Course Description

In this course, we’re going to read treatises, plays, poems, stories, novels, and autobiographies that have been produced over the past 500+ years, asking, over and over, as we go, this slippery question: What is “American literature”?

This devil of a query raises all sorts of intellectual problems: What does it mean for a person or a thing to be “American”? What makes literature “American”? What makes writing “literature”? Is there an American literary tradition? An American culture? Are there lots?

These questions are both personal and political. They concern the way that writers and their audiences have defined themselves as political subjects, as individual persons, as communities; they concern the way that writers and audiences have defined their collective past and their collective futures. The stakes of these issues have always been very, very high.

In order to encounter these questions, we’ll use employ two strategies. The first of these is chronological. In two units – one proceeding from Contact (1492) to the end of the American Civil War (1865); the other from the end of the American Civil War until the present day (2017) – we will consider literary works in their social and historical contexts. We’ll also use close reading to investigate the way that that work of literature functions, aesthetically and rhetorically.

Our second strategy will be intertextual. We’re going to take on that strange and persistent White Whale of American Literary Studies: the concept of the Great American Novel. Over the course of this semester, you will read – slowly, and carefully, and with a very small group of colleagues – a long novel that’s a contender for this most prestigious classification, investigating how it intersects with the tropes, ideas, language, metaphors, and problems of the American literary texts that we read.
together as a class. Through this intertextual investigation, you'll form your own theory of what “American literature” means, and you'll show us – with expertise and insight – the new questions, and problems, and insights, that your unique investigation into this problem will raise.

**Course Goals**
This course is dedicated to the literary study of the multiple traditions of American literature. As such, our aims cover a number of domains: (1) the specific knowledge you'll gain about the things we're studying (novels, poems, literary periods, form, language, genre); (2) the specific intellectual practices that constitute “literary study” – in particular, the research, writing, and critical thinking skills used within this discipline; (3) the more generalizable skills that constitute effective, university-level work. These intertwine, and they all have applications beyond the classroom. Here's a breakdown of what these knowledges and skills look like for this class.

- **Become familiar with** major genres of and movements in American literature (including Transcendentalism, realism, modernism, etc);
- **Become familiar with** major historical factors influencing American literature and culture (including First Great Awakening, Civil War, Reconstruction, etc);
- **Analyze** literary works as historical and cultural productions as well as imaginative works of art (which means recognizing when literature was produced);
- **Recognize** that language can contain multiple meanings (or “significations”), hypothesize about these significations as they appear in literature, evaluate conflicting interpretations to determine which is more meaningful, and employ textual and historical evidence to give examples that justify why one “reading” is more convincing than another. These skills are sometimes called “close reading”;
- **Formulate** complex and novel questions, investigate those questions by reading, understanding, and analyzing literature and scholarship, evaluate your hypothesis, and defend your ideas using examples;
- **Make significant, analytical connections** between texts;
- **Engage with** the ideas of others in meaningful ways. This involves interpreting arguments; evaluating the meaning, value, and application of ideas to a particular subject; summarizing accurately; debating convincingly; attributing ethically; quoting effectively; collaborating successfully;
- **Express and explain** ideas through conversation and speech;
- **Illustrate** ideas visually;
- **Express, explain, and argue** in writing;
- **Revise.** That means reviewing your own work, listening to the feedback of others, reflecting on that feedback and on your own writing, choosing which changes to make, modifying your prose, reorganizing when necessary, explaining your ideas with more clarity, outlining, and rewriting efficiently to enhance your ideas and your writing.

**Discussion Guidelines**
Class discussion serves a lot of aims. It’s a place to talk over and, so, clarify concepts that seem murky. It’s a place to express your delight in the reading, or your disagreement with it. It’s a place to ask questions about stuff you don’t understand, and also to ask questions about things you think you do understand and want to push to the next level. It’s a place to debate philosophy and literature, and to debate with philosophers and writers. It’s a place to explore ideas, and collaborate, and also to disagree in ways that are ethical and safe.
To make this work, you must - we must - on the most deep-down level, respect every person in this class through our words and our actions. Keep in mind that others may be of a different class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, or ability set than you, and make a pact with yourself to refuse to hurt others through your words or actions. Why not go further, and make a pact to support your colleagues' thriving?

This pact, to respect and honor and help to thrive, enables the other great thing about discussion. Discussion is your chance to be wrong. We’ll all be swimming into some uncharted territory – this is the nature of lively discourse – so we will all experience moments of panic, of flailing, and, most excitingly, of error. I ask that you boldly accept the chance to make mistakes, and that you give your classmates the chance to be boldly wrong as well. To coin a new and somewhat awkward phrase, it’s only by risking being boldly wrong that we can ever be boldly right.

**Reading Expectations for This Class**

You’ll be expected to read somewhere in the neighborhood of 25 pages a night, including the weekend. (Since we hold class every other day during the week, that ends up looking like 50 pages of reading per class session.) Sometimes, you’ll be asked to read a little more than this; sometimes, you’ll be asked to read a little less. We’ll check in about pacing a few times this semester.

This reading has two parts: the reading you’ll be doing for each individual class session (usually about 8-12 pages a night), plus the reading you’ll be doing for your Great American Novel project, with the other members of your group.

A few tips for staying on top of this reading: (1) Read every day. Make some leisure time for this, and don’t try to cram all the pages into the night or morning before class. (2) Read at odd hours. Read between classes. Read at the bar while you wait for your friend to arrive. Read before you fall asleep. Carry your Great American Novel everywhere, and turn to it instead of your phone. (3) Read ahead. If you ever find yourself with some extra prep time, do your future self a favor.

**Attendance**

Attendance is required. Our class meetings are rich and compact and important; any absence will put you significantly behind the rest of the class. For this reason, your final grade will fall by 1/3 of a grade for every absence after three. (An A would become an A-, an A- would become a B+, etc.) **If you miss six classes (or more), you will be unable to pass the course. If you’re 15 minutes late or more, that counts as an absence for that day.**

In the case of illness or emergency, please contact me as far in advance of the class as possible so that I know you’re still in tune with the class.

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1 This section’s here on your syllabus so that you’ll know how much time you’ll need to dedicate to your reading, so you can make smart choices about your prep schedule. However, communicating these expectations might have the accidental effect of suggesting that the reading for this class is a slog - a regrettable thing you’ve got to trudge your way through while sweating and weeping. It isn’t. The crazy thing about literature is that it does all this work (asking us hard questions, helping us navigate the political and ethical and emotional dimensions of our lives…), and it does this by producing *enjoyment*. The “enjoyment” factor is nowhere close to the only thing that matters, but it is part of literature’s premise. So, here’s to *enjoying* the reading – even when the enjoyment is fraught and complex…
Class participation figures significantly in your course grade. I therefore ask that you make sure that you bring not only your body and your books, but also your mind and spirit to class with you. In other words, don’t merely come to class; be present.

Assignments: Due Dates
All assignments should be submitted on the due date in the format (hard copy or Microsoft Word Document) that is specifically indicated by the assignment. Late work will only be accepted if an extension has been requested and granted at least 24 hours prior to the class meeting at which the paper is due. If you neglect to show your work on the day that it is due (or, in some cases, to present it in your feedback meeting), you will not receive credit for this work. Plan accordingly. If you expect that you will not be able to meet a deadline, do not disappear into the night. Rather, consult me as far in advance as possible to discuss the situation.

Plagiarism
The College and I expect that all papers turned in will be your original work. This means that the ideas, arguments, and words that appear on the page are yours and yours alone. If your paper includes ideas or words that are not your own, you must cite your source using MLA guidelines.

The term “original” also refers to your submission. A paper submitted for credit for this class should not be submitted for another class. Plagiarism of any kind will result in a failing grade in the course, and may lead to probation and expulsion from the College. We’ll be talking about protocols of citation throughout the course. If you are unsure or have any questions about plagiarism, please contact me.

Writing Resources
The Brainard Writing Center offers writing workshop services free of charge for Carthage students. I strongly suggest taking advantage of this resource. You can make an appointment with a Writing Fellow on their website, https://www.carthage.edu/writing-center/appointments/. Of course, I will also be available during office hours, or by appointment, to discuss any issues regarding the class materials, your progress, or your writing assignments, and I strongly encourage you to come to office hours if you have any questions at all about the class or your work.

Tutoring Resources
The College offers free tutoring to all Carthage students. You can find an academic coach to help you develop better time management skills and more effective study habits. You can also book a peer tutor for more course-directed assistance. You don’t need to be in dire straits to use these resources – though you can! You can also come here to help your good strategies to become even more effective. (Even Usain Bolt has a coach.) Here’s their website: https://www.carthage.edu/tutoring/. Here’s how you can request a coach: https://www.carthage.edu/tutoring/academic-coaching/request-a-coach/. Here’s how you can request a tutor: https://www.carthage.edu/tutoring/request/.

Counseling Resources
Carthage counseling services are terrific, and free to Carthage Students. Their website is https://www.carthage.edu/campus-life/health-counseling/counseling-services, and their phone number is (262) 551-5777. They are open M-F 8:30a – 5:00p. They can help with issues ranging from writer’s block to general malaise to transitioning to college.
Resources for Students with Disabilities
If you are a student with a disability and would like to discuss special academic accommodations, please contact me and register with the Diane Schowalter at the Center for Student Success. Her number is (262) 551-5802. Here’s a link to more information: https://www.carthage.edu/student-success/students-with-disabilities/.

Grading
To write and think well, we need to return, revisit, re-envision, reconsider, and revise our ideas and the way we frame them. (Walt Whitman, a man egotistical enough to call himself “a cosmos,” only wrote one book of poems. But he revised that book six times.) The more we return and reflect, the better our writing becomes. And the more we practice revision, the sharper our analytical skills will be.

For these reasons, this class uses a version of portfolio grading. This means that you’ll have a number of chances to develop your ideas in writing, to return to your ideas and revise them, to share your work with others, and to receive feedback. You’ll have many opportunities to update, extend, and revise your work. My feedback on your writing will not be a meditation on what could have been, but will suggest how you can (in reality!) revise your ideas and writing as you proceed. Thus, much of your grade in this class will be based on revision of your work, submitted in a final course project (the “Critical Edition”) at the end of the semester.

Class participation
Class participation will be based on (1) your active contributions to group work and class discussion, (2) your focus and attentiveness in class, (3) your conscientious, active, and respectful engagement with the work and ideas of others (this includes listening as much as responding), (4) your punctuality and attendance, (5) your participation in conferences and visits to office hours, (6) your preparation for class as reflected in your facility with assigned reading - and, when you’re still struggling to understand, your preparation to pose informed questions about the reading.

Assignments and Grade Distribution
Great American Novel Project:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Edition</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly Report</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>G.A.N. Project Total</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical R/W Drafts</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Journal</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
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Major Due Dates
Each of our two unit calendars contains a complete calendar of assignments, including smaller project deadlines and readings. Your G.A.N. assignment contains a reading calendar for your long novel. The list below offers the major due dates for class projects so that you can plan your schedule.
Every Monday and Wednesday..................Reading Journal
Every Friday..........................................Weekly Work Report (for G.A.N. Project)
Wednesday, March 15..............................Midterm Exam
Week 4 (2/20), 6 (3/10), 11 (4/12)......... Critical Reading / Writing Assignments
Weeks 12-13 (April 17-26).......................G.A.N. Presentations
Critical Edition Final Draft.....................May 15
Final Exam Week: May 15-17

Syllabus may be subject to revision at the Professor’s discretion.