

HL1006 / Wednesdays, 14:30-16:30 / HSS Auditorium
Introduction to American Literature
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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)

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. 17th January

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

2. 24th January

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

3. 31st January

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

4. 7th February

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

5. 14th February

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

6. 21st February ——— **short paper due**

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

7. 28th February

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

Recess -----

8. 14th March

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

9. 21st March

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

10. 28th March

Nathanael West, *Day of the Locust*.

11. 4th April

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.

12. 11th April

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

13. 18th April ——— **term paper due**

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