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## ENGL 215-02, "The American Dream" in Literature, Fall 2009

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Professor Leslie Petty  
Office Hours: T 11:15-12:15; W 2-3; Th 2-3 and by appointment  
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Fall 2009

**English 215: "The American Dream" in Literature  
(T/Th 9:30-10:45; Buckman 334)**

The concept of the "American Dream" has been integral to the nation's identity since the narrator of the first American novel, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) declared, "we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free; as he ought to be." In English 215, we will examine how this potential for perfection (often gauged by material success) through freedom is the tantalizing yet ultimately unattainable promise that drives most American writers. We will read a widely diverse set of texts and students will be asked to consider how each articulates a vision of American possibility that contributes to the nation's literary tradition as well as to its sense of identity.

**Required Reading**

Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick* (Norton Critical Edition)  
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life* (Norton Critical Edition)  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner)  
Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Bedford/St. Martin's)  
Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Modern Classics)  
Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Penguin)  
Several scanned documents located in the Eng 215 file in Prof. Petty's public folder

**Assignments**

Essay #1 (3-4 pages)	15%
Essay #2 (3-4 pages)	15%
Essay #3 (3-4 pages)	15%
Midterm	20%
Final Exam	25%
Participation (includes quizzes and in-class writing)	10%

We will discuss these assignments more fully during the course of the semester. PLEASE NOTE: You cannot receive a passing grade for this course unless you complete all major assignments.

## Learning Community

As members of the American Studies learning community, you will be part of a unique environment, one that blends the disciplines of history and literature and that will extend beyond the classroom, during outside lectures, movie viewings, and other events designed to create community and cohesiveness. We will discuss the concept of a learning community in greater detail, but you should be aware your participation in events outside the classroom is required unless otherwise noted. Your enthusiasm and consistent presence are the only way to ensure an engaging, transformative learning experience for everyone. Please note especially that the lectures by Kevin Sharp on Sept. 9 at 4:30 p.m. and Jackson Bryer on Nov. 5 at 6:30 p.m. are considered mandatory classroom meetings.

## Participation

This course is a seminar and requires the active and engaged participation of every member of the class. Make sure you read each day's assignment carefully and come to class with questions or comments to bring to the discussion. The success of the class depends upon your willingness to actively engage with the material and discuss it with the rest of the class. Often the most productive questions are ones that work to pinpoint what is difficult about a particular reading. Your participation grade will also be affected by reading quizzes and in-class writing assignments. It can also be positively influenced by visiting the professor's office hours and attending learning community events.

## Attendance Policy

You are expected to be in class every day. Being "present" doesn't just mean physically being in the room; you are to be alert and prepared. Anyone not alert (i.e. sleeping, reading the paper, working a crossword, etc.) will be counted absent, as will anyone clearly not prepared to participate. If you must miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed and what, if anything, you need to make up. **More than 3 absences (for any reason other than a school sanctioned event) will adversely affect your grade; i.e. you will lose 1/3 letter grade for each additional absence.** Chronic tardiness will count towards absences. Excessive absences (i.e. more than 6 of the total class days) could result in an "F" for the course.

## Assignment Submission Policy

Essays are due at the beginning of class unless otherwise noted. Late papers will be penalized a third of a letter grade per day. Except in the case of documented illness or family emergency, papers more than a week late will receive a failing grade. If you believe you have a legitimate reason for missing a due date, talk to me beforehand to make alternative arrangements. Also, please note that essays and response papers must be typed, double-spaced with an inch margin, stapled, and adhere to MLA standards in both layout and documentation. See me if you have questions about MLA or need further information.

### A Note about Plagiarism

The English department's academic honesty policy is attached to this syllabus. You should consider it a binding statement about plagiarism in this class. Please note especially that you may not submit to me work that you have written in other classes, including those you took in high school. Doing so is academically dishonest and will result in an Honor Council hearing.

### Reading Schedule

#### August

Thurs. 27: Introductions

#### September

#### "THE MOST PERFECT SOCIETY NOW EXISTING IN THE WORLD": ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Tues. 1: COURSE FOLDER: John Winthrop "A Model of Christian Charity," (1630) J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, "What is an American?" from *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)

Thurs. 3: COURSE FOLDER: Thomas Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence" (1776); Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, Part One (27-80)

Tues. 8 Franklin, *The Autobiography*, Part Two (81-98); excerpt from Part Three (99-108)

**Wed. 9 Lecture by Kevin Sharp, Director of the Dixon Gallery and Gardens  
4:30 p.m. in Blount Auditorium, Buckman Hall**

Thurs. 10 COURSE FOLDER: Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle"  
Phillis Wheatley, selections from her poetry and letters

Tues. 15 COURSE FOLDER: Caroline Kirkland, *A New Home, Who'll Follow?*  
(selections); Cherokee memorials  
**Essay #1 Due**

#### "AMERICA IS A POEM IN OUR EYES": ANTEBELLUM OPTIMISM

Thurs. 17 COURSE FOLDER: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance;" "The Poet"

Tues. 22 COURSE FOLDER: Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government,"  
Walt Whitman, selected poems

Thurs. 24 COURSE FOLDER: Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birth-Mark"; Harriet Beecher  
Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (selections)

Tues. 29 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American  
Slave*

### October

Tues. 6 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American  
Slave*

Thurs. 8 Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*

Tues. 13 Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*

Thurs. 15 **Midterm**

### "LIKE BOATS AGAINST THE CURRENT": SLOWLY WAKING FROM THE DREAM

Tues. 20: FALL BREAK

Thurs. 22: COURSE FOLDER: Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier  
in American History* (selections); Zitkala Sa, "Impressions of an Indian Girlhood"

Tues. 27: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*  
COURSE FOLDER: Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*  
(selections)

Thurs. 29: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

### November

Tues. 3: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Thurs. 5: Guest lecture: Dr. Jackson Bryer, Professor Emeritus, University of Maryland-  
College Park

**6:30: Dr. Jackson Bryer, "The Greatness of *The Great Gatsby*"  
Blount Auditorium, Buckman Hall**

Tues. 10 COURSE FOLDER: Anzia Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts* (selections)

"A MAN IS NOT A PIECE OF FRUIT": MID-CENTURY DRAMA AND THE DREAM

Thurs. 12     Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*  
**Essay #2 Due**

Tues. 17     Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Thurs. 19     Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

Tues. 24     Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

Thurs. 26:    THANKSGIVING BREAK

**December**

Tues. 1     View film of *A Raisin in the Sun*  
**Essay #3 Due**

Thurs. 3     COURSE FOLDER: "The Future of the American Idea"; *The Atlantic Monthly*,  
November 2007, 13-62

Tues. 8     Review for Final Exam

FINAL EXAM  
Monday, 12/14 @ 1:00 p.m.

**English 215: The American Dream in Literature**  
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