

# Syllabus

## English 234: Survey of African American Literature

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Welcome to English 234! This course introduces students to the dominant themes, aesthetic concerns, and political contexts that constitute a *specifically* African American literary tradition that has itself been vital in shaping the identities and histories of the people of African descent living in the United States. We will survey texts across genres (novels, poetry, drama, and short stories) and historical periods to ensure a well rounded understanding of the breadth of the African American literary tradition. We will pay particular attention to the historically fraught (but also electrifying) relationship between "race" and writing. Through close-reading and contextual analysis, we will explore how African American literature has long been (and continues to be) a site where the struggle over self-definition takes place, where African Americans use tools historically denied them (literacy and writing) to fashion racial identities in their own terms.

- What is "literary history" and "literary criticism"? (What do English majors **study** and **do**?)
- What historical, political, and material contexts have been central to shaping and animating African American literary history?
- What are the major periods, authors, and aesthetic debates in African American literary history?

### REQUIRED READING:

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845)
- Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)
- Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1947)
- LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman* (1971)
- Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
- A collection of shorter pieces on Blackboard



## STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

By the end of this class, my students should be able to:

- **Identify, differentiate** and **explain** the major historical periods and aesthetic concerns in African-American literature produced after 1845.
- **Conduct** library research in the discipline of literary studies.
- **Develop and present** critical interpretations of literary texts through formal academic writing unique to the field of English studies.
- **Collaborate** in small groups in self-directed, multimedia research projects.

While a major goal of this course is to introduce you to an underrepresented community of American writers, additional learning objectives have influenced the design of this course. One of the most important of these is the art of **critical thinking**, a skill whose utility extends far beyond the classroom. Most people define critical thinking as the ability to identify, understand, and solve problems by asking informed questions and exercising creative and reflective reasoning to answer them. In literary studies, critical thinking is what we're doing when we construct an interpretation of a text. Here, we're literally identifying and solving "problems" or "tensions" we see evident in any given literary text. This requires not simply intelligence, which you *all* have, but also putting in enough time, forethought, and patience to give yourself time to write, think, and write again.

## COURSE POLICIES:

**LATE ASSIGNMENTS:** In-class assignments cannot be made up for either full or partial credit. In-class assignments include free-writes and small group exercises, which I regularly assign throughout the quarter to break up long lectures and encourage student collaboration. Obviously, the more of these in-class assignments you miss, the lower your participation will be by the end of the term.

**READING PREPAREDNESS:** To get the most out of lecture and small group activities, you must keep up with the reading (see Schedule for specifics). Students must also bring all reading assignments to class, including the shorter readings from Blackboard (BB), *on the days in which we discuss those readings.*

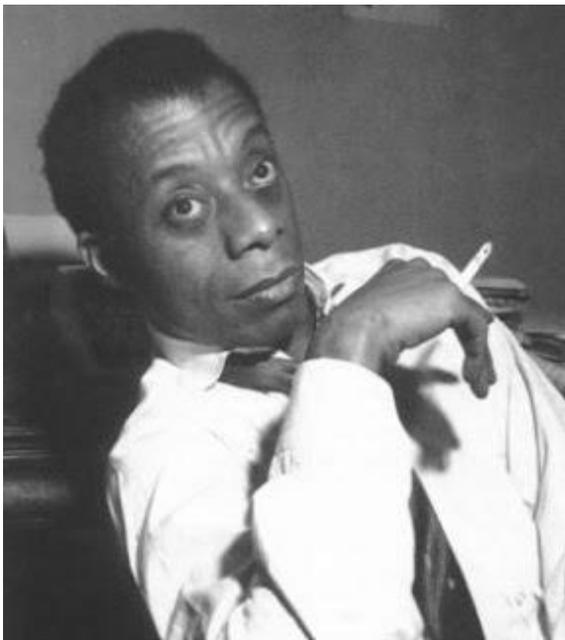
**PLAGIARISM:** The English department considers plagiarism a grave breach of intellectual integrity. Plagiarism involves the appropriation and use of someone else's ideas or words as one's own. All definitions, terminology, concepts, and patterns of organization taken from an outside source must be identified and documented in any essay or exam students write-- whether it be for this department or any other. Facts of general knowledge (such as the place



and date of an author's birth, honors granted during his or her lifetime, the titles and dates of published works, etc.) need not be documented. However, facts that are not in the area of general knowledge must be credited to the source. Ideas, interpretations, terms, and patterns of organization taken from an outside source may be either directly quoted (in which case the exact words should be placed in quotation marks) or paraphrased. For a more detailed summary of how the university defines and deals with plagiarism, please visit [this site](#).

**EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY:** Western is committed to equal opportunity and a campus environment free of harassment and discrimination based on race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or veteran status. If you feel you have been harassed or treated unfairly by either an instructor or another student, please consult a faculty member or call the Equal Opportunity Office (650-3307). Visit <http://www.wvu.edu/eoo/> for more information.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** Western is committed to creating an equitable and non-discriminatory learning environment, which includes accommodating students with disabilities. Students are responsible for obtaining appropriate documentation to meet their special needs. Requests for accommodation or assistance should be directed to Disability Resources for Students located in Old Main 110; additional information is available at: <http://www.wvu.edu/depts/drs/> Telephone: 650-3083 / Email: [drs@wvu.edu](mailto:drs@wvu.edu)



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## **GRADED REQUIREMENTS:**

**ATTENDANCE (10%):** Regular attendance is mandatory and constitutes ten-percent of your overall grade. Although at times I will monitor attendance using a sign-up sheet, I will mainly do so through various in-class activities -- both individual and group -- that I will collect and record that same day. You are allowed three "free" absences, meaning you can miss three sections without penalty. I do not distinguish between "excused" and "unexcused" absences, so if you miss class, I do need neither explanation nor documentation as an absence is an absence, and more than three will impact your grade (at least, ten percent of it).

MASH-UP PROJECT (15%): This multimedia semi-creative *group* project will be entirely self-directed: ***your group will be responsible for defining its project, dividing the labor involved in its production, presenting the final product to the class, and completing a (blind) evaluation of each other and of the group as a whole.*** I will use your group's self-evaluation and my own evaluation of your mash-up, to determine your collective project grade. I use the [CATME](#) software, if you're interested.

5th HOUR READING RESPONSES (25%): Throughout the quarter students will have several opportunities to demonstrate learning and comprehension through informal or "low stakes" writing assignments. The goal of these reading responses is to provide students frequent opportunities to engage the texts and demonstrate critical thinking in writing. All reading responses should include textual reference (either through direct quotation and/or paraphrase) and should demonstrate thoughtful reading and insightful (and inventive) critical reasoning. Consult the schedule for Reading Response deadlines.

MIDTERM and FINAL EXAM (50%): Students will complete a midterm and final exam, which together constitute 50% of the final grade. Exams will either be in-class, take-home, or a combination of both.