

**SYLLABUS- ANG 1500**  
**African-American Literature**

Professor Caroline Brown  
Fall 2011  
Course Meeting Times: Thurs, 1-4pm  
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**Course Description**

What is African-American literature? Why is it so important a part of American history and literature? What does it tell us about the United States? About the status of people of African descent within its borders? Of the role of race, class, region, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity in their lives? Of political movements, cultural traditions, and artistic trends? In this course, we will read diverse forms of literature—the slave narrative, novels, plays, essays, poetry, and short stories—by black American writers, using them to investigate these issues and, in so doing, gain a better sense of the United States as a nation and the African-American presence within it.

We will begin by reading pre-Civil War literature with its keen consciousness of the contradictions of slavery in a land of freedom. 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century writers pointedly demanded that their readers acknowledge their humanity. Embracing literacy, they used the written word as a tool to push for their political goals, namely enfranchisement of the black population. One question that we will ponder: how did this precedent serve as a foundation for later African-American literature? The course will then segue into the Reconstruction, a time of promise for social justice for blacks that remained unfulfilled. Though slavery ended, racism and reactionary political movements led to violence, legal segregation, and socioeconomic marginalization. How did literary texts reflect the lived experiences of individuals? What was the role of artistry in literary production and engagement? We will proceed to the early and mid-twentieth century with works that trace the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North and beyond. Central to this are the consequences of this movement: shifting definitions of self and culture; more material opportunities yet the continuing specter of racial discrimination; a sociopolitical awareness that challenged the denial of African-American personhood in increasingly sophisticated prose forms. What were the effects of these events on the greater body of literary works? Finally, we will examine texts of later 20<sup>th</sup> century (post-1960). From the angry demand for racial equality to multifaceted musings on shifting forms of racial and personal identification, writers demanded the acknowledgment of the complexity and cultural wealth of the African-American experience. How are artistic experimentation and identity politics reshaping the discourse around blackness and literary production?

**Required Texts (Available at UdeM Bookstore)**

Hansberry, Lorraine	<i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>
Jacobs, Harriet	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</i>
Larsen, Nella	<i>Passing</i>
Morrison, Toni	<i>Beloved</i>
Wilson, August	<i>The Piano Lesson</i>
<i>Course Reader</i>	

**Course Objectives**

1. To allow students to appreciate the diversity that is African-American identity and literature while providing a framework to examine how race is used as a tool in the construction of American national identity.
2. To permit students to read and understand important works of literature, placing them within a specific historical and cultural context. In this manner, we will relate works to contemporaneous social and political concerns as well as literary movements.
3. To enable students to recognize the evolving format of the literary text and the literary devices, including plot and character development, language, dialogue, and symbolism, which affect the text as a work of art.
4. To help students improve their writing and interpretive skills through textual analysis.
5. To permit students to present and examine their ideas in a public forum. By participating in class and small group discussions, students will be able to articulate and share ideas, as well as respectfully challenge others, thus maturing as thinkers and improving their public speaking skills.

### Course Mechanics

- Class participation is a must. It improves the quality of discussion and is graded for both content and frequency.
- All essays must be typed. Each should be double-spaced and have a one-inch margin. Please use a standard font. Remember to title your essays and include page numbers. Staple all pages together.
- Plagiarism, the uncredited use of another's words, research, and thoughts, is forbidden. Please document your sources appropriately.
- You are responsible for collecting any materials or assignments handed out during an absence, including graded essays.
- Turn off cellphones and pagers while class is in session. Please do not text during class.

### Course Requirements

Participation		10%
Reflection Papers	10%	
1 Essay (3-4 pp) <i>Due: 11/17</i>		20%
Mid-term Exam (in class)		30%
Final Exam (in class)		30%

### SCHEDULE

#### **WEEK 1 (9/1)**

- Introductions
- Film: *Black Is, Black Ain't* (Marlon Riggs)

#### **ANTEBELLUM**

#### **WEEK 2 (9/8)**

- Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (essay)
- Phillis Wheatley (poetry)
  - "To the University of Cambridge, in New England"
  - "On Being Brought from Africa to America"
  - "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth"
  - "On Imagination"
  - "To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works"

#### **WEEK 3 (9/15)**

- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

**POSTBELLUM/RECONSTRUCTION**

**WEEK 4** (9/22)

Paul Lawrence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask” and “Sympathy” (poetry)  
Charles Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison”  
W.E.B. DuBois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” and “The Coming of John” (from *The Souls of Black Folk*)

**HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

**WEEK 5** (9/29)

Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (essay)  
Poetry: Georgia Douglass Johnson, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Bennett, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Helene Johnson

**WEEK 6** (10/6):

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

**WEEK 7** (10/13): **MID-TERM EXAM**

**WEEK 8** (10/20): No Class

**WEEK 9** (10/27): **BREAK**

**REALISM**

**WEEK 10** (11/3):

Essay: “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” (Richard Wright)  
Short Story: James Baldwin (“Sonny’s Blues”)  
Poetry: Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks

**WEEK 11** (11/10):

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

**REVISING THE RECORD: THE BLACK AESTHETIC AND BEYOND**

**WEEK 12** (11/17)

**Due:** Short Essay  
Poetry (Black Power): LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni

**WEEK 13** (11/24)

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

**WEEK 14** (12/1)

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*  
Film based on Wilson’s play

**FINAL EXAM: Thursday, December 8, 2011**