

Introduction to African American Literature - Module Description

This module will explore multiple forms of black literary production from the late 18th Century through to the late 20th Century. Course readings will emphasise some of the ways African American literature is constructed by and through concepts of class, gender, sexuality and migration. We will consider how African American literature contributes to processes of nation building and the development of national identity. What are some of the key elements of 'the' African American literary tradition? How is African American literature in conversation with other forms of material production such as visual art, music, and film? How have particular historical eras helped to shape black literary production in the U.S.? Which tools are needed in order to effectively and thoroughly interpret African American literature? These are some of the questions that will guide lecture and seminar sessions. Readings will include poetry, essays, autobiography, novels and the spoken word. One of the defining features of African American literature is its dual role of imaginative act and historical documentation for a group that has often been denied a public voice. This module aims to provide an introduction to the study of literature and culture as well as an introduction to African American literary forms and creative expression.

Learning Outcomes

On completion of the module students will be expected to have

1. Demonstrated and applied a basic knowledge of African American Literary forms and theories such as the slave narrative, the idea of double consciousness and the uses of vernacular language.
2. Distinguished between major periods of African American literary production, such as Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement and also understood these periods as part of wider historical contexts.

3. Demonstrated basic skills of literary analysis such as close reading, understanding the stylistic structure of language and discerning authorial point-of-view.
4. Discussed the literary features of assigned readings, eschewing the reading of texts as transparent transcriptions of reality, and learned how to interpret them as mediated representations.

Format

Each week, a one-hour lecture followed by a one-hour seminar.

Assessment

- Class participation (10%)
- 1,500 word essay (40%)
- Final exam (50%)

Required texts

- Henry Louis Gates, jr. and Nellie McKay (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Lecture and seminar schedule

1. Issues in the study of African American literature and culture
2. Poetic structures: Phillis Wheatley and Langston Hughes
3. The slave narrative: writing a people into a nation
4. Reconstruction and the project of uplift
5. The Harlem Renaissance and the uptown aesthetic
6. The vernacular tradition: writing the oral text
7. The great migration and the era of reluctant integration
8. Civil Rights and Black Power
9. The people who could fly: postmodernist tendencies
10. Revision lecture



2 | This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.

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