

- Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines
- [www.unine.ch/lettres](http://www.unine.ch/lettres)

**Lecture course 4: Modern and Contemporary Literature (19th-21st centuries) (2AN1401)**

Filières concernées	Nombre d'heures	Validation	Crédits ECTS
<b>Pilier principal B A - langue et littérature anglaises</b>	<b>Cours: 2 ph</b>	Voir ci-dessous	5
<b>Pilier secondaire B A - langue et littérature anglaises</b>	<b>Cours: 2 ph</b>	Voir ci-dessous	5

ph=période hebdomadaire, pg=période globale, j=jour, dj=demi-jour, h=heure, min=minute

**Période d'enseignement:**

- Semestre Automne

**Equipe enseignante**

Dr. Philip Gerard

**Contenu**

What is American literature? Is American literature a literature written by Americans, or is it a literature written for Americans, a literature dealing with particularly "American" topics or composed in a particularly "American" idiom? Does American literature have a beginning? and under what conditions might it end? Directly or indirectly, all of these questions are premised on a still deeper puzzle, what does it mean to be American? Does the adjective "American" qualify a language, a culture, a form of legal recognition? Does the reach of American literature coincide with the borders of the United States of America? Can we understand American literature without understanding who counts as American and who doesn't? And when?

At a moment when the real and imaginary borders of the United States become increasingly policed, and economic, cultural, and racial divisions carve up its interior, we will take a new look at American literature. We will focus on the tension between the history of American literature and the history of the American state from the moment the two were bound together in the joint performance of political representation and literary creation, "We the People of the United States." In an important though not exclusive sense, the American people were called into being by these words, and since that declaration the nature and limits of American literature have been tied up with the trials of American citizenship, with its inclusions and exclusions, its radical promise and bitter hypocrisies.

Our course's focus on American literature and American citizenship draws its inspiration from Claudia Rankine's book-length poem, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, and will also consider her pointed use of the term "lyric." We will devote special attention to the historic connection between American identity and poetic expression by reading our fair share of lyric poetry, lyrical prose, hymns and song lyrics, but also by casting poetry in broader and more figurative senses. In this, we take our cue from all those writers, from William Carlos Williams to Zora Neale Hurston, whose works uncover poetic rhythms and popular inflections particular to American speech. More than anything, however, our capacious understanding of what counts as poetry follows in the footsteps of writers like Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, who maintained that the political project of constructing an interracial democracy implied the poetic project of fashioning a new, democratic literature.

The goal of this course, then, is not only to acquaint ourselves with a set of classical or canonical works of American literature, but, more profoundly, to interrogate what it means to be American and to examine how literary texts—from Mesoamerican creation myths and Puritan psalters to nineteenth-century slave narratives and modern commemorative poems—have alternatively consolidated and contested the cultural, political, and linguistic boundaries of American identity.

By the end of the course, students will have matured as critical thinkers and acquired skills crucial for deciphering, analyzing, and interpreting literary and non-literary texts. They will have gained a familiarity with a variety of literary genres as well as an ability to discuss the historical links between democracy and literary expression. Having traced the construction (and deconstruction) of the American literary canon, students will become sensitive to the ideological uses of national literature as well as the often surprising ways classical texts and familiar tropes have been repurposed by later writers. Finally, our survey of the literature of citizenship from 1787 to 2014 will acquaint students with the long pre-history of America's pressing current debates about civil disobedience, public mourning, and the politics of identity.

**Forme de l'évaluation**

Two informal, unmarked in-class quizzes and a half-hour oral exam (100% of the final grade) during the exam session will test students on the material covered in lecture and on the books chosen for the BA exam reading list. The quizzes too are conceived as a way to gauge students' preparedness for the exam. Students interested in rattrapage will have to take the oral exam (100%).

**Documentation**

- The Norton Anthology of American Literature, shorter 6th edition (or later). Available for free at

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<https://epdf.pub/queue/norton-anthology-of-americanliterature-shorter-sixth-edition.html>

- Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (ISBN-10: 1555976905)
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (ISBN-10: 0061120065)
- Various poems and prose works, all available for download from the Moodle learning platform

#### **Pré-requis**

Requirements

Reading the material before each course is highly recommended. I will provide a list of reading questions before each session to guide students through the more challenging texts and to prepare them for lecture. These questions will also be useful aides in studying for the exam. Lecture slides will be made available after each lecture on the Moodle learning platform.

#### **Forme de l'enseignement**

Lecture

#### **Objectifs d'apprentissage**

Au terme de la formation l'étudiant-e doit être capable de :

- Discuss the relationship between literary expression and political representation
- Relate literary texts to their historical and social contexts
- Interpret the legacy of certain epoch-making pronouncements and legal decisions (The Declaration of Independence, Dred Scott v. Sanford, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, etc.)
- Develop close reading skills
- Recognise the constructedness of the American literary canon and its evolution over time
- Identify examples of key literary genres (lyric poem, epistle, novel, slave narrative, etc.)
- Question familiar commonplaces about American history and culture ('the American Dream,' 'the Melting Pot,' etc.)

#### **Compétences transférables**

- Communicate in a second language
- Carry out a critical analysis
- Discuss complex issues
- Develop intellectual rigor and curiosity