

Instructor: Mikhail Kleynman
Sample Syllabus: Upper-Level Elective

Financial Fictions in 19th-Century American Literature

Course Description

This is a course about conmen, reporters, deceivers, financiers, hoaxers, witnesses, and storytellers—in short, it's a class about what's at stake in believing—or not—a narrative.

Our first unit looks at how early 19th-century American literature developed the idea of credit, both as an economic concept and in the sense of “credulity.” We'll begin with some of the stranger works of canonical American authors like *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (Poe's only novel and perhaps a half-hearted hoax) and *The Confidence-Man* (Melville's puzzling last novel, published quite deliberately on April Fool's Day). In reading these short stories and novels, we'll explore how economic concerns went hand-in-hand with questions of trust, credibility, and narrative.

Our second unit will consider how these questions took on new form in the context of American slavery. Turning to both fictionalized and autobiographical accounts of slavery, we'll see how these narratives balanced critiques of the economics of slavery on one hand with appeals for credibility to predominantly white audiences on the other.

In our third unit, we'll turn to a mix of canonical and popular texts that depict the economics of domesticity. These texts—like much of Fanny Fern's work and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*—often feature critiques of the precarious economic position of women, while simultaneously turning representations of this plight into a literary commodity that would far outsell the work of more established authors. I'd like to pay especially close attention to the strategies by which these narratives sought to retain a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude while courting readers in the literary marketplace.

The final unit looks at how all these literary preoccupations find their fullest expression in the naturalist literature of the century's end. Working with texts by Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Edith Wharton, we'll discuss how the need to convincingly represent the horrors of increasingly desperate economic inequality contributed to the development of a new literary form.

Each unit features a contemporary film that resorts to nineteenth-century ideas about fiction and credibility in order to exercise a powerful hold on our current ways of thinking.

Grades will be based on participation in course discussions, a mid-term paper, and a final paper.

Below, you'll find a course calendar for the semester; below that, the assignments and policies for the course. **Texts in bold must be purchased or taken out from the library in physical form.** All other films/readings will be provided on our course site.

Please read this carefully before our first day of class and make sure to order the required books well in advance.

COURSE CALENDAR
(subject to change)

Class 1

- Syllabus, introductions.

Unit 1: Credit and Credibility (Or: Hucksters, Hoaxes, and Cons)

Class 2: Questions of Faith

- Washington Irving, “The Devil and Tom Walker” (1824)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown” (1835)
- Selections from Benjamin Franklin, “The Way to Wealth” (1758)

Class 3: Looking for work

- Edgar Allan Poe, “The Business Man” (1840)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1831)

Class 4: “An impudent and ingenious fiction”

- Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) (Ch. 1 – 12)

Class 5: “To lie like truth is no such easy affair”

- Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) (Ch. 13 – end)

Class 6: “An honest man has nothing to fear”

- Film: Steven Spielberg, *Catch Me If You Can* (2002)

Class 7: “How subtle a thing is suspicion”

- Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (1857) (Ch. 1 – 22)

Class 8: “A perfect goose, a beautiful goose”

- Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (1857) (Ch. 23 – end)

Unit 2: The Economies of Slavery

Class 9: “Do you complain that I have written fiction?”

- Lydia Maria Child, “The Quadroons” (1842)

Class 10: “To give a candid and truthful statement of facts”

- Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853)

Class 11: “This is no fiction, no exaggeration”

- Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853)

Class 12: Mid-term paper workshops: Come with 2-3 pages ready to discuss.

Class 13: Useful delusions, useless truths

- Film/Streaming: Episodes 1 & 2 of *The Underground Railroad* (2021), dir. Barry Jenkins

Class 14: “Some of my adventures may seem incredible”

- Selections from Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)
- Selections from Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)

Unit 3: Domestic Economies**Class 15: Selling sentiment**

- Selected sketches from Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Port-Folio* (1853)

Class 16: “It’s so dreadful to be poor!”

- Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868) Part One

Class 17: “Doing heaps of good with your money”

- Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868) Part Two

Class 18: Inheriting risk

- Film: Jane Campion, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996)

Class 19: Utopia in the year 2000

- Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) (Ch. 1 – 15)

Class 20: “A colossal, world-darkening blunder”

- Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) (Ch. 16 – end)

Unit 4: Naturalism and Class Conflict**Class 21: “A wonderfully vivid picture”**

- Selections from Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)
- Stephen Crane, “An Experiment in Misery” (1894)

Class 22: “For gold, for gold, for gold”

- Frank Norris, *McTeague* (1899) (Ch. 1 – 11)

Class 23: A little guilt prison

- Frank Norris, *McTeague* (1899) (Ch. 12 – end)

Class 24: “Money that ought by rights come to you”

- Film: Paul Thomas Anderson, *There Will Be Blood* (2007)

Class 25: “The only way not to think about money...”

- Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905) Book One

Class 26: “... is to have a great deal of it.”

- Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905) Book Two

Last Class

- Final Paper Consultations

TECHNOLOGY POLICY

This is a discussion-heavy course in which you'll spend most of class time speaking, asking questions, and listening to other students' comments. All of this only works when students are fully present, which is why laptop, tablet, etc. use is not permitted during class. The same, of course, goes for phones.

If you have a special reason or accommodation for technology use, please email me or speak to me after class.

ASSIGNMENTS

Mid-term paper: This assignment will be 6-8 double-spaced pages in length and will ask you to offer an argument on a single one of our texts. You will get a formal assignment with prompts and guidelines later. **Due at noon of the day stated.**

Final paper: A 10–15-page research essay that advances an original argument on the material covered in this course. You will have to incorporate secondary/critical sources (e.g., scholarly articles or books). Formal guidelines and prompt to follow. **Note: you will have the opportunity to submit a rough draft to me for comments and guidance before the deadline. Due at noon of the day stated.**

GRADING

Participation: 25%

Mid-term paper: 25%

Final paper: 50%

ATTENDANCES AND ABSENCES

You're expected to come to—and participate in—every class. After one unexcused absence, your overall grade will be lowered by one-third of a letter grade for each subsequent unexcused absence (an A becomes an A-, an A- becomes a B+, etc.).

That being said: if you are feeling sick or something comes up that requires you to miss a class, just let me know ahead of time, and it won't be a problem.

If you have athletic, religious, or other commitments that will cause you to miss multiple classes, speak to me at the start of the semester.

These classes can only work if everyone reads/watches the assigned material before class. **If it becomes evident during class that you didn't do the reading, it will affect your participation**

grade significantly—you cannot meaningfully participate in the discussion or the work without doing the reading.

OFFICE HOURS POLICY

I of course encourage you to meet with me for office hours as often as you like. Even if you just want to talk briefly about a text, ask questions about an assignment, or talk about writing in general, I'm always happy to meet.

In the interest of helping students over the initial hurdle of actually coming to office hours, I ask that **before [DATE], you come to office hours at least once**. This is a mandatory component of the class. Beyond that, whether you come to OH or not is up to you.

LATE WORK

The usual rule applies here: one third of a letter grade off for each day a paper is late. In other words, what would have been an A becomes an A-, what would have been an A- becomes a B+, etc.

If you realize in advance you're going to struggle to turn in the midterm or final on time, please reach out 24 hours before the deadline so that we can arrange an extension.

Because posts are designed to structure our class discussion, they must be completed before the week's Wednesday class, no credit for late posts.