



American Literature III – Syllabus

Course Description: For centuries, writers have striven for their “great American novel.” In this course, we’ll delve into several of the country’s strongest works of long fiction, exploring novels and stage plays by Wharton, Cather, and other greats. Students will be encouraged to both read and respond critically (while having fun!).

Course Outline:

Week One: Introduction to the Novel – Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

Week Two: Wharton Continued

Week Three: Introduction to the Stage – Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*;
and Selected Songs

Week Four: Willa Cather, Excerpts from *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Week Five: August Wilson, *Fences*

Week Six: John Steinbeck, *The Pearl*

Week Seven: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

Week Eight: Bradbury Continued

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Advanced Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

Required Texts:

The student should have access to the following works.

We have also provided brief explanations of why particular texts/authors were selected for the course. Selections cover as wide a geographical and cultural background as possible, while still including the essential works of the American literary canon.

Note on content: *While we always strive to pick clean and uplifting works, some highly valuable texts result from cultural backgrounds that involve some negative or challenging content. Therefore, we recommend that a parent or guardian at least briefly review works and reach out if they would like to substitute a work that matches their family values.*

If you have any trouble finding a work, please let me know promptly so that I can help!

Week One & Two: Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

Value: In *Mirth*, Wharton creates a vivid character study of a Gilded Age socialite. Throughout the novel, students will experience careful plotting, strong yet deeply flawed characters, and an introduction to all the ephemeral glitz of the American Gilded Age.

Week Three: Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*

Value: Not only does Wilder's classic play examine metatheatricity, but it explores, with thoughtful nostalgia, American small town life.

Listening: Song Selections from Musical Theater

Value: To truly understand American theater, one must realize the impact of American musical theater and the lights of Broadway.

Week Four: Willa Cather, Excerpts from *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (We will read all of Book 1, "The Vicar Apostolic": Chapter 1, "The Cruciform Tree"; Chapter 2, "Hidden Water"; Chapter 3, "The Bishop Chez Lui"; Chapter 4, "A Bell and a Miracle"—around 50 pages in my edition)

Value: To call Cather's grasp of description "sublime" is an understatement. She depicts the New Mexican landscape, and her characters, with an unmatched eloquence and empathy.

Week Five: August Wilson, *Fences*

Value: *Fences* deals with a set of deeply American themes: family, race relations, the African-American experience, city life, and—of course—baseball.

Week Six: John Steinbeck, *The Pearl*

Value: Throughout Steinbeck's canon, he empathizes with the manual laborers, the World War II soldiers, the migrant workers, and all the downtrodden or forgotten people occupying a landscape's margins. *The Pearl* highlights important themes such as family, perseverance, and the preservation of what is good.

Week Seven & Eight: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

VALUE: In Bradbury's classic American dystopia, books are outlawed and must be burnt. The novel is a thoughtful, engaging contemplation of the value of literature and the freedom to read.

There is no required edition; the student must simply cite the edition used. **Please make sure that your copy of the text is not abridged.**

We recommend that students interact with the text (highlighting and marginal notes), but students are *not* required to own copies of the works—texts from the library are perfectly all right! If you would like to own, inexpensive copies can be found online and at used bookstores.

As students tend to experience stronger reading comprehension when not reading on a screen, we would highly recommend that students have access to a hard copy of the works (a printed out PDF works well, too!).



American Literature III

Lesson One: Introduction to the Novel

SAMPLE LESSON

Have you ever wished for a time machine? We would love to skip through different moments in history, meet the people who have shaped our lives, from Abigail Adams to Abraham Lincoln and beyond. If we had a time machine and all the time in the world (no pun intended), imagine how wonderful it would be to sit in the cozy restaurants, talk to the quirky shop-owners, experience the lives of real, breathing people who have dwindled to numbers in history books.

In this class, we would like to offer you the next-best thing: the true, (often) unfiltered voices of that generation, speaking into their culture, writing people inspired by their friends and neighbors. In this class, we will find those voices in a range of America's best and most-influential novels and stage plays.

COURSE STRUCTURE –

If you are joining us after taking *Intro to American Literature* and *American Literature II*, you will notice a few differences in this class.

- **One author per lesson or lesson pair:** As we will only tackle longer works, we will have one author per lesson (for plays and excerpts) or lesson pair (for full novels).
- **Shorter lessons:** Since our readings are more intensive, we will shorten these lessons by providing brief contextual information and important topical insights, either about our texts as literary works or about relevant skills for literary study.
- **Multiple options for some assignments:** In several assignments, you will have the opportunity to choose a creative or scholarly response to our reading. Since we have longer readings, we want you to have the chance to pick whatever assignment would be most enjoyable and beneficial—and least stressful—for you.
 - When we believe a style of response is particularly important for your growth as a reader, writer, and critical thinker, there will only be one assignment option.

INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN NOVEL –

“This task of painting the American soul within the framework of a novel has seldom been attempted, and has never been accomplished further than very partially . . . Hawthorne, the greatest of American imaginations, staggered under the load of the American novel. In ‘The Scarlet Letter,’ ‘The House of the Seven Gables,’ and ‘The Blithedale Romance’ we have three delightful romances, full of acute spiritual analysis, of the light of other worlds, but also characterized by only a vague consciousness of this life, and by graspings that catch little but the subjective of humanity. . . . The nearest approach to the desired phenomenon is ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’ . . . There was . . . a national breadth to the picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling.”

“The Great American Novel” by John William DeForest, 1868

You have probably heard people mention the “great American novel” before—the piece of work that, supposedly, sums up the American existence, captures the American spirit, and speaks to the American culture. As DeForest expresses above, that novel should *paint the American soul*—have *national breadth*—*outline characters truthfully*—*carry strong feeling*.

In our prior classes, we have questioned what, if anything, makes a piece of literature feel “American.” It is hard to dispute, though, that a text as detailed and developed as a novel hasn’t been shaped by the world spinning around it. In fact, while we will explore texts from a wide range of backgrounds, they are held together by one thread: the attempt to faithfully capture what life was like in a particular moment.

Early in American literature, we see a dogged pursuit of the “American dream”—the idea of a beautiful, self-made existence full of freedom and success. As time progresses, many writers feel as though that dream is crumbling:

“Don’t you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you’re not taking advantage of it? Do you realize you’ve lived nearly half the time you have to live already?”

‘Yes, every once in a while. . . . It’s one thing I don’t worry about,’ I said.

‘You ought to.’

‘I’ve had plenty to worry about one time or another. I’m through worrying. . . . Listen, Robert, going to another country doesn’t make any difference. I’ve tried all that. You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There’s nothing to that.’”

The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway, 1926

As you look at these texts, consider how they align with what you have learned about American culture and history. What changes do you see? Where do you see glimpses of that “American dream”—of freedom—of individuality? On the other hand, where do you see a rejection of these ideas—a Hemingway-esque view of losing the “American dream”?

INTRODUCTION TO EDITH WHARTON & THE GILDED AGE –

Edith Wharton, born into a wealthy New York family who traveled extensively in Europe, was well-read, well-tutored, gifted in languages, and fond of art. Despite the strict societal expectations for women, she privately published her first collection of poems at age sixteen. After an unhappy twenty-eight-year marriage and subsequent divorce, Wharton moved to France. There, she worked hard to relieve suffering during World War I—she even received the French Legion of Honor in 1916. After the war, she was granted an honorary doctorate from Yale, but would live the rest of her life in France.

Her era is known as the **Gilded Age** for its swift-growing industry and emerging *nouveau riche* (an often-dismissive word directed towards people who recently gained wealth, such as businessmen of the late 19th-century). The Library of Congress marks the period between 1878-1889, but some scholars extend the period from the 1870s-1900.

The House of Mirth was published in 1905, but it is set in the 1890s—nearing the end of the Gilded Age, and nearing the beginning of a new era.

THEMES AND TOPICS TO CONSIDER –

- **CLASS:** How does the American Gilded Age class structure affect the characters’ lives and choices?
- **MARRIAGE:** Think about the marriages in the novel. What do they tell you about the Gilded Age society? (Remember, Wharton was married while writing *The House of Mirth*, but unhappily.)
- **BEAUTY AND DINGINESS:** What is the importance of the beauty/dinginess binary opposition (two opposite terms that are set against each other) in the text?

Assignment 1A: Begin reading Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. We would recommend reading 2/3rds of the text this week if possible, as next week's assignment will include a research component.

Value: In *Mirth*, Wharton creates a vivid character study of a Gilded Age socialite. Throughout the novel, you will experience careful plotting, strong yet deeply flawed characters, and an introduction to all the ephemeral glitz of the American Gilded Age.

Optional reading questions: You will not need to answer these questions for the assignment, but they will help you engage more deeply with the literature.

- What would you do in Lily's shoes?
- Do you like or dislike these characters? Why? Do you think that Wharton attempts to steer you one way or the other?
- What do the characters' lives say about class and the American Gilded Age society? Do you think that Wharton had a positive or negative view of that society?

Assignment 1B: For this assignment, we will practice skills that make material stick in our memory, develop strong arguments and opinions, and foster critical thinking. Follow the steps below to engage with the text, using the assignment sheet (attached to the email) as your guide.

***Don't be intimidated!** This assignment only looks long because we walk through the steps below. If you complete this process while reading, it will barely add to your reading time, but will increase your comprehension of the text.*

Step One: Actively engage with the text as you read.

- ***If you are using a book in which you can write:***
 - Underline, highlight, circle! This way, important elements will jump out at you when you review for future paper-writing.
 - Make marginal notes—questions, comments, thoughts, clarifications.
 - Doodle if you'd like!
- ***If you are using a borrowed book, an ebook, or a book in which you'd rather not write:***
 - Take good notes on a separate piece of paper or a digital document, using proper in-text citations (Lastname Pagenumber), *e.g.* (Wharton 12).
 - Copy quotes that stand out to you (with proper citations).
 - Note your questions, comments, thoughts, and clarifications—remember to note page numbers so you can return later!

You will not receive more points for more pages, but will be graded on your detail, thoughtfulness, and accuracy. We expect that students will take good notes on the whole book, although some pages will naturally be more marked up than others.

Step Two: Note key themes.

- When you see a theme emerge in the text (childhood/faith/individualism, etc), write that word on the top of the page.
- If you aren't writing in your book, you can place themes in your notes with page numbers and, if required, an explanation.

Step Three: Keep a simple character chart.

- This can be a family tree, a bulleted list, whatever works best for you!
- Note the character's name and anything you will want to remember—how they relate to other characters, what they look like, your opinion on them, etc.

Step Four: Write a *brief* summary of each chapter after you finish reading it.

Please fill out and submit the assignment sheet, which will include the following elements:

- A list of at least five questions, comments, thoughts, or clarifications which you have noted in your reading
- At least two themes you have noticed in your readings thus far
- Your character chart
- Your brief summaries