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21H.105 American Classics
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Massachusetts Institute of Technology

21H.105

American Classics

Professor Christopher Capozzola

Fall 2002

“What then is the American, this new man?” asked J. Hector St-John de Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782. This subject takes Crèvecoeur’s question as the starting point for an examination of the changing meanings of national identity in the American past. We will consider a diverse collection of classic texts in American history to see how Americans have defined themselves and their nation in politics, literature, art, and popular culture. As a communications-intensive subject, students will be expected to engage intensively with the material through frequent oral and written exercises.

Requirements: The success of this class depends on the active participation of all students. Classroom participation (20%) represents a substantial portion of the grade, and will be evaluated in terms of preparation, participation in large and small group discussion, active listening, collaboration, and overall contributions to the class experience during the term. Needless to say, if you do not attend a class it is impossible for you to contribute to it. All students will do a short presentation (10%) about a document that you find that relates to the readings for a particular class. Signups will follow.

Writing assignments in this subject are frequent. Everyone will write three 3-5pp. essays (15% each), of which at least one must be revised. In addition, each student will write a longer 8-10pp. essay (20%) on an additional work or works not on the syllabus. Various preparatory writing exercises (5%) will help students develop a topic, a bibliography, and an argument in advance of the final paper itself.

Writing assignments are due on paper in person at the beginning of the class in which they are due. Extensions will be granted only for good reasons explained well in advance; computer malfunctions are never an acceptable excuse for a late submission. Adherence to standards of academic honesty is required; if you have any questions about how to go about your writing or cite your sources, don’t hesitate to ask.

Books: Required books are available at the MIT Bookstore. Additional copies of all books have also been placed on reserve in the Humanities Library. A number of readings will also be made available through the library’s electronic reserve system (accessible through the class website) or by handout. Readings should be completed by the beginning of the class under which they appear, unless otherwise stated.

**** CLASS OUTLINE ****

WEEK 1 IMAGINING AMERICA

Thursday September 5

READING: None.

WEEK 2 ERRAND INTO THE WILDERNESS

Tuesday September 10

READING: Ángel Losada, "The Controversy between Sepúlveda and Las Casas in the Junta of Valladolid," in Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, eds., *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work* (1971), pp. 279-300. [handout]

Bartolomé de las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians* (c. 1552), trans. Stafford Poole (1992), pp. 25-30. [handout]

John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), in Perry Miller, ed., *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (1956), pp. 78-84. [handout]

Thursday September 12

READING: Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, begin reading.

Your other assignment for today is to read the newspaper and watch the news on September 11th and September 12th. Listen carefully to the speeches that are made and the public ceremonies that commemorate September 11th, and be prepared to talk about how different speakers reflect on the idea of America.

WEEK 3 BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE ART OF SELF-INVENTION

Tuesday September 17

READING: Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, finish reading.
Benjamin Franklin, "The Way to Wealth."
Benjamin Franklin, "Poor Richard's Maxims."
Benjamin Franklin, "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North-America."

Thursday September 19

WRITING: ROUGH DRAFT OF FIRST WRITING ASSIGNMENT due at beginning of class today.
Bring two copies with you.

WEEK 4 DECLARING AND CONSTITUTING AMERICA

Tuesday September 24

WRITING: FINAL DRAFT OF FIRST WRITING ASSIGNMENT due at beginning of class today.

READING: The Declaration of Independence (1776). [electronic reserve]

“The Declaration of Independence: The Jefferson Draft with Congress’s Editorial Changes,” in Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (1997), pp. 235-241. [electronic reserve]

The Constitution (1787) and The Bill of Rights (1791). [electronic reserve]

Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (1788), nos. 1-6, 9-10, and 14. We will pay particular attention to no. 10.

Thursday September 26

READING: Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (1788), nos. 37-39, 44-46, 51, 84-85.

WEEK 5 THE JEFFERSONIAN VISION

Tuesday October 1

READING: Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), begin reading. You are welcome to read all of it, but much of the commentary on natural history and landscape is skimmable. Be sure to pay close attention to Queries V, VI (especially the last half, starting on p. 61 of the Penguin edition, which deals with Native Americans), VIII, XI, XIII, XIV, XVII, XVIII, and XIX.

Thursday October 3

READING: Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), finish reading.

Thomas Jefferson, “An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom” (1786), included as “Appendix No. III” in the Penguin edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, pp. 231-232.

Thomas Jefferson, correspondence with Benjamin Banneker (1791), included in the Penguin edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, pp. 271-275.

WEEK 6 THE TRANSCENDENTAL MOMENT

Tuesday October 8

WRITING: SECOND WRITING ASSIGNMENT due at the beginning of class.

Thursday October 10

READING: Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (1837), and "Self-Reliance" (1841), in Nina Baym et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th ed. (2003), pp. 1135-1147 and 1160-1176. [electronic reserve]

Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849), in Nina Baym et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th ed. (2003), pp. 1792-1807. [electronic reserve]

WEEK 7 WRITTEN BY HIMSELF: FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Tuesday October 15

Fall Break. No class.

Thursday October 17

READING: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845).

WEEK 8 ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR

Tuesday October 22

READING: Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, selections tba. For today's class, we will focus primarily on the years before the Civil War, with special attention to the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

Thursday October 24

READING: Abraham Lincoln, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, selections tba. For today's class, we will focus primarily on the Civil War era.

WEEK 9 THE CIVIL WAR AND THE GILDED AGE

Tuesday October 29

WRITING: THIRD WRITING ASSIGNMENT due at the beginning of class today.

Thursday October 31

READING: Andrew Carnegie, "How I Served My Apprenticeship" and "The Gospel of Wealth" in *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays*, ed. Edward C. Kirkland (1962), pp. 3-49. [electronic reserve]

Thorstein Veblen, "Conspicuous Consumption," from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), pp. 68-101. [electronic reserve]

WEEK 10 THE SELF-MADE MAN AND THE SELF-MADE WOMAN

Tuesday November 5

READING: Horatio Alger, *Struggling Upward, or, Luke Larkin's Luck* (1886).

Thursday November 7

READING: Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1902). Read all of the memoir and as many of the letters as you wish.

WEEK 11 WASHINGTON AND DUBOIS

Tuesday November 12

READING: Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (1901), chs. 1-5, 7-8, and 10-14, in John Hope Franklin, ed., *Three Negro Classics* (1970).

WRITING: GROUP ONE REVISED ESSAY due at the beginning of class today.

Thursday November 14

READING: W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Forethought, chs. 1, 3-4, 7-8, 14, and Afterthought, in John Hope Franklin, ed., *Three Negro Classics* (1970).

WEEK 12 AMERICA IN A WORLD AT WAR

Tuesday November 19

READING: E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981), pp. 1-158.

WRITING: GROUP TWO REVISED ESSAY due at the beginning of class today.

Thursday November 21

READING: E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981), pp. 161-315.

WEEK 13 AMERICA ON A WORLD STAGE

Tuesday November 26

READING: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "The Four Freedoms" (1941) and "War Message to Congress" (1941), in Diane Ravitch, ed., *The American Reader* (1990), pp. 281-284. [electronic reserve]

Henry R. Luce, "The American Century" (1941) in John K. Jessup, ed., *The Ideas of Henry Luce* (1969), pp. 105-120. [electronic reserve]

United Nations General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). [electronic reserve]

WRITING: GROUP THREE REVISED ESSAY due at the beginning of class today.

Thursday November 28

Thanksgiving. No class.

WEEK 14 THE AMERICAN DREAM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Tuesday December 3

READING: Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California" (1956) and "America" (1956), in Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2d. ed. (1988), pp. 1215-1218. [electronic reserve]

Allen Ginsberg, "Howl" (1956), in Nina Baym et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th ed. (2003), pp. 2865-2872. [electronic reserve]

VIEWING: *Easy Rider* (1969).

WRITING: GROUP FOUR REVISED ESSAY due at the beginning of class today.

Thursday December 5

READING: Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, chs. 1-3, 10, 12-13.

WEEK 15 THE AMERICAN DREAM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Tuesday December 10

WRITING: FINAL PAPER DUE at the beginning of class today.

READING: Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," (1963), in *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), pp. 76-95. [electronic reserve]