

COMING OF AGE IN BLACK AMERICA

AFRAM 358/ENGL 358: Literature of Black Americans

<http://staff.washington.edu/grooters/spring05/index.htm>

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Office hours: Wednesday 11:00 – 1:00
and by appointment

Required texts: *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (University Book Store)
Invisible Man (University Book Store)
Maud Martha (University Book Store)
Their Eyes Were Watching God (University Book Store)
No Telephone to Heaven (University Book Store)
Course copy packet (Ave Copy Center, 4141 University Way)

Required materials: access to a computer that can run the UW's "EPost" bulletin board
active email account

Course Description:

Lisa Lowe writes in “Writing and the Question of History” that the novel in general—and the *Bildungsroman*, or “coming of age” novel, in particular—teaches us how to imagine ourselves into the dominant story of “America” and its history (a history that often fails to account fully for the experiences of many Americans). She argues that novels “colonize” readers’ understanding of themselves as raced, gendered, sexed, and classed national subjects. At the same time, however, novels have also served as sites of contestation that challenge such typical “American” stories. Lowe, for example, asserts that Asian American writers who choose to write using dominant aesthetic forms, like the novel, do so not to emulate or imitate dominant American narratives, but instead as a means of challenging and “decolonizing” those narratives. In this course, we will examine whether and how Lowe’s argument might also apply to Black American literature written in dominant genres. Specifically we will study the Black American “coming of age” novel and how it both upholds and undermines traditional understandings of what it means to grow into an American.

My goal is that by the end of this course you will have:

1. gained confidence in reading Black American literature within the context of Black literary and “postcolonial” theories,
2. come to a better understanding of how Black American writers have defined their aesthetic values and practices in relation to anglo-american aesthetic traditions,
3. developed your own position on how the *Bildungsroman*, specifically, has allowed Black writers to engage with, examine, and subvert their place in the dominant narrative of (raced, classed, sexed, gendered) American history, and
4. considered the broader question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in literature.

Reading in the Literature Classroom: Most of the work we do this quarter will take the form of "close reading," which is a specific way of reading (and writing) that people who study literature rely on to analyze texts. Basically, close reading focuses on two questions—1) what work is the text trying to do? and 2) how is the text getting that work done?—and explores those questions by looking to the details of a text and analyzing how those details interact meaningfully. Close reading is certainly not the only way to engage with a text—and other ways of reading are equally valid—but it is a skill that you, as students of literature, need to develop. I'll be asking you to practice your close reading skills in EPost responses, close reading presentations, and the final project. In your final project, I'm hoping to see you bring together close reading with other ways of reading that you practice elsewhere in your lives.

A note about experience: Each of us enter this classroom community with unique sets of experiences that will inform our readings of and reactions to these texts. Because of this wide variety of perspectives, I insist that you each agree to respect the validity of everyone's experiences in this community. At the same time, I also expect each of you to listen to others' experiences and be willing to reconsider your own perspectives in light of such new information. If you have questions about this policy, please come talk to me about it.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION: It is my goal to insure that our learning environment is accessible to everyone. If you have a learning or other disability that requires accommodation, please contact me or Disabled Student Services in order to make suitable arrangements (Disabled Student Services website: http://www.washington.edu/students/genocat/front/Disabled_Student.html/).

Evaluation:

class participation/preparation: 25%

EPost responses: 25%

presentation: 10%

critical article response paper: 10%

final project: 30%

PARTICIPATION AND PREPARATION: Since this course will often be run as a discussion-based seminar, every student's careful preparation and active participation is essential for its success. I give regular reading quizzes and an in-class midterm exam, in addition to other everyday in-class assignments, in order to evaluate your preparation for class. Participation in class—in large- and small-group discussions—is also be a key component of the course requirements.

Of course, everyone has their own comfort level regarding large group discussions, and I take this into account in my evaluation. However, I do believe that everyone is capable of making some kind of beneficial contribution to class discussion every day. To understand better what I expect from you in terms of participation, see the following descriptions of two very different, but equally successful, class participants:

Ella is a visible and obvious class leader. She contributes regularly and enthusiastically to class discussion without dominating it. She realizes that good participation doesn't mean talking a lot. Rather, she participates in a way that develops the conversation, encourages comments from others, and is thoroughly grounded in the text under discussion. Ella thinks before she speaks, is concise, and always refers to relevant passages and concrete details from the text. Moreover, she doesn't just talk to the instructor. She engages with everyone in the class, asking questions and building on the comments of others, and addressing others' remarks as well as promoting her own positions. She is present and prepared for every class.

Although he wouldn't classify himself as a "class leader," Jonah is also an excellent class participant and is also present and prepared for every class. He doesn't contribute as often as Ella, but when he does offer comments, they are insightful and well-grounded in the text. Since he isn't as comfortable speaking in public, he sometimes writes out his ideas beforehand and reads aloud from his notes in class to keep his thoughts straight. Most people in the class describe Jonah as a terrific listener and this is obvious during class discussion: Jonah's ideas always build on those of others and often make reference to comments made by others during previous class sessions. Jonah may need some time at the beginning of the quarter to get comfortable contributing, but by the second half of the quarter, he is usually making at least one comment during every class session.

Overall, my evaluation of your participation will be based on your consistent effort and improvement throughout the quarter. If you are concerned about your ability to meet these participation requirements, please come talk with me during office hours and we can discuss strategies for making class participation less intimidating.

EPOST RESPONSES : You will each be assigned to a small "EPost" group that will serve as your writing community for the quarter. You will be required to post at least 500 words to the bulletin board each week. In evaluating your posts, I will disregard your two weakest contributions. EPost responses will be evaluated as receiving full, partial, or no credit. See the EPost handout for further explanations.

PRESENTATIONS: You will each be responsible for making a collaborative, 10-minute close reading presentation to the class. Presentations will be evaluated on a 4.0 scale. See the presentation handout for further explanations.

CRITICAL ARTICLE RESPONSE PAPER: You will each need to read a critical scholarly article of your own choosing (and my approval) that offers a reading of one of the assigned novels. Your response should both summarize and offer a response to the article. These response papers will be evaluated on a 4.0 scale. See the response paper handout for further details.

FINAL PROJECT: During the last class meeting, you will turn in a critical project of your own design. You will also be required to make a brief presentation of your project to the class. Your project must engage in some meaningful way with the texts and ideas discussed throughout the quarter. I will give you opportunities throughout the quarter to get feedback on your project ideas before it is due. The project will be evaluated on a 4.0 scale. We will discuss the details for this assignment later in the quarter.

Class policies:

PLAGIARISM: Plagiarism is the representation of another's words or ideas as your own. This can range from paraphrasing an author's idea without giving proper credit to buying a paper to turn in as your own. Even bringing up an idea in class discussion that you took off the internet is plagiarism if you don't give credit to the person you're borrowing it from. I expect every student to follow MLA citation guidelines whenever borrowing from another's work or ideas. If you are uncertain of MLA citation style, please come see me.

I take plagiarism, and all other forms of academic dishonesty, very seriously. I will investigate any suspicious contributions thoroughly and follow through with discipline according to school policy (which can range from academic probation to expulsion). If your quarter is getting hectic and you don't see how you can finish an assignment without plagiarizing, come talk to me. I would rather extend a deadline than have to report you. Further information about the College of Arts & Sciences policy on academic honesty can be found at <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/issue1/honesty.htm> and information for students charged with academic misconduct can be found at <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/issue1/charged.htm>.

LATE WORK: Late work will receive reduced credit relative to the number of days it is late. Excessively late work will make a noticeable impact on your final grade.

MISSING CLASS: Each class period will incorporate a number of the above requirements (e.g. one day we might have a quiz and small group discussion), and you must be in class in order to receive credit for that day's work. Missed in-class work cannot be "made up" outside of class. Furthermore, I will hold you accountable for all information that is discussed in class, so it is in your own best interest to attend class regularly. Please let me know before class if you plan to be absent. **If you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to contact another class member in order to catch yourself up.**

TARDINESS: Please be on time. When you are late, you risk losing credit for the first in-class activity that day, and it's distracting to the rest of us.

GRADE CONCERNS: If at any time during the quarter you have questions about the grading system or any concerns about your progress in this class, please come see me during office hours or make an appointment.

OTHER CONCERNS: If you anticipate something conflicting with your ability to fulfill the course requirements, please come talk to me **BEFORE** the problem becomes unmanageable. I know many students don't want to be seen as "giving excuses," and so they put off letting instructors know of conflicts they're dealing with. While I can't promise a solution to every problem, I am pretty creative in helping students figure out ways to work around those conflicts so they can still fulfill their class responsibilities. There's nothing, however, that I can do after the fact, so let me know early and **keep those lines of communication open.**

My responsibilities:

My main goal this quarter is to facilitate a class that is both interesting and useful to you. I want to be open to your opinions about the direction of the class and willing to make changes if it will benefit our classroom community. I will always be willing to hear your concerns about the course and will work to incorporate your suggestions if at all possible. The more input I get from you, the better I can tailor the course to address your specific skills and needs.

I am available to provide you extra help when you need it. I have scheduled office hours during which you can stop by to talk about a paper draft, a class concern, or to chat about the latest reading. If you cannot attend my office hours, please schedule an appointment with me. I am flexible. I only ask that you respect my time and follow through with appointments. You can also contact me through e-mail with specific questions if you can't find the answers elsewhere.