



## **Intro to American Literature – Syllabus**

**Course Description:** We are surrounded by references to great literature, whether or not we recognize it. By interacting with these works, we not only better understand our world, but we build critical thinking skills and empathy for those around us. In *Intro to American Literature*, we will survey the greatest works of American fiction, providing special focus on literature that has shaped our cultural consciousness like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Great Gatsby*. Students will be encouraged to interact with the texts on a variety of levels, such as literature analysis, character sketches, creative responses, and close readings.

### **Course Outline:**

**Week One:** American Foundations – Introduction and Letters of John & Abigail Adams

**Week Two:** American Romanticism – Selections from *The Scarlet Letter*  
and Twain’s “Rules” of Literary Art

**Week Three:** American Poetry – Poe, Dickinson, Frost, Cummings

**Week Four:** The Lost Generation - *The Great Gatsby*

**Week Five:** *The Great Gatsby*, Continued

**Week Six:** American Theater - *A Raisin in the Sun*

**Week Seven:** American Identity - *To Kill a Mockingbird*

**Week Eight:** *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Continued & Finals

**Grading Information:** All assignments will be graded using *The Advanced Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

## **Required Texts:**

*Please note that, on heavier reading weeks, we will have shorter or lighter written assignments. Our goal is that students are understanding and enjoying the texts!*

The student should have access to the following works, via internet links provided in each lesson, attached PDF documents provided with some lessons, or hard copies borrowed or purchased. Selections cover as wide a geographical and cultural background as possible, while still including essential works of the American literary canon.

**Note on content:** *While we always strive to pick clean and uplifting works, some highly valuable texts result from cultural backgrounds that involve some negative or challenging content. Therefore, we recommend that a parent or trusted adult at least briefly review works and reach out if they would like to substitute a work that matches student and/or family values.*

**If you have any trouble finding a particular text,** please let us know promptly so that we can help!

### **Week One: American Foundations**

**Reading:** Letters of John & Abigail Adams (Available online; links provided)

**Value:** As America was taking shape as a nation, John and Abigail Adams corresponded with each other through some 1,200 letters. Their letters provide insight into the life of a Founding Father and Founding Mother and are considered integral primary documents in the history of the United States.

### **Week Two: American Romanticism**

**Reading:** Nathaniel Hawthorne, selections from *The Scarlet Letter*

**Value:** Author of numerous short stories and novels, Hawthorne played a central literary role in the American Romantic era.

**Reading:** Mark Twain, selections from “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses” (PDF provided)

**Value:** Known as the Father of American Literature, Mark Twain wrote twenty-eight books and countless other works throughout his iconic career. As we cover his literary box-office-hits *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) in our Growing Literature classes, here we touch on one of his well-known essays.

### **Week Three: American Poetry**

**Reading:** Edgar Allen Poe, “The Raven” (PDF provided)

**Value:** One of the first American authors to make a living through his work, Poe played a major role in the Romantic and Gothic movements and contributed to what would eventually develop into the genre of science fiction. The 1845 poem “The Raven” was Poe's first major literary success.

**Reading:** Emily Dickinson, “Because I could not stop for Death” (PDF provided)

**Value:** During her lifetime, Dickinson penned some 1,800 poems though only 10 of those were published. Her success as a poet did not come until well after her death, but she is now regarded as one of the most significant figures in American poetry. From her childhood, Dickinson was known for being preoccupied by the idea of death, and many of her poems reflect this topic.

**Reading:** Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken” (PDF provided)

**Value:** Although Robert Frost initially found success in having his poetry published in England, he eventually became a well-known American poet and won four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry. Frost grew up in the city but depicted mostly rural settings throughout his poetry which, although seemingly straightforward on the surface, regularly explored complex themes.

**Reading:** E.E. Cummings “[i carry your heart with me (i carry it in)]” (PDF provided)

**Value:** Although Cummings wrote everything from poems to plays, essays to novels, we explore his most well-known poem in this lesson for its distinct style and structure. Cummings experimented freely with structure and mechanics, exploring a new way of sharing poetic vision with his readers, leading him to become one of the most prominent poets of the 20th century.

### **Weeks Four & Five: The Lost Generation**

**Reading:** F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

**Value:** The author of more than 100 short stories along with several story collections and novels, Fitzgerald is another well-known writer who did not achieve fame until after his death. Now considered one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, Fitzgerald is best known for his two modernist novels, *The Great Gatsby*—which we read in class—and *Tender in the Night*, both of which highlight Fitzgerald's incredible skill in bringing a historical period to life.

## **Week Six: American Theater**

**Reading:** Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

**Value:** Throughout *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry boldly paints a picture of life in the middle of the 20th century. As an African-American female playwright, Hansberry used her work to raise thought-provoking questions about age, race, city life, money, gender, and moral responsibility.

## **Weeks Seven & Eight: American Identity**

**Reading:** Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

**Value:** One of the best-known modern American novels, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was Harper Lee's sole success. Despite this coming-of-age novel's instantaneous fame, Lee led a secluded life following its publication and never published anything else. Still, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has endured in its success while it champions the ideals of integrity and moral confidence and raises important discussions about the topic of racial inequality.

There is no required edition; the student must simply cite the edition used. **Please make sure that your copy of the text is not abridged.** Other works will be provided in PDF format to the students, although students are more than welcome to find their own print copies!

If possible, we recommend that students interact with the text (highlighting and marginal notes), but students are *not* required to own copies of the works—texts from the library are perfectly all right! If you would like to own a particular text, inexpensive copies can be found online and at used bookstores.

As students tend to experience stronger reading comprehension when not reading on a screen, we would also highly recommend that students have access to a hard copy of the works (a printed out PDF works well, too!).



## **Intro to American Literature**

### **Lesson One: American Foundations**

#### **SAMPLE LESSON**

Why is it important to study literature?

I bet that, at some point in your life, you have asked yourself this question. Maybe you have never understood the purpose of reading—maybe you love literature, but haven't given much thought as to why we put it on a curriculum.

Simply put, what we write reflects who we are. Therefore, when we read, we connect with experiences other than our own, finding similarities and grappling with differences. Reading helps us learn to think critically, to care deeply, and to understand broadly.

Throughout this course, we will focus on those goals.

- We are going to learn more about the American culture and experience, whether it is new to us or whether we have never known anything else.
- We will explore works of literature from people just like us and people completely different from us, and strive to empathize with both.
- And, to join in the American written tradition, we will also have opportunities for showing off our personalities, interests, and opinions through various forms of writing.

#### **TIPS TO READ AND UNDERSTAND LITERATURE –**

Whether this is your first or hundredth class, it's a good idea to think about *how* we read. Here's what we have found to be the most successful way to study literature—plus, it doesn't add much extra time to your reading, *and* prepares you for any analysis or writing you'll do afterwards.

- **Understand, and keep trying to understand, the context and the intention.** What kind of culture existed when this was written? What did the author hope to gain from this story? You may

be able to learn some of these answers before you start reading, but keep your eyes open for more clues as you go. It's easy to "judge a book by its cover."

- **If possible, have a summary available for tough texts.** This way, we won't get lost in confusing words or long paragraphs. With tough texts, we would recommend reading the summary beforehand, using it to understand unclear segments, or reviewing it to make sure that you grasped the text properly.
- **Look up words you don't know and write down the definitions,** whether that's in the margins, above the word, or on a separate sheet of paper. Next week, we'll have an assignment digging into language, so this is good practice.
- **Write comments, questions, and summaries as you read, either in the margins or in a separate book.** When we read, it's easy to forget details, right? Keeping notes not only helps us remember, but it reinforces what we read in our memory and ensures that we're really comprehending what we read.
  - **One Example Process:** Write a short summary of each chapter, then each section or part, then the work as a whole. Also note keywords in the margins that might be useful to write about later (e.g. "family," "hope," "loss"). If you write keywords in the top-hand corners, it is easy to see as you skim back through the book!
- If possible, **read the piece a second time!** This helps a lot before writing on a piece of literature. It's important to make sure that the work is fresh in your mind, and you might catch things you missed!

How are we feeling about that? Again, these tactics won't add much to your reading time—and we will try to keep our intros short so you have time to read well. If you'd like to dig deeper into particular aspects of our historical context, footnotes will be provided in a works cited list following the weekly assignment.

Now, let's turn the clocks back . . .

## **AMERICAN REVOLUTION 101 –**

Although Queen Elizabeth I reformed many of the policies of the Church of England established by her father, Henry VII, many Protestants were concerned that the entire entity was corrupt and that the reforms were simply not enough. This group was known as the "separatists," wanting to separate from the Church of England and establish their own churches. To accomplish this, many Protestants left England in 1609 to reside in Holland. After eleven years, some of the members of this group, known as the Pilgrims, returned to England but ultimately set sail for the New World on the *Mayflower* on August 5, 1620.

Another group of Protestants, known as the Puritans, also disagreed with the policies of the Church of England. However, rather than separate from the church, the Puritans hoped to bring their own reforms to the institution. However, as religious and political tensions continued across England, Puritan men and women like Simon and Anne Bradstreet boarded ships and made the long and arduous journey across the Atlantic Ocean, in search of freedom in the new world. This Puritan Migration, which took place from 1620-1640, resulted in numerous new settlements in America. (For example, both Anne Bradstreet's husband and father would serve as governors of the new Massachusetts Bay Colony.)

For many decades, this arrangement seemed to work. English Colonists came to America in search of liberty and opportunity. Some came in search of riches. Many poor English people signed indenture agreements, essentially a contract which offered free passage to America in exchange for a specified time period of work. Although the English Colonists were living in the New World, they were still very much a part of England.

So, let's imagine, for a moment, that you and I are two of many siblings in a big family. Our parents have just given us permission to live by ourselves on a plot of land miles and miles away from the family. We have to build our own house with our own resources, farm for our own food, and find out how to get along with the neighbors (whose land we may or may not be taking—an ethical question for another class).

But, after all that hard work, our parents still want us to pay them rent. To add insult to injury, they won't allow us any say in how much we have to pay them—or, honestly, just about anything else. That, in a very simplified metaphor, is what led eventually up to the American Revolution in 1776.

Your history classes can delve into much greater detail, but here is what you should know. Our first states were English colonies, but England continually taxed us . . . without allowing us representation in their Parliament. Tensions rose until the Americans expressed their grievances to England—and, not long after, declared a rebellion against the Crown.

### **MEET THE ADAMS FAMILY (NO, NOT THAT ONE) –**

In the midst of these tumultuous times lived a favorite family of the Revolution.

John Adams was born into the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1735. He was the great-grandson of Henry Adams, an Englishman who emigrated from Braintree, Essex in England to what became Braintree, Massachusetts sometime around 1632/1633. Abigail Adams was born in 1744 in Massachusetts. Her great-

great-grandfather, Thomas Boylston is believed to have sailed from England to America in 1635 and settled in Watertown, Massachusetts. (1)

John and Abigail Adams married on October 25, 1764. They began their married life in Braintree, Massachusetts and later moved to Boston. Together, the couple had six children—Abigail (“Nabby”), John Quincy, Grace Susanna (“Suky”), Charles, Thomas Boylston, and Elizabeth (sadly, stillborn).

John and Abigail Adams had a witty, loving relationship, even while John was serving as one of the leading political figures in the American Revolution. They were well-read, strong, and resourceful—Abigail ran their estate while John was involved in the Revolution—and both were strongly principled. (John, a lawyer, chose to represent the British soldiers accused in the Boston Massacre so that they still had their right to a fair trial.) They were truly outstanding people.

On March 4, 1797, John Adams was inaugurated as the second President of the United States. John and Abigail Adams were the first Presidential couple to reside in the White House when the nation's capital was relocated to Washington, D.C. in 1800. Later, their son, John Quincy Adams, became the sixth president of the United States. Because of this, Abigail Adams became the first woman (and one of only two) to be married to one United States President and the mother of another United States President.

John Adams and his son John Quincy Adams are noted as the only two of the first twelve presidents to *not* own any slaves. Abigail Adams, herself, disagreed with slavery and wrote about the topic in several of her letters.

Abigail Adams died on October 28, 1818 at the age of 73. John Adams passed away on July 4, 1826 at the age of 90. His passing occurred on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, and only a few hours after the passing of Thomas Jefferson.

Throughout the course of Adam's political obligations, John and Abigail corresponded through roughly 1,200 letters. Historian Joseph Ellis, in his work *First Family: Abigail and John Adams*, states that these letters, “constituted a treasure trove of unexpected intimacy and candor, more revealing than any other correspondence between a prominent American husband and wife in American history.” He goes on to say that, “the distinctive quality of their correspondence, apart from its sheer volume and the dramatic character of the history that was happening around them, is its unwavering emotional honesty.” (2)

This week, we are going to be reading two letters from the Adamses, one from Abigail and one from John. We have selected these letters because the Adamses document a prime moment in the foundation of our



country's history, and because they let us hear from multiple sides of the Revolution. John provides insight into the life of a Founding Father, and Abigail that of a Founding Mother. We hear about everyday family life in the dawn of American nationality, as well as their fears, concerns, and hopes.

## **FORMATTING LITERARY WRITING: MLA OVERVIEW –**

Before we move on to this week's assignment, let's review formatting. To standardize our assignments and prepare you for higher education or careers that involve writing, we will use MLA (Modern Language Association) formatting for all of our assignments.

### **What is MLA?**

To keep formatting consistent in the writing world, we have a variety of "styles" that provide rules for formatting. Rules range from how you cite sources to how you capitalize article titles. In collegiate English, and most high school English, we rely on MLA style.

### **Okay, but why are we using MLA?**

In general, MLA standardizes how we cite sources and ensures that we include important information like course titles or dates. Also, if you choose to pursue higher education, you will most likely need to write English papers. Most English professors expect you to use MLA formatting, so this will give you a head start! Once you're comfortable with one formatting style, it also becomes easier to transition into other styles. That'll make it simpler if your future career or interests involve any type of writing.

### **How do we write in MLA?**

Once you've familiarized yourself with the rules, formatting a paper tends to only take 5-10 minutes (if that). You can even make your own templates and work from there! There are lots of helpful online resources for MLA (my favorite is Purdue OWL), but here are the general rules to follow in the 8th edition. You can find an example essay via Purdue OWL here. **We have provided an overview with formatting information on the essentials of MLA for this course. You can find it attached to this week's email.**

Formatting is always challenging, but it gets easier with practice! If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out. I'm here to help!

**Assignment 1A:** Read these two letters (links are attached with this week's lesson):

- Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 19 August 1774
- Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 28 August 1774

**Assignment 1B:** Write and submit a response, answering the five questions below. Each answer should be 4+ sentences and demonstrate proper paragraph structure, strong writing skills, and use of specific examples and/or direct quotes as applicable."

**Your answers should be submitted using MLA format:** your name, your instructor's name, the course, and the date in the upper left-hand corner; standard font size 12; double-spaced. (no title is required for this assignment.)

- What is your previous experience, if any, with American literature?
- What is your previous experience, if any, with American history?
- What is your previous experience, if any, with reading and writing about literature as a whole?
- What is at least one thing which surprised you about John & Abigail Adams' letters? Why?
- What is at least one thing you learned from John & Abigail Adams' letters?

**Sources –**

1. "Adams Family Tree." *Massachusetts Historical Society Founded 1791*, <https://www.masshist.org/adams/family-tree>.
2. Ellis, Joseph. *First Family: Abigail and John Adams*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.