

**English 4472F: American Literature Seminar**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Century American Novels**  
**Topic: Give Me Liberty, Or Give Me Death!**

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**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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 their own individualized research project on a topic of their choosing. Potential authors to be included on the syllabus include, but are not limited to, Kate Chopin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, James Baldwin, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Viet Thanh Nguyen.

