English 2082
Hard Times and the American Dream: The Literature of the Great Depression

Instructor   **Office Hours**
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DESCRIPTION: The economic, social, cultural and foreign policy crises of the 1930s provide an apt way to think about both the relationship between art and history as well as to investigate many questions that bedevil Americans in the present day. As a nation, the United States continues to ask questions that would be familiar to critics, readers and authors of the 1930s: what is the American Dream? What does democracy mean? How do poverty and class shape national identity? This course will investigate these different questions by asking what role does art, particularly literature, play in a society undergoing a crisis? This course in particular will focus on questions about class and representation and the way historical forces shape literature.

Many of these questions require a careful reading of the text for answers; others may require anecdotal evidence, or some speculation based on the text. Much of this class will require students to examine primary sources outside the texts we are reading. We will also consult critical responses to these texts from the 1930s and from contemporary scholars. We will focus discussion on themes central to American literature (such as individualism, nature, gender, class and race) as well as examine specific themes that seem to characterize the 1930s such as an increased interest in issues related to social problems, collectivism, and the influence of popular entertainment.

GOALS: This course is designed help students
1. Develop critical reading skills that will allow them to approach literary and critical sources thoughtfully, independently, and with attention to detail.
2. Synthesize and question sources and arguments to create independent arguments based on reliable information.
3. Create a community of scholars working together on some loose open-ended questions that we can disagree about from an analytical perspective.
4. Write well developed critical papers about their own ideas developed by examining primary sources (from magazine articles to movies) and in response to the ideas of other scholars.
5. Develop effective research and documentation skills, including the use and evaluation of sources. Beyond that this course will help students become increasingly familiar with locating and making sense of primary sources.

REQUIRED TEXTS
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
Tom Kromer, *Waiting for Nothing*
William Faulkner, *Light in August*
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
Nathaniel West, *Day of the Locust*

GRADING:

Close reading posts (5 out of 6)	20%
Close reading papers (3 out of 6)	25%
Class participation	15%
Class leadership	10%
Steps toward the headnote	10%
Short story headnote	20%

POLICIES

I. **Papers** must be turned in in .doc or .pdf format on Canvas on the day they are due at midnight. If you have any trouble with Canvas, let me know (by email or phone message) as soon as it starts.

A. **Assignments**: I will hand out more details about these assignments in class.

    1. **Close reading posts and responses (each student needs 5 posts and responses and 10 responses)**:   For each novel we read students should
a. post a short passage (around 200 words long) from the text that seems particularly interesting, confusing or important.
b. respond to at least two other students' passages with response posts that provide some insight into the passage they have posted (responses should be detailed and thoughtful but do not have to be fully formed essays – see my samples on Canvas.)

    2. **Short close reading paper** (each student does 3 of the 6 total): This is a chance for you to take the passage you identified and use ideas generated by your classmates to create a fully developed short (2-3 pages) about that passage in the context of the whole book. Students will have a chance to revise any close reading papers to improve the grade up to two weeks after the first draft.

    3. **Short Story headnote.** The final paper will focus on a short story that you chose to write about (I have a list but you can also find one on your own). This paper should be around 3 pages and stand as a sort of introduction to your story (as if it were in an anthology) raising important questions about the text and highlighting the text's historical context. This text must have been originally written and published between 1929 and 1942 by an American author.

Throughout the semester you will be working on this paper and at the end of the semester every student will lead a class on the text they chose. Various elements of the research paper will be due throughout the semester:

    i.   Your own close reading of the text.
    ii.   Background on the author: Why did this person write? What did they think writing could do? What was their reputation in the 1930s?
    iii.   Research on where the text originally appeared and the publishers behind the text.
    iv.   Connecting this text to other texts (e.g. the other short stories that you will be reading) to make some larger historical generalization.
    v.   A sense of the major themes of the period that the text engages.

B. **Drafts**. You may turn in a draft of any of the papers before they are due (of course) and I'll give you feedback. You may also revise any of the short close reading papers. I expect that you will revise the steps of the research paper throughout the semester.

C. **Due Dates.** Posts and responses are due at the start of class on the day they are listed as due in the syllabus. Papers are due at midnight.
If you need to turn in a paper late, you may do so without penalty if you notify me 48 hours in advance (and with less advance warning in extraordinary situations.) Late papers without notification will be penalized one letter grade for each day they are late.

D. **Grades for papers**. I have very high expectations for all of you and will not insult you by giving good grades to inadequate work.

An A paper represents outstanding work. It has a clear and sophisticated claim about the text (or texts under discussion) that guides the entire essay. The organization of ideas appears apt and the paper builds a convincing idea about the text using evidence from the text. The essay provides original insights into the text and develops those insights through analysis of a wide range of textual details. The essay should account for complications or difficult elements of the text (so the conclusions may not seem to be perfectly neat). For essays that include outside sources, those sources need to be incorporated into the text of the essay and be cited.

A B paper has many of the same qualities of an A paper: a clear claim that guides the essay, effective organization, insights into the text, and analysis of details. The main thing that separates an A from a B is that B papers are less complex, sophisticated, and original than A papers. B papers sometimes ignore problematic elements of the text or do not fully consider the evidence.

A C paper has an overly general claim or relies on summary of the text rather than analysis. This paper may understand the basic idea of the assignment but relies on lists and summaries rather than developing an argument. The key difference between a B and a C is that a C relies on summary, restates the obvious, and may contain fairly substantial errors in syntax or in interpretation.

A D paper simply summarizes the plot or lacks a clear purpose. It uses very little textual detail or uses that detail inadequately.

An F paper is off topic, factually inaccurate, or incoherent.

E. **Grades for Class Discussion**

Class participation grades be based on your willingness to speak up in class, ability to demonstrate that you have completed and thought about your reading and your active participation in class activities. (So simply being in class will not be enough.) Please remember that I do want vigorous discussion but I am more interested in quality than in quantity. Here's what you need to do to earn the following grades:

A: Provide insightful ideas about the texts under discussion and supported by the text: listen carefully to your peers, and comment thoughtfully and graciously on their ideas; ask questions that demonstrate you are thinking about how to analyze and synthesize the works under discussion.
B: Speak fairly often in class, have some good ideas, and usually back those ideas up with evidence from the text.
C: Offer vague generalized ideas unconnected to the texts under discussion or to other students' comments.
D: Rarely speak in class and when you do show little understanding of the texts under discussion.
F: Never speak in class or if you do not seem to have completed the reading.

Students can skip 2 classes without penalty and can make up one additional class by doing extra response posts. After missing three classes students' participation grades will lose a letter grade for each class missed. In the two individual meetings we have I will tell you what your participation grade is, why I think you've got that grade, and what you need to do to improve (if you need to improve.)

IV. All **Reading Assignments** must be completed before class on the day scheduled.

V. **Academic Integrity**: My interest in teaching this class honestly stems from my interest in learning what *you* have to say about these texts. I believe that every person in this class has something valuable to add to what we already think about the 1930s. My assignments focus on that goal first and foremost, so if you plagiarize any assignment it follows that you should fail the class. I will also report you to the Office of Student Conduct.

I will explain in class some issues that might be confusing (how to paraphrase, what is common knowledge, citation styles) but if you have further questions about your papers or are concerned that you might appear to be plagiarizing when you have no intention of doing so, come and talk to me.