

English 515: American Autobiography

Course Description:

An intensive study of American autobiography primarily from a historical perspective. This course will explore various forms of the genre, including the diary and journals, letters, slave narratives, essay, and memoir. Topics to be addressed include the ways autobiographies reveal or reflect the social history of the United States, the relationship of literacy to freedom in the African American community, and the reasons for the autobiography being the preferred form of first-generation immigrants. Larger theoretical issues include the nature of "truth" in autobiographical texts and the boundaries between fiction and autobiography.

Required Texts:

Classic American Autobiographies by William L. Andrews (editor)
Modern American Memoirs by Annie Dillard and Cort Conley (editors)
One Writer's Beginnings by Eudora Welty
Woman in Front of the Sun by Judith Ortiz Cofer
The Way to Rainy Mountain by N. Scott Momaday
The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich
The Cancer Journals by Audre Lorde
Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness by William Styron
The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston
The Autobiography of Malcolm X

Course Objectives:

Upon completion of this course, the student will be able to

1. define the genre of autobiography, acknowledging the complexity of forms that it may take
2. explain the relationship between specific autobiographical texts and the history and politics that inform them
3. identify and analyze theoretical underpinnings of autobiography
4. relate autobiography to other literary forms in terms of artistic and theoretical concerns
5. develop an autobiography and analyze its literary influences

Instructional Modes:

Discussion, lecture, oral reports, observation, critical writing, computer lab

Requirements:

1. Students are expected to attend every session for which the course is scheduled unless inclement weather conditions necessitate the canceling of classes.
2. Students are expected to read all assigned texts prior to class on the day those texts are to be discussed.
3. Students are expected to lead class discussions as appropriate.
4. Students are expected to work collaboratively both in and outside of class, in face-to-face as well as through electronic communication.
5. Students are expected to complete all required written assignments.
6. Students are expected to conduct research using the Internet.
7. Students are expected to submit all assignments when due.

Evaluation:

The semester grade will be determined as follows:

Class participation	25%
Essay #1 Comparing Classic and Contemporary Autobiographies	25%
Essay #2 Analyzing an Immigration Narrative	25%
Autobiographical Project	25%
Total	100%

Final Grades will be computed as follows:

90 - 100 A 89 - 80 B 79 - 70 C Below 70 Failing

Since the course is organized as a seminar, students will be expected to assume leadership of class discussion; individuals will take responsibility for focusing and conducting class sessions on specific required texts. The class participation grade will reflect this leadership as well as responsive and thoughtful engagement as a member of the group discussion.

Essay #1 will be an analysis of an immigration narrative (e.g., *Hunger for Memory* by Richard Rodriguez, *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, *The Road from Coorain* by Jill Ker Conway). (8 - 10 pages)

Essay #2 will be a comparison of a contemporary American autobiography (within the last fifty years) with one of the five autobiographies in *Classic American Autobiographies*. Students might, for example, compare Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative with a prisoner-of-war memoir or compare Ben Franklin's autobiography with a self-help memoir or success story by a contemporary person.. (8 - 10 pages)

Essays 1 and 2 will require secondary sources as part of the analysis as well as a presentation of the analysis to the class.

By the end of the semester, students will apply what they have learned in the class to develop an autobiographical text in their own voice. They will also write an analysis of how the texts read for class are reflected in that work, particularly its form (prose narrative, poetry, journals). Autobiography (10 - 15 pages, analysis ~5 pages)

Bibliography

N.B. This bibliography is limited to secondary critical studies, books only.

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