

ENG 324: THE BLUES TRADITION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE (Fall 2012)

Tues/Thurs 2:30-3:45 in Bishop 324

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Office hours: Tuesday 4-6 PM and by appointment

Course Description:

This course will explore the way in which African American (and selected white American) writers have translated the oral culture and social milieu of blues musicians into a range of literary forms: epigrams, poems, stories, novels, plays, folkloric interviews, and autobiographies. Since the blues tradition is firmly grounded in what David Oshinsky has called “the ordeal of Jim Crow justice,” we’ll devote considerable attention to the way in which adverse social conditions in the early modern South—lynching, segregation, sharecropping, and other forms of economic exploitation—are represented and contested by blues texts. We’ll cover a range of other themes as well: the laughing-to-keep-from-crying dialectic; the emergence of southern juke joints; the spread of blues music north with the help of two Great Migrations and its progressive transformation into “classic” blues, amplified Chicago blues, and postmodern blues; “signifying” as a blues-textual strategy; womanly self-assertion and the sounding of desire as paradigmatic blues modes; the emergence of a mass white blues audience in the 1960s; contemporary blues culture as a space of interracial contact in which the enduring legacy of segregation is challenged and sometimes overcome.

Course objectives and learning outcomes:

After completing this course, students will have:

- *) a greatly improved knowledge base with which to contextualize and evaluate a range of blues texts, including literary works, recordings, and live performances;
- *) a more nuanced sense of the dialectical tensions at work in the blues—despair/euphoria, enslavement/freedom, tragedy/comedy, reality/fantasy—and a corresponding ability to think their way past clichés (i.e., “The blues are an expression of the black man’s pain” and “No black, no white, just the blues”);
- *) a working familiarity with the relevant critical vocabulary (e.g., blues ethos, call and response, AAB stanzaic form, disciplinary violence);
- *) an improved ability to formulate a thesis and write a short literature paper;
- *) a greater facility at presenting and defending their ideas in a classroom setting

Required texts:

W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1991)

August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Plume Books, 1988)

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Perennial, 1998)

B. B. King, *Blues All Around Me* (Quill, 1999)

coursepak (to be purchased at CopyTime in downtown Oxford)

Course requirements and grading policy:

It is your responsibility to obtain a copy of all of the course texts listed above, including the course pak; to read the portion of the text to be discussed on a given day; and to bring the text to class that day, prepared to participate actively in class discussion. Students who regularly fail to bring the assigned text(s) to class and/or participate in discussion will find the “class participation” portion of their final course grade diminished.

PLEASE NOTE: This classroom is a real community, not a virtual community, and your full embodied presence is required. You must turn off and stow smart phones, cell phones, and all other PDAs when class begins. Laptop computers may not be opened during class. I heartily encourage you to take notes, but you must take them by hand. As a condition of remaining registered in this class, you are required to read and sign an Appropriate Use Policy (AUP) statement, which governs the use of laptops, cell phones, and PDAs in the classroom. If the requirements spelled out in this paragraph strike you as an intolerable burden—well, your blues education has begun.

Students must complete all written elements of the course; any written element not completed and handed in will receive a grade of zero. Two such zeroes (except for quizzes) will result in automatic failure in the course. There will be no make-up quizzes or exams.

Your final grade will be calculated as follows, using the recently-adopted +/- scale:

Paper #1:	15%
Paper #2:	15%
Midterm Exam:	20%
Final Exam:	30%
Quizzes	10%
Class particip.	10%

Papers:

Two shorter (4-5 page) papers are required. Both will be standard academic essays on one or more of the course texts with topics provided by the instructor. These papers will allow students to engage more fully with the reading material and exercise the skills required to write a literature paper. The papers should articulate a convincing thesis in clear, economical prose and quote from the text(s) as a way of proving that thesis. Please proofread! Due dates are listed in the syllabus. The essays should be double-spaced, in 12-point type, with standard margins. I will give you more specific assignments roughly 10 days before each paper is due. Late papers will be marked down 3 points per day (i.e., per 24 hours of lateness).

Exams:

There will be an in-class midterm and a final exam. Both exams will ask you to ID a selection of passages drawn from the course readings and then analyze and contextualize them. On the final, you will also be asked to write a longer essay about three or more of the course texts.

Quizzes:

I'll give you occasional quizzes during the first 5-10 minutes of class. These are designed primarily as a way of encouraging prompt and regular attendance and keeping you accountable for that day's reading assignment. A secondary purpose is to diversify your grade portfolio, so that your final grade becomes slightly less dependent on the other course elements: papers and exams. I will curve quizzes as needed and will drop your lowest quiz grade. If you are absent on the day I give a quiz, that 0 will become your dropped grade. If you show up late, while a quiz is happening, you may do as much of it as you're able to complete during the time that remains.

Academic honesty:

Cheating on exams and plagiarizing are serious offenses and will not be tolerated. Keep in mind that plagiarism includes a range of activities, from having someone else write part or all of your assigned work to using someone else's words or ideas--including material found on the Worldwide Web--without acknowledging the source. Web-assisted plagiarism is easy to detect and would be an extremely bad idea. Students engaging in any sort of academic dishonesty will critically endanger their ability to pass this course. If you're in any doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, the University Library staff has created a 20-minute video that will set you straight. It can be found at the following URL, or by simply googling the words "ole miss plagiarism" without quotes: http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/general_library/instruction/resources/plagiarism_ac_honesty/plagiarism_academic_honesty.html

Attendance policy:

Regular, on-time-and-in-time attendance is expected of all students. An attendance sheet will be passed around at the beginning of class. All present students are responsible for signing themselves in. You will be allowed a total of four (4) absences with no negative consequences. (Please note: I do not differentiate between reasons for absences—i.e., there's no such thing as an "excused" or "unexcused" absence in my class. Save your absences for when you need them.) Each successive absence will deduct five points from your final course grade. Anyone with nine or more absences will automatically fail the course. Students with borderline final grade-point averages—i.e., 89, 79, 69—and perfect attendance at term's end will receive special consideration.

Schedule of Assignments:

ORIGINS, DEFINITIONS, AND MYTHS

- Tue 8/21: course introduction
- Thu 8/23: Steven C. Tracy, *Goin' to Cincinnati* (handout)
Kalamu ya Salaam, "The Blues Aesthetic" (handout)
- Tue 8/28: Barry Lee Pearson, *Jook Right On* ("Introduction, "Blues Talk")
(coursepak)
- Thu 8/30: Pearson, *Jook Right On* ("Turn-Arounds") (coursepak)

Tue 9/4: W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (Ch 1-7)
PAPER #1 ASSIGNED

Thu 9/6: Handy, *Father of the Blues* (Ch. 8-14)

Tue 9/11: Steven A. King, “Blues Myths and the Rhetorical Imagination of Place”
and “A Blues Counteremory: The History of Mississippi, The Story of
the Delta” (coursepak)
poems: Sterling Plumpp (coursepak)

Thu 9/13: live performance/Q&A: Bill “Howl-N-Madd” Perry
PAPER #1 DUE

BLUES POETICS: FORM, PORTRAITURE, POWER

Tue 9/18: Steven C. Tracy, “Creating the Blues” (coursepak)
poems: Langston Hughes (coursepak)

Thu 9/20: poems: Hughes (cont’d), Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden (coursepak)

Tue 9/25: Angela Davis, “I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama” (coursepak)
poems: Wanda Coleman, Sherley Anne Williams, Eugene Redmond (coursepak)

Thu 9/27: Larry Neal, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation” (coursepak)
poems: Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight, Quincy Troupe, Jayne Cortez

Tue 10/2: **MIDTERM EXAM**

BLUESWOMEN AND THEIR MEN, BLUESMEN AND THEIR WOMEN

Thu 10/4: August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (Act I)
Wilson, “Preface to Three Plays”

Tue 10/9: Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (Act II)

Thu 10/11: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Ch. 1-6)

Tue 10/16: Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Ch. 7-13)
Adam Gussow, “Guns, Knives, and Buckets of Blood” (coursepak)

Thu 10/18: Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Ch. 14-20)

Tue 10/23: B. B. King, *Blues All Around Me* (Ch. 1-8)

Thu 10/25: King, *Blues All Around Me* (Ch. 9-18)
PAPER #2 ASSIGNED

Tue 10/30: King, *Blues All Around Me* (Ch. 19-26)

BLACKS, WHITES, AND BLUES

Thu 11/1: Michael Bloomfield, *Me and Big Joe* (coursepak)

Tue 11/6: film: *Crossroads* (first half, in class)
PAPER #2 DUE

Thu 11/8: film: *Crossroads* (second half, in class)

Tue 11/13: Ben Caldwell, “Birth of a Blues” (coursepak)
Roland L. Freeman, “Don’t Forget the Blues” (coursepak)
BeBe Moore Campbell, *Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine* (coursepak)

Thu 11/15: Frank Matheis, “Guy Davis Has It All—Or Does He?” (coursepak)
Adam Gussow, “Whose Blues? Eight Infuriating (and Hope-Inducing)
Half-Truths About the Modern Blues Scene” (coursepak)
Vincent Leitch, “Blues Southwestern Style”
Blues/rap dialogues (in class):
 “Uncle Tom is Dead,” Guy Davis & son
 “Bridging the Gap,” Olu Dara and Nas
 TBA, Mark “Muleman” Massey & TBA

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Tue 11/27: live performance/Q&A: Mark “Muleman” Massey

Thu 11/29: course review

FINAL EXAM: Tuesday, December 4th, 4-7 PM