

HL2038 / Thursdays, 14:30-16:30 / HSS Auditorium  
Introduction to American Literature  
Professor Christopher Trigg / [cptrigg@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:cptrigg@ntu.edu.sg)



### Description

In the second volume of his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin describes his attempt to achieve “moral perfection.” Having achieved a degree of temperance, frugality, and sincerity, Franklin attempts to acquire a sense of humility. Here he admits failure as regards “the *reality* of this virtue”, but adds that he managed to cultivate the “*appearance*” of it.

In this course, we’ll examine the way in which American literary works represent and facilitate personal transformation. Reading a broad range of texts, dating from the colonial era to the present day, we’ll examine different conceptions of self-construction and self-performance. Many of our chosen works will describe moments of conversion or decisive change, from Thoreau’s resolution to resist peacefully his government’s support of slavery to the narrator’s decision, in James Weldon Johnson’s novel, to forgo his black identity and live as an “Ex-Colored Man.” Our survey will conclude with a consideration of autobiographical writings by Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Here we’ll discuss how American leaders often feel obliged to structure their life-stories according to the popular tropes of conversion and self-creation.

### Required Texts

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Nathanael West, *Day of the Locust*

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

(available for purchase at the Campus Bookshop; alternatively try [Books Actually](#), 9 Yong Siak Street, Tiong Bahru, 168645)

Course Reader (available for purchase at HSS print room)

### Assessment

Participation and Preparation 10%

Short paper 10%

Term paper 30%

Final exam 50%

### Late Penalties

Late work submitted without an approved extension will be penalized one half-mark per day late – an A paper submitted one day late would drop to an A-, etc.

### Plagiarism

Please see the Division of English’s statement on plagiarism [here](#).

## Lecture Schedule

1. 12<sup>th</sup> January

Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* I-II  
Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*.

2. 19<sup>th</sup> January

Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle”; “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”; “The Devil and Tom Walker.”

3. 26<sup>th</sup> January

Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience.”  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance.”

4. 2<sup>nd</sup> February

Walt Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “Come up from the Fields Father,” “When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom’d”

5. 9<sup>th</sup> February

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

6. 16<sup>th</sup> February ——— **short paper due**

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

7. 23<sup>rd</sup> February

Emily Dickinson, Poems 199, 303, 656, 1072, 764, 670  
Margaret Fuller, “The Great Lawsuit.”

Recess -----

8. 9<sup>th</sup> March

James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

9. 16<sup>th</sup> March

Meredith Wilson, *The Music Man* (film).

10. 23<sup>rd</sup> March

Nathanael West, *Day of the Locust*.

11. 30<sup>th</sup> March

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.

12. 6<sup>th</sup> April

Sui Sin Far, “Mrs. Spring Fragrance;” Philip Roth, “Defender of the Faith.”

13. 13<sup>th</sup> April ——— **term paper due**

Barack Obama, excerpts from *Dreams from my Father*.