ENG 5009-001: Liberal Dissent and the American Renaissance

Christopher Hanon
Eastern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_fall2008

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_fall2008/145

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the 2008 at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fall 2008 by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
American liberals during the 1840s and 50s were both a demoralized and galvanized presence in American culture—still are, in fact. Demoralized, as when in 1850 Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster endorsed the Fugitive Slave Law—a gesture he described as part of a program of “Compromise” with the South but which was widely decried in his home state as a form of capitulation to pro-slavery forces in the Senate. Galvanized, as when in 1854 the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison took to the stage at a Framingham rally and burned a copy of the Constitution. The pyrotechnics to which Garrison submitted the founding document were sparked by the Fugitive Slave Law itself, the passage of which lent fuel to debates over whether the Constitution was itself a pro-slavery document.

The course will take up the 1840s and 50s as a period during which a series of American writers developed public identities within a culture whose politics were swinging between extremes. We'll read Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Harriet Wilson, Frederick Douglass, Emily Dickinson, William Lloyd Garrison, Lysander Spooner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, James Russell Lowell, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and others, always with an eye toward discerning how the artistic and the political intersected during the antebellum period. Of special interest to us will be the ways in which many of these writers were able to register varying degrees of dissent, and the extent to which their dissent constituted either a disavowal or a re-appropriation of the rhetoric of democracy. Students in this course will learn how to use historical archives to research literary problems, and they will produce a piece of writing suitable for submission to a journal or presentation at a conference.

Course Requirements & Policies

In addition to completing all assigned readings and discussions, students will write a paper suitable for presentation at a conference or submission to a journal, approximately 18-20 pages long (50% of final grade). Students will also complete an annotated bibliography of scholarly sources dealing with some aspect of our general topic, a bibliography which will also help you to write an abstract describing your paper topic well before the essay's due date (25% of final grade). All students will also make one presentation, during which they will lead the class in a discussion of the implications of a journal article or chapter from a book dealing with our subject matter (25% of final grade). I will match each student with an article or chapter and assign a week for the report.
I will also sometimes ask students—either individually or as a class—to take on certain research challenges. Part of what separates graduate courses from undergraduate courses is that in this sort of gathering, it’s fair for me to expect you to use the research tools that define our profession (the kind you either have studied or are this semester in ENG 5000 with Professor Ringuette) to deal with certain problems we’ll identify together. Thus, if we at some point find ourselves wondering, for instance, whether Ralph Waldo Emerson’s books were well reviewed in the South, don’t be surprised or bothered if I single you out and instruct you to find the answer—along with primary evidence—by our next class meeting. That kind of thing is the spice of life, if you ask me, and your ability to distinguish yourself with these sorts of research problems will affect your grade insofar as they will affect my sense of how serious and skilled you are about participating. By the way, they couldn’t stand Emerson (the Southern press, that is).

Participation

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. 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 qualify as participation.

Attendance Policy

Don’t miss class.

Late Assignments

Generally, I don’t give extensions. That said, there are of course 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—assignments that have been given an extension are read with an even more demanding eye than those that have not. Lastly: in order to be granted an extension, students must contact me at least two days before the assignment’s due date.
| Reading Schedule |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| **Liberalism, Individualism, Dissent** | **Week 1**  
Introductions, overview of the course  
Richard Rorty, introduction from *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989) |
|                  | **Week 2**  
John Locke, from *An essay concerning human understanding*, Book 2 (1690)  
Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, book 2, chapters 4, 5, 7 (1689)  
Adam Smith, from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)  
William Lloyd Garrison, “No Compromise With Slavery” (1854)  
Lydia Maria Child, from *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833)  
|                  | **Week 3**  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-reliance” (1841)  
Report: John Carlos Rowe, “At Emerson’s Tomb” (1997)  
| **The Mexican War** | **Week 4**  
Thomas Cary, “An Oration Delivered Before the Authorities of the City of Boston, 1847”  
James Russel Lowell, from *The Biglow Papers* (1848) |
|                  | **Week 5**  
Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849); “Higher Laws” (1854)  
Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853)  
| **The Fugitive Slave Law** | **Week 6**  
Emerson, “Address to the Citizens of Concord on the Fugitive Slave Law, 3 May 1851,” “Seventh of March Speech on the Fugitive Slave Law, 7 March 1854” |
John Carlos Rowe, “Hamlet’s Task: Emerson’s Political Writings” (1997)

Week 7
Lysander Spooner, from *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery* (1845)
Wendell Phillips, from *The Constitution a Pro-slavery Compact* (1856)

Week 8
Frederick Douglass, Speech on the Dred Scott Decision (1857)
Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, Decision in Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857)
Justice John McLean, Dissenting Opinion in Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857)

Week 9
Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852)

Week 10
Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)
Brook Thomas,
Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Return of Hester Prynne”

Week 11
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)

Week 12
Lydia Maria Child, from *Letters from New York* (1843)
Margaret Fuller, from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)
Hawthorne, “Chiefly About War-Matters, by a Peaceable Man” (1862)
Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* (1853)

Week 13
Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown”
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Speech on the Affairs in Kansas” (1856)
Emerson, “Remarks at a meeting for the relief of the family of John Brown,” 1859

Week 14
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

Week 15
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic” (1863)

POSSIBLY WORK IN?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, something from *Representative Men* (1850)

