the relief of the family of John Brown” (1859); “John Brown” (1860)
Martha Schoolman, “Emerson’s Doctrine of Hatred” (2009)
Wed Mar 6  Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic” (1863)
     Scholarly editions due

Wed Mar 20 Emerson, *English Traits* (1856)

Wed Mar 27 Emerson, “Permanent Traits of the English National Genius” (1835); “New England Reformers” (1844)
     Ian Finseth, “Evolution, Cosmopolitanism, and Emerson’s Antislavery Politics”

     Annotated Bibliographies due

Wed Apr 10 Emerson, “Eloquence” (1857); “Illusions” (1856); “Wealth” (1860)
     Proposal for final paper due

Wed Apr 17 Emerson, selections from *Natural History of the Intellect* (1871,1872); “Natural History of Intellect,” “Memory”

Wed Apr 24 Dinner at my house; final conversation about Emerson

Finals Week: Research Papers due by April 1, 4 pm