

HL1006 / Thursdays, 10:30-12:30 / SHHK--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 President Barack Obama and the tweets of President 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 NTU Booklink)

All other texts (marked with a *) are in the Course Reader (available for purchase at SHHK / 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 School of Humanities’ statement on plagiarism [here](#).

Lecture Schedule

1. 16th January

Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* I-II*

Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative**

2. 23rd January

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

3. 30th January

Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”*

4. 6th February

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

5. 13th February

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

6. 20th February ——— **short paper due**

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

7. 27th February

Emily Dickinson, Poems 199,* 303,* 656,* 1072,* 764,* 670*

Margaret Fuller, “The Great Lawsuit”*

Recess -----

8. 12th March

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

9. 19th March

Meredith Wilson, *The Music Man* (film)

10. 26th March

Nathanael West, *Day of the Locust*

11. 2nd April

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

12. 8th April

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

13. 16th April ——— **term paper due**

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