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English 543, Studies in Nineteenth-Century American Texts: Reading the Antebellum City
University of Rhode Island, Spring 2012
Thurs., 3:00-5:45, Swan Hall, Rm. 111

* Please feel free to contact me through e-mail or else by phone at my office if you have questions about this course.

From the course description: **ENGL 543**: Studies in Nineteenth-Century American Texts, 4 credits. Literary and nonliterary cultural texts, genres, and topics of the Western Hemisphere.

Course Objectives and Goals:

With the appearance in 1941 of scholar F. O. Matthiessen's seminal study *American Renaissance*, critics commonly came to apply the term "Renaissance" to the outpouring of "great" literary works that appeared in the United States during the momentous decade of the 1850s. It is no less common today to see Matthiessen's famous phrase applied in ways that he might not have anticipated. On the one hand, some would extend the term "Renaissance" to the general period of U.S. literary production that occurred from 1820 to 1865, the latter date marking the end of the nation's Civil War. On the other hand, revisionist scholars would expand Matthiessen's influential canon of elite artists to include

additional “serious” and alternative “popular” writers whose very presence in or near the American canon must qualify how we define “literature,” let alone literary “greatness,” at least according to Matthiessen’s own formalist terms.

In this spirit of revision, our course revisits the American Renaissance on urban terms. There is little about Renaissance that ostensibly lends itself to such a citified reading. Indeed, Matthiessen’s vested aesthetic interest in what he names an “organic” literary form suggests to our minds “country” as much or more as it suggests “city.” And yet Matthiessen’s Renaissance coincides precisely with the United States’ dramatic urban turn during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. We accordingly proceed from the assumption that the U.S. city provided more than a mere backdrop for period literature. Rather, urban America instigated the nation’s Renaissance. A complex city helped to shape and sustain a complex Renaissance, even as a vibrant urban diversity laid constant siege to whatever formal organicism (and organic formalism) there was to be found in period letters.

In all fairness to Matthiessen, his complementary (if underdeveloped) interest in what he styles the “possibilities of democracy,” as embodied for him in an emerging American nation, prepared the groundwork for the lively, cultural studies, and often implicitly urban-oriented reading of Renaissance that has pertained in recent times. Matthiessen was prepared in his far-sighted progressiveness to seek the seeds of Renaissance at the grass roots, as it were. We will follow his lead in this respect, even as we shift our focus (and our metaphors) from country grass to city streets in our wide-ranging explorations of a demotic, sidewalk Renaissance that would have been unthinkable outside of its contemporary urban context.

Course content is decidedly interdisciplinary. Although we focus on literary depictions and scholarly conceptions of the antebellum American city, we will supplement our examinations of the written city with any number of alternate cultural artifacts, or "texts." These include the built environment, period paintings, engravings, stage and sidewalk performances, and photographs. Using these interpretive tools, we will interrogate the strategies of urban representation employed by our forbears, some 150 years before our own metropolitan moment.

To summarize, we will consider the following this term:

1. The various forms and functions of urban American writing.

2. Alternate urban representational forms, with special emphasis on the physical and visual city.

3. Theories of "reading" the American metropolis.

4. The complex connection between urban literature and urban society.

5. Urban American diversity, as measured by the dynamic relations of race, class, region, gender, and ethnicity that have characterized the American metropolis.

Instructional Methods:

Class meetings will entail topical-contextual lectures, as well as focused seminar discussions. Major graded assignments include a semi-formal oral report on a supplemental reading assignment, as well as a short "professional" talk on your own research, to be delivered before you submit a substantial research essay at semester's end.

Course readings will range from works of fiction and academic criticism to contemporary journalism and cultural commentary. Weekly topics for discussion include the forms and functions of both conventional and "subversive" American Renaissance writings, the semiotics of city-living, city-mysteries, urban constructions of gender, as well as race, riot, social class, urban habitat, and urban humor, among other diverse subjects. Selected primary works will draw from the prose and poetry of a variety of authors – some familiar, some not.

Students can expect a graduate seminar setting for classroom meetings. Work loads will be sizeable but reasonable, and divided equally among students and instructor.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Penguin Great Ideas), ISBN: 0141042486

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Norton Critical Edition, 3rd), ISBN: 0393930904

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe* (Penguin, 2006), ISBN: 0143039911

George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (U. of California, 1990), ISBN: 0520067223

George Lippard, *The Quaker City* (UMass, 1995), ISBN: 0870239716

Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall* (Rutgers UP, 1986), ISBN: 0813511682

Herman Melville: *Pierre, Israel Potter*, et al. (Library of America, 1985), ISBN: 0940450240

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* [1855] (Dover, 2007), ISBN: 0486456765

Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (Nabu, 2010), ISBN: 1173083162

F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* [1941] (Oxford UP, 1968), ISBN: 019500759X

David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* [1989] (Oxford UP, 2011), ISBN: 0199782849

COURSE POLICIES, ASSIGNMENTS, ETC.

COURSE POLICIES:

GRADING: I grade with a standard grading scale: 100-90=A; 89-80=B; 79-70=C; 69- 60=D; and 59-0=failing. I will grade each assignment and exam on a letter-grade system. *Each assignment will have its own criteria for assessment*.

ATTENDANCE: As graduate students, you will want and need to make a special effort each week to be here – in body, in mind, and in spirit. Please hold yourselves to the highest of professional standards throughout the semester.

PARTICIPATION: a full 20% of your final grade (see below) derives from your weekly contributions to class. Practically speaking, this means:

1. You must come to class, and you must arrive and leave on time.

2. You will bring a copy of each day's assigned reading. If you do not bring a copy of your reading, you may be counted absent.

3. You must demonstrate a positive level of commitment to the course. I expect *each* of you to make a meaningful contribution to *each* class meeting.

4. Do not just talk; also listen. Demonstrating a proper regard for *mutual* exchange will ensure that we all have our say, and so further the "conversational" aims of our course.

   For my part, I need to set our agenda, and keep class meetings interesting and edifying. But I can only fulfill my responsibilities if you fulfill yours. Let this be our classroom contract.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Graded work for the semester includes the following assignments:

10% Oral Report
10% Conversations (see below)
10% Research Report
50% Research Essay (15-20 pages)
20% Participation (attendance, classroom contributions, and caring)

CONVERSATIONS, CLARIFIED +
ORAL/RESEARCH REPORTS

Beginning in the third week of the semester, we will commence a series of "conversations" that revolve around various pairs of authors, ideas, and/or concepts. These "conversations" (to be explored in both primary and secondary readings) will revolve around such general categories as follows: literary form and formlessness; genre, gender, and race; feeling/affect and affectation; and the cultural politics of interpretation. You might consider these dialogues to be a kind of role-playing exercise, in which you assume the part of an author or scholar as you contest some socio-literary issue of consequence with a counterpart whose views may differ from your own. You are not to "win" or "lose" your conversation. Rather, you and your partner are to conduct your conversation in such a way that you together help illuminate the core ideas expressed in our texts. To that end, I will circulate a sign-up sheet at the beginning of the semester. Each of you will converse officially at least once during the term, but you may be called on to fill in informally from week to week. Rest assured that I will prompt you and your partner with one or more talking points when the day of your discussion arrives. Once that discussion is underway in earnest, your classmates and I will join sides as we sustain the debate. Note that your performance on this conversational occasion, in which you must strive to embody the *position* that you have chosen to represent, will account for 10% of your semester's grade.

More straightforward are the TWO oral reports that you will deliver this semester. The first of these entails a

supplemental text that you will read and interpret for your classmates. You need to outline the work's major argument and supporting evidence, before you relate this particular text to our assigned general reading for the week in question. Take 15-20 minutes (no more, please) to establish the premise of your selected text, explaining how it complements, complicates, and/or contradicts our shared readings. Your second oral report involves your personal research project for the course. On this occasion, to occur at the close of the semester, you will share the scope and tentative findings of your "Renaissance" research with your classmates. Do not to memorize your talk, as if delivering a formal speech. Instead, use notes to prompt yourself with talking points during the 8-10 minutes of your discussion.

ACADEMIC HONESTY: All written work that you submit must be your own. If you consult other sources (class readings, articles or books from the library, articles available through internet databases, Web sites, etc.), these sources MUST be properly documented, or you will be charged with plagiarism and will receive a failing grade for the assignment in question. In some cases, this might result in your failing the course as well. If you have any doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, visit the following Web site:
http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/hc/plagiarism.html

DISABILITY NOTICE: If you have a documented disability, please contact me early in the semester so that we may arrange reasonable accommodations to support your success in this course. Also be sure to take advantage of the resources available at Disability Services for Students, Office of Student Life, 330 Memorial Union, (401) 874-2098.

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COURSE SCHEDULE

Note: This schedule is tentative. If we need more time to complete a task or pursue a point of interest, we will do so, within reason. **You remain responsible for all class meetings, assignments, and announced changes that may occur.**

*** = Electronic Reading, available as email attachment from me, or else …**

1-26: American Renaissance, and the Political Ritual of Re-interpretation

SECONDARY READING: Frederick C. Crews, "Whose American Renaissance?" *New York Review of Books* (Oct. 27, 1988)*

UNIT 1: Emerson & Thoreau – Literary Form & Formlessness

2-2: Classic Renaissance, Renaissance Classics

PRIMARY READING: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836)

SECONDARY READING: F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, pp. 3-55, 133-40.

REPORT: Randall Fuller, "Aesthetics, Politics, Homosexuality: F. O. Matthiessen and the Tragedy of the American Scholar," *American Literature* 79:2 (Spring 2007): 363-91.

2-9: Beneath the American Renaissance

PRIMARY READING: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, "Economy" + "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," pp. 1-70

SECONDARY READING$_1$: David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, pp. 3-11, 169-210

SECONDARY READING$_2$: F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, pp. 153-178

REPORT: "An Enterprise of Self-Culture in a Culture of Enterprise," from Leonard Neufeldt, *The Economist* (1989): 23-52

DEBATE: Matthiessen v. Reynolds

2-16: Renaissance, Ruptured

PRIMARY READING: *Walden*, 71-224.

REPORT$_1$: Leo Marx, from *The Machine in the Garden* (1964): pp. 3-5, 11-16, 242-65.

REPORT$_2$: Robert A. Gross, "Transcendentalism and Urbanism: Concord, Boston, and the Wider World," *Journal of American Studies* 18:3 (1984): 361-81.

REPORT$_3$: Robert Fanuzzi, "Thoreau's Urban Imagination," *American Literature* 68:2 (June 1996): 321-46.

DEBATE: city v. country

UNIT 2: Urban American Renaissance

2-23: City-Mysteries

PRIMARY READING: Nathaniel Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832)*; Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841); and George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light* (1850): Chapter 1, "Broadway at Evening," Chapter 5, "A Night Ramble," and Chapter 14, "Saturday Night"

SECONDARY READING$_1$: Stuart M. Blumin, Introduction

to *New York by Gas-Light* (1990): 1-63.
SECONDARY READING$_2$: John Kasson, "Reading the City: The Semiotics of Everyday Life," from *Rudeness and Civility* (1990): 70-111.*
REPORT: Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846)
DEBATE: high v. low

3-1: Radical Renaissance
PRIMARY READING: George Lippard, *The Quaker City* (1844)
SECONDARY READING: David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, pp. 441-483
REPORT: Samuel Otter, Introduction + "The Fiction of Riot," from *Philadelphia Stories* (2010), pp. 3-24, 182-201
DEBATE: camp v. "classic"

3-8: City of Women
PRIMARY READING: Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall* (1854)
REPORT$_1$: Christine Stansell, "Women and Men," from *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (1987), pp. 76-102
REPORT$_2$: Nina Baym, "The Form and Ideology of Woman's Fiction," from *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978), pp. 22-50.
DEBATE: women v. men

3-15: NO CLASS, SPRING BREAK

3-22: Urban Discursive (Un)convention
PRIMARY READING: Herman Melville, *Pierre* (1852)
REPORT$_1$: Sacvan Bercovitch, Preface + Intro., *The*

American Jeremiad (1977), pp. xi-30.

REPORT$_2$: Gillian Brown, "Chapter 5: Anti-sentimentalism and Authorship in *Pierre*," from *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992), pp. 135-69.

REPORT$_3$: Catharine Maria Sedgwick, "New Year's Day" (1835)*
[http://www.merrycoz.org/voices/token/1836/36TOKEN.HTM#11]

DEBATE: insane v. not-so-insane

UNIT 3: Urban Perspectives, Poetry, Comedy, Philosophy

3-29: Imaging the City

PRIMARY READING$_1$: Melville, "The Two Temples" (1854) + "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855)

PRIMARY READING$_2$: "New-York Daguerreotyped," *Putnam's* (April 1853): 353-68.*

PRIMARY READING$_3$: Fashion Plates from *Godey's Lady's Book*, ed. Sarah Josepha Hale, ca. 1850s*

REPORT$_1$: David Henkin, "Words on the Street: Bills, Boards, and Banners," from *City Reading* (1998), pp. 69-100.

REPORT$_2$: Dennis Berthold, "Class Acts: The Astor Place Riots and Melville's 'The Two Temples,'" *American Literature* 71:3 (1999): 429-61.

DEBATE: seeing v. saying – REPORT on Paul Jay, "Picture This: Literary Theory and the Study of Visual Culture" (2000)*

4-5: Urban Poetics

PRIMARY READING$_1$: Whitman, Preface + "Song of Myself," from *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

PRIMARY READING$_2$: Emily Dickinson, "I heard a fly

buzz when I died" (Johnson, poem #465)
SECONDARY READING$_1$: F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, pp. 517-31
SECONDARY READING$_2$: David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, pp. 309-334
REPORT: Alan Trachtenberg, "Illustrious Americans," from *Reading American Photographs*, 21-70.

4-12: Funny Metropolitan Philosophy
PRIMARY READING: Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1858)
REPORT$_1$: Holmes, "The Chambered Nautilus" (1848),* plus Dorothy C. Broaddus, "Introduction: Rhetoric & Culture," from *Genteel Rhetoric: Writing High Culture in Nineteenth-Century Boston* (1999), pp. 1-17.
REPORT$_2$: Peter Gibian, "The Conversation of a Culture: Strange Powers of Speech," from *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (2001), pp. 15-60.
DEBATE: funny v. not so funny

4-19: Research Reports I
½ the class

4-26: Research Reports II
½ the class, + conclusions & course evaluations

Final Drafts, Research Papers: due (in MS Word or PDF) via email attachment on Sakai by noon Thursday, May 3

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