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ENG 444 – African American Literature Fall 2004 Course Syllabus

Required Texts

- *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., et al. (Norton)
- *Invisible Man*. Ralph Ellison. (Vintage)

Prerequisites

ENG 102

Catalog Description

The contribution of the African American to literature is considered from a historical standpoint. Major emphasis is on the twentieth century, with interpretation and analysis of four genres: poetry, drama, short story, and novel.

Course Objectives

This is a survey course, and as such, we're going to be surveying quite a bit of literature. This is a reading intensive course, so please prepare accordingly. The subject matter spans a very large temporal area, from the late-18th century to the present, a scope that will give you a broad sweep of the African American literary landscape, and in a variety of genres. We will read these texts not only within race-specific contexts, but also—and perhaps more importantly—as American literature. The objectives of this course are to give students an introduction to the vast array of prose, poetry, and drama that make up much of African American literature; to provide the opportunity to explore the diverse nature of this literature; to help students develop a deeper understanding of the ever-evolving issues involved in defining the American literary canon; and to encourage the reading of literature with a fine critical understanding and aesthetic appreciation that a 400-level course should provide.

Attendance

Be here! Much of your work will be done in class. Therefore, except in the most extraordinary cases, **you will be required to attend all class sessions**. If you know you have/will have an excused absence from class, please see me about this as soon as you can. You still need to make up the work you may have missed in class. And do arrive to class on time; tardiness can count as an absence. Attendance and class participation will help determine your overall course grade. **More than three unexcused absences can lower**

your course grade by at least one letter. Also, if you miss more than 15% of the scheduled classes you will automatically receive an F for the course.

Evaluation

The course grade is largely determined by performance on major exams, a group presentation, and a final paper. Class participation will also be graded.

Grading Scale

A+=99, A=95, A-=90 B+=89, B=85, B-=80 C+=79, C=75, C-=70 D+=69, D=65, D-=60
F=59-0

The portions are weighted as follows:

3 Exams	60%
Vernacular Presentation	15%
Final Paper	25%

Except for legitimate excused absences, **any paper turned in after the due date will result in a zero for the assignment.** Furthermore, unless there is an excellent excuse, the exams cannot be made up, so please make sure you do the readings and don't miss class.

American Disabilities Act (ADA) Statement

Students requesting accommodations for disabilities must go through the Academic Support Committee. For more information, please contact the Director of Disability Resources & Services, Halladay Student Services Building, Room 303D, 303-886-5835.

Plagiarism and Cheating

- **Department policy:** The Department of Literature and Languages adheres to the university definition of "plagiarism" by the Council of Writing Program Administrators that can be found at <http://www.ilstu.edu/~ddhesse/wpa/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf>:

Plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source. [...] Ethical writers make every effort to acknowledge sources fully and appropriately in accordance with the contexts and genres of their writing. A student who attempts (even if clumsily) to identify and credit his or her source, but who misuses a specific citation format or incorrectly uses quotation marks or other forms of identifying material taken from other sources, has not plagiarized. Instead, such a student should be considered to have failed to cite and document sources appropriately.

- **Royal's addendum:** To intentionally plagiarize is to steal another's words or ideas as if they were your own. **Any student who blatantly plagiarizes (i.e., intentionally and directly lifting whole or partial material from any electronic or printed material) will automatically fail the course and should expect disciplinary action by the college.**

Student Conduct and Responsibilities

- **University policy:** All students enrolled at the University shall follow the tenets of common decency and acceptable behavior conducive to a positive learning environment.

- **Royal's addendum:** In order for everyone to get the most out of this course, classroom conduct is of the utmost importance. Therefore, you will be required to create and maintain

a productive classroom environment with little in the way of disruption. Your overall grade could be put in jeopardy if you demonstrate inappropriate classroom behaviors. This includes the habitual disruption of the class through chit-chatting and talking out of turn, doing outside work during our classroom time, and bringing in active electronic devices (such as cell phones and pagers). Every day you enter the class, please turn off your cell phones and pagers.

Schedule

There is **A LOT** of reading here, so please keep up with the syllabus. Please note the weeks where assignments are due.

Week 1: August 30 – September 3

Introduction.

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*

Phillis Wheatley, various poetry

Week 2: September 6 – 10

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*

Vernacular Presentation – Spirituals

Week 3: September 13 – 17

Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*

W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*

Week 4: September 20 – 24

Charles Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine”

Paul Laurence Dunbar, various poetry

James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Vernacular Presentation – Gospel

Week 5: September 27 – October 1

Alain Locke, “The New Negro”

Claude McKay, various poetry

Zora Neale Hurston, “Sweat,” “How It Feels to be Colored Me,” “Characteristics of Negro Expression”

Exam 1

Week 6: October 4 – 8

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

Vernacular Presentation – Secular Songs, Ballads

Week 7: October 11 – 15

Jean Toomer, *Cane*

Week 8: October 18 – 22

Langston Hughes, various poetry
Countee Cullen, various poetry
Vernacular Presentation – The Blues

Week 9: October 25 – 29

Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” “The Man Who Lived Underground”
Ralph Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” *Invisible Man*

Week 10: November 1 – 5

Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (continued)
Exam 2

Week 11: November 8 – 12

Robert Hayden, various poetry
Gwendolyn Brooks, various poetry
James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues,” “Going to Meet the Man”
Vernacular Presentation – Jazz

Week 12: November 15 – 19

Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*
Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*

Week 13: November 22 – 26

Ishmael Reed, “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” various poetry
Vernacular Presentation – Rhythm and Blues

Week 14: November 29 – December 3

Nikki Giovanni, various poetry
Toni Cade Bambara, “Raymond’s Run”
James Alan McPherson, “A Solo Song: For Doc”

Week 15: December 6 – 10

Paule Marshall, “Reena”
Alice Walker, “Everyday Use”
August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
Vernacular Presentation – Hip Hop
Final Paper Due

Week 16: December 13 – 17

Final Exam Week
Exam 3

ENG 444 – Vernacular Presentation

There will be a series of seven group presentations this semester reflecting the vernacular tradition in African American literature. Everyone in the group will be responsible for carefully studying the tradition, discussing it within the group, and taking significant part in the group oral presentation and formal write-up. I require everyone to rely not only on our Norton textbook, but on outside sources as well, especially for information concerning the critical heritage. For your vernacular presentation, your group needs to make sure it does the following:

- Introduce the specific tradition and give an overview of its history.
- Present what are considered some of the major pieces in the tradition and/or some of its major artists.
- Discuss the basic elements and themes of the tradition; in other words, define the tradition to the class by introducing some of its best defining characteristics.
- Along with this, highlight what you consider some of the primary variations (in form, content, presentation) within this tradition.
- Discuss the connections among your group's vernacular tradition and others traditions (derivations? inspirations?).
- Give a brief overview of the criticism surrounding the vernacular tradition. In particular, you might want to look at the history surrounding the criticism (e.g., how long has this been an "accepted" topic for academic study? What might be some of the arguments against its scholarly adoption?).
- Explore some of the problems **you** might see in the study of this tradition.
- Since many of you are in education, it would be a good idea to speculate on how you would teach this kind of literature to high school or even a junior high school class. (Or, **would** you even consider teaching it to a high school or junior high school class?)
- Provide a 4-5 page formal essay, jointly written and edited by the group, that encapsulates the issues you bring up and discuss in class.

Remember that this is a group effort, which means that everyone in the group must participate in the class presentation as well as contribute to the writing/editing of the essay. So you'll need to assign responsibilities accordingly. (In other words, if someone's really good at doing research, that person can do a survey of the criticism. Or if two group members are good writers, they could write up an initial draft that can be critiqued by the others.) You will need to exchange contact information with your fellow group members and make arrangements to meet several times outside of class. Feel free to use any sort of media in your class presentation, but please keep in mind three things: 1) you will need to use the CD-ROMs that came with your Norton textbook (since these are oral traditions, you will need to rely on some of those recordings); 2) if you choose to use visual media of any kind you **must** check with me at least a week before your presentation so that I can make arrangements with Media Services, and 3) make sure that the glitz or dazzle of any media that you use does not overshadow the content of your presentation.

Paper Assignment

First, your class paper should reflect the historical scope of ENG 444—in other words, you must focus on an African American writer or text(s). I would prefer that you write on an author and a novel/story/poem that we've covered in class. However, if you have an idea for a work of literature that we haven't read as a class, then you need to talk with me about this.

Here are some strategies for getting started:

- In deciding on a paper topic, begin by thinking of a text (prose or poetry) that you particularly enjoyed reading (or maybe even enjoyed arguing against) and consider that as your literary focus. Remember, you're going to spend a good number of days and weeks dealing closely with this text, so choose something you can live with for a while.
- Next you will need to decide how you will approach your author/text. Think in terms of focusing on **one particular aspect** of your narrative or poem. Over a period of several days, engage in various pre-writing exercises (e.g., brainstorming, free writing, branching) and see what ideas occur to you.
 - In coming up with a specific focus, you could consider one of the basic literary elements found on our handout, "Strategies on Reading Literature." Keep in mind that in your paper you should concentrate on **one** literary element (for instance, either plot, or character, or irony, or imagery, etc.) and not feel that you have to cover several (plot *and* character *and* irony *and* imagery, etc.) in a laundry list fashion.
 - You can most certainly discuss more than one literary element, but keep in mind that only **one** should be your thesis focus. For instance, if you want to look at the way that a writer deals with characterization (such as his or her handling of the central protagonist), you might need to bring in a discussion of setting and symbolism to illustrate your main points. In other words, you would be using aspects of setting and symbolism *as it relates to* issues of character.
 - You can also think in terms of larger themes that would reach beyond the text. Here you might want to approach a narrative or poem in terms of a particular social, psychological, political, or cultural theme. You might consider these questions: What does your work say about a certain theme within its historical moment? What might the work reveal about the writer in his or her place or time? How might you apply your reading of this narrative or poem to contemporary cultural issues?
- After you decide on your paper's focus, you'll need to craft a well-written and finely-tuned thesis statement. This can be a working thesis at first, and as you write you may find that your thesis focus will shift. That's okay. But please keep in mind that when it comes time for your final draft, your paper should have one, **and only one**, central thesis and that your paper should follow its trajectory throughout.

When it comes to the finalization of your class essay, here are the basic guidelines that you will need to follow:

- Your essay must be typed.
- Your paper must be written in MLA style. Please refer to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th edition. **Every aspect of your paper must adhere to MLA guidelines.**
- It must be between 5-7 pages in length (not counting the Works Cited page).

- There must be a separate Works Cited page that contains all of the sources, and only the sources, that you cite in your essay.
- When citing (either in quote or paraphrase) your primary source, use the page numbers from our textbook (or line number, if you're quoting poetry...see the *MLA Handbook*). If you're citing a text outside of the one we're using in class, you would obviously use those page numbers.
- Although ideally there is no set limit as to the number of sources needed to write a good literary research essay, for this assignment you must utilize **at least three secondary sources**:
 - Your three sources must come from either a journal article, an essay from an edited collection of essays, or a part of a single-author book.
 - Avoid brief reviews.
 - You **cannot** use any information found on the general World Wide Web (this does not include the full-text sources you can find through one of the many databases our library subscribes to...those are perfectly fine).
 - Your three sources must be critical sources, **not primary sources** (such as another story or poem by the author you're writing on). You may use primary sources (other stories, novels, or poems), but they should not be counted as part of the three secondary sources.
- Your paper must have one, **and only one**, thesis focus.

Please keep in mind that I am interested in what you have to say about a particular author and text(s), not what someone else has to say about your topic. In order to please your primary reader—me—you should keep in mind the following:

- **Avoid sustained plot summaries.** If you catch yourself doing nothing more than recounting the events of a narrative, stop yourself immediately. A literary research essay is not a summarization exercise. It's okay to recount or describe a particular scene or event, and you may need to do so contextually in order to set up a particular point you're making. But do not fall into the trap of pointless summarization.
- **Avoid lengthy quotes.** It's appropriate to quote from your primary, and even secondary, sources. But make sure that when you do quote, you do so because the author's words are of the utmost importance and a paraphrase will not do it justice.
- **Avoid spending too much time on your secondary sources.** You will need to incorporate what other critics have said into your own arguments, but you must never lose site of your own arguments. If you find yourself going into too much detail in summarizing your secondary sources, stop and think of ways to refocus your writing back on your thesis.
- It's okay to critique or disagree with the secondary sources that you use. Just do it in a civil and professional manner.
- Don't be afraid to make literary judgments. **Remember, in engaging in this act of writing, you become a literary critic.**
- Back up your arguments with textual evidence. **This is very important!** It's one thing to claim that an author is saying something; but your statement takes on more authority when you can demonstrate your point through the text itself.
- Make sure that you cite your sources appropriately and give credit to words or ideas that aren't your own. As stated in the syllabus, plagiarism is a capital literary offense. **Anyone caught doing so, off with their heads!!!!**

And on that happy note, enjoy doing your essay!