Spring 1-15-2003

ENG 4750-001: Studies in African-American Literature: Passing and the Fictions of Race

Tim Engles
Eastern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_spring2003

Recommended Citation
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_spring2003/126
English 4750, Studies in African-American Literature:
Passing and the Fictions of Race

Instructor: Tim Engles
Phone: 581-6316 (it’s usually easier to reach me by e-mail: cftde@eiu.edu)
Office hours (Coleman 3831): TR, 12:15 – 1:15 and by appointment
Course listserv: eng4750@eiu.edu

Required Texts:

Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison” (1899)
Nella Larson, Passing (1929) (in The Complete Fiction of Nella Larson)
Langston Hughes, The Ways of White Folks (1934)
Toi Derricote, The Black Notebooks (1997)
Gloria Naylor, Linden Hills (1985)
Danzy Senna, Caucasia (1995)

Course Description:

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

----Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1895

We will read and view literary, cinematic, historical, and sociological inquiries into the phenomenon of racial passing, and we will consider how the idea of "passing" messes with the idea of "race." We will also put the metaphor of passing to further use by examining literary depictions of other African American ways of "passing" for something that one is supposedly not. We will often address these questions by using critical and
theoretical texts as aids to interpreting literary texts—and vice versa. Students will emerge from this course with a solid familiarity with primary works in what has become a subgenre African American literature, "the passing narrative." The course will be organized as a conversation on these matters, with your daily participation central to our work. Because the success of our conversations will depend so heavily on your careful study beforehand of each day’s readings, we will begin our sessions with regular reading quizzes. Also, the rule regarding attendance is: be here. If you have more than three absences this semester, your course grade will drop a full letter grade for each absence beyond three.

Course Requirements:

1. Written response and oral presentation: Each student will choose one day on the syllabus. For this class session, you will write a one-page, single-spaced response/review. This written response will be duplicated and handed out to each of us on the day of your presentation, and it will function as your guidelines for leading class discussion for a significant portion of the session. Suggestions: focus attention on a problem or set of problems, and the writer or director’s apparent solution(s); make connections, within the text, and/or with others; zero in on a significant or surprising aspect of the text; the written response should end with at least two questions whose answers provide, as you see it, keys to understanding the text under discussion. Don’t plan on talking by yourself for long—your primary goal is to stimulate discussion. After the discussion of the text, you will then revise your response (into something no more than two pages, single spaced) on the basis of your reaction to how class discussion changed (or verified) your response. This revision will be due one week after the in-class presentation. (15%)

2. 5-7 page critical essay: This paper will focus on two of the non-literary writers and their articles listed on the first half of our syllabus. It will concentrate on points of contact, convergence, and divergence in their arguments, and like the longer essay, it will follow traditional conventions for academic essays (e.g., unity, coherence, proper formatting and MLA-style documentation, and so on). You are free to connect their insights to works of literature (either on or off our syllabus) or to other “cultural products,” or you can focus on the arguments themselves. You are also encouraged (but no, not required) to read, consider, and perhaps incorporate other work by either or both of these writers. Because this essay is due right after midterm, you can think of it as a kind of take-home midterm, assigned very early. (20%)

3. 10-15+ pages research essay: This paper will focus on one of the literary texts on our syllabus, or another of your choosing, with my prior approval. The topic is open, as long as it relates directly to some of our readings and discussions, and a 250-400 word proposal will be required beforehand. The essay must reflect your close attention to and understanding of insights and interpretive concepts that will have arisen throughout the semester, and of course, it must be an entirely new essay (not something you wrote for a previous course. (25%)

4. Final exam (25%)
5. Active, thoughtful class participation: I will not deliver lectures in this class; because we are a relatively small group, we must contribute together to a positive, challenging, interesting learning environment. Doing so will call for your careful concentration before class on each assigned reading, and your willingness to share your thoughts, questions, and feelings with others about what you read and hear. (15%)

Other Matters:

E-mail activity: Enrollment in this class requires an e-mail account, and you must check it frequently for messages pertaining to the course. I will use your e-dress to subscribe you to a class listserv, where I will post occasional announcements to the class, and where class discussion will sometimes continue. E-mail is also the quickest, easiest way to reach me if I am not in my office; I welcome any and all questions and comments. Using e-mail is crucial for this course. I strongly recommend that you use your free EIU account, but another commercial account is acceptable (Yahoo, Hotmail, and other free accounts are unacceptable). If you do not send me an e-mail message (write to cftde@eiu.edu) by Tuesday, January 21 at 10:30 a.m., I will assume that you have chosen against fully participating in the course, and I will therefore drop you. In your message, 1) describe yourself in whatever way you choose, including your career aspirations, and 2) write a statement to the effect that you have read and agree with these course policies and requirements.

Academic honesty: I expect you to act honestly and do your own work in this class, and so does Eastern Illinois University. It is your responsibility (once again) to familiarize yourself with the English Department’s policy 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 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 assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.”

A bit more about essays: All writing assignments are due at the beginning of the class period on the day they are due, whether the student is in class or not. Late-paper penalty: fifteen points each day late. When each of the two essays is turned in, it MUST be accompanied in a manila folder by all notes and drafts written towards it, with the final copy of the essay on top of this material. I will use these materials to gauge and offer comments on your writing process. I WILL NOT GRADE an essay that is not accompanied by material that clearly demonstrates several earlier stages leading up to the final draft, so be sure to save all such materials (if you do most or all of your writing on a computer, print out occasional drafts to include with your final copy). Essays unaccompanied by materials that clearly demonstrate several stages of development toward the final copy will receive an automatic ZERO.
ENGLISH 4750: DAILY SCHEDULE
(this schedule may be subject to change)

Note: This schedule may change; any changes will be announced in advance. Reading and writing assignments are to be completed by the dates on which they appear on the syllabus. BE SURE to bring the appropriate handout or book to class if a reading assignment is listed for that day; students who show up without a copy of the day’s reading assignment will be marked absent.

T JAN 14 Introduction to the course


R JAN 16 Read handout before class: Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison”


R JAN 23 The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

T JAN 28 The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man


T FEB 4 “Modernism and the New Negro Movement” (handout) and begin Nella Larson, Passing

R FEB 6 Passing

T FEB 11 Finish Passing, and also read in Passing and the Fictions of Identity: Martha J. Cutter, “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction”

R FEB 13 Langston Hughes, selections from The Ways of White Folks

T FEB 18 In Passing and the Fictions of Identity: Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black” (up to page 260)

R FEB 20 No class: instead, attend if you can the lecture by Cameron McCarthy, “Strangers in the Village: James Baldwin, Popular Culture and the Ties that Bind”

T FEB 25 Imitation of Life (directed by Douglas Sirk, 1959)
R FEB 27  *Imitation of Life*

T MAR 4  *Imitation of Life* (reading to be announced)


MAR 10 – MAR 14  Spring Break – No classes

T MAR 18  *Linden Hills*

R MAR 20  *Linden Hills*

T MAR 25  *Linden Hills*

R MAR 27  Toi Derricote, *The Black Notebooks*

T APR 1  *The Black Notebooks*

R APR 3  *The Black Notebooks*

T APR 8  Danzy Senna, *Caucasia*

- Final paper proposal due

R APR 10  *Caucasia*

T APR 15  *Caucasia*

R APR 17  *Caucasia*

T APR 22  *Bamboozled* (directed by Spike Lee, 2000)

R APR 24  *Bamboozled*

T APR 29  *Bamboozled* (Reading to be announced)

R MAY 1  Final day of class; final paper due

FINAL EXAM: In our regular classroom; time and date coming soon