ENG 5009-001: Studies in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Mystery and Detection

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STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE:

MYSTERY AND DETECTION

OVERVIEW: The literature of mystery and detection, a branch of the gothic mode, enjoys vast popularity. To see examples of the genre, you can turn on a TV nearly any night of the week. In most of its manifestations, the genre is reduced to a slick form: Somebody kills somebody or somebody comes up missing or somebody steals something, at which point detection begins. Usually, after much violence, a hard-nosed detective cracks the case. Or if the culprit is supernatural, say a poltergeist, then an expert in the occult tracks down and eradicates the evil force—until it returns. This is not to say that modern literature lacks brilliant variations of the form, such as Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which a baffling contemporary scene exhausts and defeats one method of detection after another. But during the nineteenth century, impressive examples abound. The literature of mystery and detection frequently served as a vital form—an exciting way to explore ideas about epistemology, race, gender, and identity. Exploiting the curiosity and sensationalism provoked by conventions of the form, nineteenth-century writers enticed readers to consider and reconsider assumptions, to examine what Captain Ahab calls the “lower layer,” the foundations of our assumptions. During the semester, you will encounter many of the most subtle, powerful works of mystery and detection ever written. In fact, you will become a detective reviewing classic case studies, a sleuth who seeks to understand what mystery and detection are all about.

OBJECTIVES:

To read and discuss classic American literature of mystery and detection;

To consider ways in which such works relate to epistemology, gender, race and identity;

To afford opportunities to formulate original ideas through critical thinking;

To stress mastery of subject matter for continuing teaching and research;

To foster clear expression of ideas and evidence in writing;

To encourage interdisciplinary study of literature, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and science.
REQUIREMENTS:

Midterm: The midterm will consist of two parts. In part one, you will select two of four items, writing a response of 500 words for each selected item. For part two, you will select one of three items, writing about 1000 words in an essay for the selected item (25%);

Critical Essay: The critical essay will include at 12-15 pages, not including necessary documentation and other matter. All essays must include ample primary evidence, as well as appropriate secondary evidence (45%);

Final: The final will be structured like the midterm, but more weight will be placed on the final since it is somewhat more comprehensive (30%). Both midterm and final will be written out of class.

GRADING CRITERIA: When I evaluate your writing, I will consider content (depth, evidence, logic), organization, and expression (coherence, style, grammar, and mechanics). While content is most important, it is possible for writing to earn a low grade if it is seriously deficient in one or more of the other criteria.

Whenever you want me to review or elaborate expectations for assignments, let me know. I will gladly meet with you to discuss your work.

INSTRUCTOR:

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TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

1. Week of August 20: Introduction to Course; Literary Historical Background

2. Week of August 27: Weiland; or, The Transformation (An American Tale)

3. Week of September 3: Labor Day (No Classes)

4. Week of September 10: Stories By Hawthorne
   - “The Great Carbuncle” (927)
   - “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure” (996)
   - My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1209)
   - “The Artist of the Beautiful” (1139)
   - “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1043)
   - “Ethan Brand” (1184)
   - “The Minister’s Black Veil” (872)

5. Week of September 17: The Scarlet Letter (including “The Customhouse” introduction)

6. Week of September 24: The House of the Seven Gables

7. Week of October 1: The Blithedale Romance

8. Week of October 8: Selected Writings By Poe; Take-Home Midterm
   - “The Sleeper” (965)
   - “Dream-Land” (967)
   - Ulalume: A Ballad” (951)
   - “MS. Found in a Bottle” (118)
   - “The Fall of the House of Usher” (231)
   - “Berenice” (642)
   - “Morella” (667)
9. Week of October 15: More Poe

- "The Gold-Bug" (42)
- "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (141)
- "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (169)
- "The Purloined Letter" (208)
- "Maelzel’s Chess Player" (421)
- "The Man of the Crowd" (475)

10. Week of October 22: *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (Book I-)

11. Week of October 29: *Pierre* (to completion)

12. Week of November 5: Stories by Melville – and one novella

- "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1)
- "Benito Cereno" (159)
- "The Piazza" (47)
- *Billy Budd, Sailor* (287)

13. Week of November 12: *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade*

THANKSGIVING BREAK

14. Week of November 26: *Pudd'Nhead Wilson*

15. Week of December 3: Novella’s By James; Take-Home Final

- *The Turn of the Screw*
- *The Aspern Papers*