

American Literature to 1900
Dr J. Michelle Coghlan
University of Manchester

Course Overview:

This first-year course unit surveys American literature from its earliest periods to the end of the nineteenth century. It introduces students to the major genres and movements of early American literature, including narratives of captivity, seduction, and escape, fiery sermons and revolutionary oratory, gothic tales, sentimental fiction, and transcendental essays, as well as poetry in a variety of forms. In particular, we explore the rise of *feelings*—in the form of ecstatic religious experience, sentimental reform, the culture of sensation, and national sentiment—as a vital literary and cultural force in America; we also track the relationship between *form* and *reform* (most especially between social movements and antebellum literary genres) and closely attend to *texts* and *counter-texts*—the ways that American writers speak back to and rewrite one another, drawing on older forms to issue new calls for change, but also recasting familiar genres and styles for their own literary purposes. We read a mix of canonical and popular authors alongside and against the shifting geographical borders and cultural controversies of their time, tracking our key threads across texts that chart (and lay claim to) the development and formation of “American” literary traditions. And we conclude our study by turning to the way U.S. writers sought to reunite and reinvent “America” in the aftermath of the Civil War, Reconstruction and its failure, a rapidly changing urban scene and a closing (but paradoxically expanding) frontier.

Course Format:

This course requires attendance at two weekly one-hour lectures and one weekly 50-minute seminar. Lectures provide historical, cultural, and biographical material, as well as some discussion of the assigned readings; in other words, they offer students critical concepts and contexts for approaching each week’s readings. Seminars emphasize close reading and class discussion, and offer students a space in which to more fully come to grips with our readings, so participation is cordially *required*.

Assessment:

One 1000-word essay, due early in the term (15%); one 2500-word essay, due late in the term (35%); one 2-hour unseen exam (50%)

Schedule of Readings

Week 1: ENCOUNTERS & NEW WORLD PLANTATIONS

Course Overview; American Literature: Where & How to Begin?

Christopher Columbus, “Letters” (1493, 1505) p. 34-38

Alvar Cabeza de Vaca, *The Relacion of Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca* (1542) p. 43-51

John Smith, *The General History of Virginia* (1624) p. 81-93

John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) p.165-167

Week 2: NEW LITERARY SCENES

Anne Bradstreet, “The Author to Her Book,” “To My Dear and Loving Husband,”

“Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House,” and “To My Dear Children” (1650) p. 207; 225; 226; 232; 235

Mary Rowlandson, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682)

- Week 3:** **CRISIS, REVIVAL & RELIGIOUS FEELING**
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Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692) p. 327-330
Jonathan Edwards, “Personal Narrative” (1740) and “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741) p. 396-408; 430-441

Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773), To the University of Cambridge, in New England” (1773), “On the Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitfield” (1770) p. 763; 764; 766-767
Jupiter Hammon, “An Address to Miss Philis Wheatley, Ethiopian Princess”
- Week 4:** **AMERICAN NATURE & HABITS/REVOLUTION, AMERICAN-STYLE**
Benjamin Franklin, “The Way to Wealth” (1757), *Autobiography* (1784) p. 455-462; 480-1; 526-542
St. John de Crèvecoeur, “What is an American?” (1782) p. 604-613

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776) p. 639-646
Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence” (1776), *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) p. 659-667; 669-673
- Week 5:** **SEDUCTION & THE DOMESTICATION OF VIRTUE**
Susannah Rowson, *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* (1791) [Norton Critical Ed.] finish VOL I.

Charlotte Temple [Norton Critical Ed.] finish VOL. 2
- Week 6:** **READING WEEK** **2 November-6 November**
- Week 7:** **THE GOTHIC & THE SENSATIONAL**
Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” (1819/20) p. 25-27; 29-40
Edgar Allan Poe, “Ligeia” (1838), “Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) p. 629-633; 644-667
- Week 8:** **RESISTANCE & REFORM, AMERICAN-STYLE**
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837) and “Self-Reliance” (1841) p. 211-214; 243-256; 269-286
Margaret Fuller, “The Great Lawsuit:” (1843) p. 740-777

Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” (1849), *Walden* (1846) p. 961-1033
David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal in Four Articles* (1829) p. 791-95
- Week 9:** **BACK TO THE FUTURE: COLONIAL TIMES, REVOLUTIONARY TIMES**
Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown,” (1835) “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1836) and “The Birth-mark” (1843) p. 369-373; 386-395; 409-429

Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* (1855) p. 1424-27; 1526-82
Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852) p. 1170-74; 1251-54
- Week 10:** **ABOLITION & AUTOBIOGRAPHY**
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life* (1847) p. 1174-1239
William Wells Brown, *Narrative of the Life & Escape of William Wells Brown* (1853) p. 942-8

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life* (1861) p. 920-42
Angelina Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836) p. 798-801

Week 11:

ELEGY, EFFUSION & THE HOME FRONT

Emily Dickinson, “Success is Counted Sweetest,” “I’m Nobody! Who are you?,” “Wild Nights, Wild Nights!,” “There’s a certain Slant of Light,” “I felt a Funeral in my Brain,” “The Soul selects her own Society,” and “Because I could not stop for death” (1859-1862) p.1659-63; 1669-70; 1672-3; 1680; 1683

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (1855/1881), and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed” (1865) p. 1310-14; 1330-32; 1344-5; 1374; 1395-96; 1402-08
Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address” (1863) p. 730-1; 738

Week 12:

NATION, REGION, EMPIRE

Red Badge of Courage (1895) [Oxford Classics Edition] CH 1-24; Exam Review