

Brief Course Outline

Course Title: Seminar in American Literature

Course Number and Section

ENGLISH

4472F 550

Instructor Name(s): Dr. Blanchette

Instructor Email(s): sarah.blanchette@uwo.ca

Disclaimer: Information in the brief course outline is subject to change. The syllabus posted on OWL Brightspace is the official and authoritative source of information for the course.

Course Description:

The most infamous line of the Declaration of Independence sets up a quintessential paradox within the American imaginary that all people “are created equal,” and, yet, that citizens also possess the “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” While equality and liberty might seemingly appear to be mutually compatible (and desirable) goals, this seminar examines influential 20th century American novels that take up the fight for equality and the dangers of unfettered liberty. It will examine the ways in which rhetoric of liberty has shifted from Patrick Henry’s notorious call to “Give me liberty, or give me death!” in 1775 during the Revolutionary War to Malcolm X’s declaration that 1964 was the year of “the Ballot or the bullet” to former President Donald Trump’s claim in 2020 that “Republicans are the party of Liberty, Equality, and Justice for All.” How is discourse of liberty used to both promote civil rights’ agendas and to counteract them? This seminar explores the tension between equality and liberty by considering novels that are both catalysts for, and products of, the major socio-political transformations of the 20th century in the United States, including the women’s liberation movement, the Harlem Renaissance, the gay liberation movement, the Native American Renaissance, and the Mad movement. Students will be introduced to some of the major thematic concerns of American literature, as well as study the formal elements of the novel as a medium, in order to develop an individualized research project.

Learning Outcomes: one outcome per entry

- Closely examine the medium and formal elements of the novel
- Study canonical American authors to understand their impact on the American literary tradition and be introduced to major literary movements (ex. naturalism)
- Explore key themes of liberty/freedom and the tensions between liberty and equality as it relates to American ideology from a wide variety of positionalities and perspectives
- Recognize the relationship between literary texts and major socio-political transformations of the 20th century, as well as how these texts remain relevant in the contemporary moment
- Practice articulating your close-reading and research of texts with peers and engaging in respectful dialogue about disparate interpretations
- Execute a research agenda from start to finish developing transferrable skills for project management

- Develop your critical voice as a researcher and early scholar, who can meaningfully add to ongoing theoretical debates and conversations
- Perform a professional research presentation, developing oral communication skills
- Complete a formal MLA-style research-based essay on a self-directed topic

Textbooks and Course Materials:

Required Textbooks:

Louise Erdrich’s The Night Watchman (\$22)

Nella Larsen’s Quicksand (\$16)

John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath (\$26)

Viet Thanh Nguyen’s The Sympathizer (\$26)

Toni Morrison’s Beloved (\$23)

William S. Burroughs's Naked Lunch (\$26)

Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (\$21)

James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room (\$22)

The Leavers instead of Viet Thanh Nguyen's The Sympathizer

*The newest edition is not required, and students are encouraged to buy books secondhand.

Methods of Evaluation: one assignment per entry

Assignment	Due Date mm/dd/yy	Weight - %
Participation		20
Seminar		25
Research Proposal	10/30/2026	5
Peer Review	26/11/2026	10
Research Presentation	12/04/2026	10
Research Essay	12/11/2026	30

Friday, August 14, 2026

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In-course Costs \$182.00

For Textbooks and Course Materials (below), you are required to include the cost of each textbook or other learning material.

Note whether there are any restrictions that would prevent a student from using a second-hand copy. Here is some suggested text:

- Required textbook: [author, title, edition, publisher, date]. Cost: [insert amount].
 - Or include the weblink of the textbook’s publisher site that includes the cost information.
- Students need to purchase this edition. Second-hand or older editions will not be sufficient.

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OR Students are welcome to purchase second-hand or earlier editions of this textbook.

- This course has an optional field trip that costs [insert amount].
- This course has a required field component that costs [insert amount].

In solidarity with the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Chonnonton peoples on whose traditional treaty and unceded territories this course is shared.