

Q43133: American Sensations: 19thC Antebellum Writing
University of Nottingham
Department of American & Canadian Studies
Final Year Module

Module Description: This module explores a number of literary works written during the thirty years prior to the American Civil War that engage with the nature of America at a crucial stage of its national and international formation. Students study a cluster of key themes: constructions of the American canon and the ‘American Renaissance’; religious and reform movements; ‘Nativism’ and immigration; racial confrontations; inter-American imperial encounters; urbanisation and industrialisation; gendered and sexed bodies. They are asked to consider how these themes are represented in different genres—the romantic; the sensational; the sentimental; the gothic; melodrama—and to think about the relationship between high and low culture.

Aims

1. To introduce students to the diversity of American writing during the antebellum period and to give them the opportunity to explore the literary and cultural context of America at a crucial stage of its national and international formation.
2. To interrogate the process of canon formation and help students appreciate the ways in which this period has been critically constructed in American Studies.
3. To help students understand the prevalent American literary genres at this time and also the ways in which these genres were deployed across both popular and non-popular literary forms.
4. To develop ideas about the ways in which literary texts are formative of ideological constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class and power.

Teaching: One-hour lecture plus one two-hour seminar

Assessment: 50% 3500-word essay; 50% 2-hour exam.

Syllabus

- Week 1 Naming and Periodizing/Senses and Sensations
Reading: F. O. Matthiessen, "Method and Scope";
David Reynolds, "The Open Text: American Writers and their Environment";
Shelley Streeby, "The Culture of Sensation"
- Week 2 Sensational Fiction
Reading: E.D.E.N Southworth, *The Hidden Hand* (1859)
- Week 3 The Woman Question
Reading: Margaret Fuller: 'The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women' (1843); Emily Dickinson: Selected Poems
- Week 4 Domestic/Sentimental Fiction
Reading: Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall* (1854)
- Week 5 Fiction and Reform
Reading: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852)
- Week 6 Gothic and City Mystery
Reading: George Lippard, *The Quaker City* (1845); Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter" (1844), "The Man of the Crowd" (1840)
- Week 7 Labouring Bodies
Reading: George Lippard, *The Quaker City* (1845);
Herman Melville, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855)
and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853)
- Week 8 Melodrama
Reading: Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon*
- Week 9 Literature and Nation
Reading: Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'The American Scholar' (1837); Women's Rights Convention, Declaration of Sentiments (1848); Frederick Douglass: 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' (1852); Walt Whitman: Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855)
- Week 10 Imperial Sensationalism I
Reading: George Lippard, *'Bel of Prairie Eden* (1848)
- Week 11 Imperial Sensationalism II
Reading: Mary Denison, *The Prisoner of La Vintresse* (1860)