

American Literature and American Politics  
Pols-423; Seminar: Topics in American Politics  
Fall, 2003

Tuesday, 4:30-7:30  
MS 225  
Dr. Lane  
X6675; 944-4812  
MS 222

About this Course

In this seminar, we will study how American literature reveals important elements of American politics. For purposes of this class, I would urge you to think of American politics in a very broad sense. American politics is a form of liberal democratic politics that purports to respect the rights and autonomy of individuals to be free of what we condemn as “governmental interference” in many “private” aspects of our lives. As a result, we tend to think of many *social* contexts as *apolitical*, and we blithely assume that our family lives, religious lives, friendships, economic ties, and social alliances are not really topics for *political* analysis. In this seminar, we will adopt an older, more comprehensive approach to thinking about things as political, which is to say that we will take seriously the proposition (unchallenged until the Enlightenment) that family, religion, social ties, and economic relationships are political and in fact play a crucial role in defining and directing the political ideas of a people.

When we open up our minds to consider the possibility that our ideas and relationships are political, we can see that most great works of literature are a discussion of politics, whether they overtly deal with characters who hold offices or win elections or not. Nor is my insisting on this expansive view of the political merely an academic peccadillo. As human beings, we are constantly faced with a choice (albeit one that we often fail to recognize as such) between living a life entirely shaped by the powerful forces of our particular circumstances – where we were born, what our parents thought, what our schools and televisions have told us, and how much money we have – and living a life that is, for lack of a better word, self-conscious. I do not want to enter (at least not yet) the thorny question about how much we can control our own lives, but we can say this much: Even if we may not be able to *change who* we are, we can to a considerable degree *understand* who we are and how we came to be this way. I, for one, would argue that there is far more dignity in knowing who we are and how we came to be this way than to be the unknowing, unthinking product of forces beyond our comprehension. Furthermore, any hope for self-reform, however limited or remote, must be based on self-knowledge. Only when we can unravel the roots of our own formation can we discover how we are creatures of our circumstances and understand how we live better (more just, more pleasant, more well-considered) lives.

As Alexis de Tocqueville argues in our first set of readings, the most defining characteristic of our lives is the regime in which we live, the liberal democratic regime of the United States:

AMONG the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence that this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society; it gives a peculiar direction to public opinion and a peculiar tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities and peculiar habits to the governed. I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less effect on civil society than on the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.

Based on Tocqueville's assertion, we can claim that the study of our "peculiar habits," our "opinions, new sentiments, and novel customs," is, in an indirect way, the study of our peculiar notions of and affinity for equality, and this equality is both the result of and a cause of our politics. Our political habits/ideas and our love of equality exercise a certain reciprocal effect on each other. The politics create the habits, customs, and opinions. The habits, customs, and opinions impact and alter the political institutions. They combine to produce a unique trajectory of social and political history that is both formed and constantly forming who we are, what we think, and how we live our lives.

In this context, the study of American literature is a study of American politics because as the literature reveals our social character, it also serves as a vehicle for discussing the education and influence that our politics exercises on our lives and development. Even in those works that appear utterly *apolitical*, the telltale marks can be discerned. Thus, Paul Cantor (1995, 194) claims that overt discussions about politics may not be included in works about American social life, but this absence in itself tells us something about the special character of our view of politics in America. We must be constantly alert "to the possibility that what is omitted from a work of literature may be as important as what is included."

In this seminar, we will use our study of American literature to think about American politics in a new way. We will try to understand our habits, customs, and beliefs as phenomena that have both political causes and political consequences, and we will use some of the greatest works of American literature to help us better understand ourselves and the nation and culture within which we live. This study may at times appear to be less about politics than some might wish, but I hope that the works for the course, taken as a whole, as a line of works that lead from one thought to another through a series of

steps to an integrated conclusion, will reveal new dimensions to our decisions about our political life that we might otherwise overlook. In the short article cited above, appropriately entitled “Literature and Politics: Understanding the Regime,” Paul Cantor argues that the biggest difference between contemporary literary critics and classical philosophers is that the latter thought that human study and deliberation might improve the human condition while the former think that human beings and institutions are largely beyond any conscious control. Cantor’s classicism is ultimately optimistic. He encourages us to read our literature to better understand our politics because he thinks that the enlightenment that we will gain thereby may help us make better political choices *and* lead more well-considered (private?) lives. I hope that we will come to share Cantor’s optimism and to begin to think through our position so that we may better fulfill our grandest aspirations to self-knowledge and self-definition.

### Grade Formula

Three 5-7 page essays – 20% each, 60% total  
Attendance, Participation, and Reading Journals – 40%

### Attendance, Participation, and Reading Journals

The key to any true seminar experience is that all members of the seminar arrive for each class meeting having read the assignment, formed opinions about its importance, and prepared to share their thoughts with others. In addition to attending each and every class, you must be ready to offer and defend your opinions and to listen to and challenge the opinions of other members of the class. This is a 400-level course. The knee-jerk and ill-considered ideas that may have been appropriate class discussion in introductory classes do not belong here. You need to be devoted to being prepared to make well-considered points that you can ground in the texts and explain to the group.

In order to help you prepare to participate at the appropriate level, you will need to write a reading journal entry for every week in the class for which there is no paper due. There are twelve reading journal assignments on this syllabus. Each journal assignment calls for a mini-essay response. Think about it as a condensed suggestion of what you might write if you were asked to prepare a full-length essay on the topic. Your journal entry should have a clear and identifiable thesis, and should have evidence cited to the text to support that thesis. However, I do not expect you to write a polished essay for each week. In fact, each journal that you submit must be *one single-spaced page in length. No longer! No smaller than 11 point Times!* Therefore, your journal entries will be suggestive more than exhaustive. You will not make your points thoroughly in writing, but you should include enough information so that your readers (your classmates and I) can see where you are going, and you should be prepared to elaborate on your suggestions during the class discussions. This exercise is designed to force you to think about the essence of your arguments to separate the essential points from peripheral or secondary ones. Do not reproduce long quotes or dwell throughout on a minor, particular point. We all have the books and can evaluate your use of the texts for ourselves.

You must send me your journal entry as an email attachment or slide it under my door by 12:00 noon on the day of the class meeting for which the journal entry is due. That means that if we are having class on a Tuesday (as is normally the case), your journal entry must be submitted by no later than 12:00 on that day. I want the journal entries ahead of time for two reasons: 1) I plan to read and grade the journal entries *before* class meetings. 2) I will copy and circulate particularly interesting journal entries to the class to facilitate class discussions.

I will give each submitted journal a score from 1 to 5.

1 = A journal entry that was turned in late (but no journal entries will be accepted after the beginning of class), that had little bearing on the assignment, or that made only cursory reference to the text. In order to receive a 1 a journal must be poorly written, submitted late, or contain evidence that the student has not really read the assignment.

2 = A journal entry that was turned in on time and that made some effort to answer the question but that contains evidence that the student has not read the assignment thoroughly or that it was completed thoughtlessly or at the very last minute. Some journals may receive a 2 even if they contain some good thoughts because they are very poorly written.

3 = A journal entry that is written decently and that contains substantial evidence that the student read the assignment, thought about the material, and made a good faith effort to answer the question with reference to the text. Journal entries that receive a 3 will be those that are competent but not great. I want to be clear that a student who consistently writes 3's *can* make a B for this 40% if s/he attends all the sessions, submits all the journals, and participates regularly in class discussion.

4 = A journal entry that is well-written and thoughtful. Journal entries that offer a plausible answer to the question or a reasonable interpretative suggestion for class discussion but that are not very creative or illuminating will normally receive a 4. I want to be clear that a student who consistently writes 4's *can* make an A- for this 40% if s/he attends all the sessions, submits all the journals, and participates regularly in class discussion. While 5's are hard to come by, they are not required to do well.

5 = This score is reserved for excellent journal entries that demonstrate considerable thought and understanding. A 5 must be well-written and creative. 5 journals will be circulated to the class to serve as a resource for meaningful class discussion. No one should expect to write a 5 each and every time.

There are 70 points available for attendance, participation, and journals. In addition to earning as many as 5 points for each journal entry that you submit (12 possible), I will reserve 10 points to give for superlative class participation. Attendance, participation, and journal grades will be assigned according to the total number of points scored in the semester. There will be no negotiation or adjustment of points at the end of the semester. You will receive what you have earned.

As noted above, attendance is mandatory because the seminar will only work if everyone is present and ready to participate. If you miss *one class* for a good reason (illness, family emergency, etc.), you may turn in your reading journal (provided it is received on time) and have it counted. Any class meetings that you miss after your first absence (for any reason whatsoever) will result in your losing 1) the opportunity to submit a reading journal for that week, *and* 2) 2 points from the 10 reserved for attendance and participation. Therefore, you will, for every absence beyond the one allowable excused absence, lose one tenth of the points that are available. If you are more than 15 minutes late for class, I will count you absent for that day. If you are counted absent for lateness, you cannot count a journal entry for that date (even if it was submitted on time) unless it is your first absence missed for an excusable reason.

The point scale:

60-70 points = A  
55-59 points = A-  
50-54 points = B+  
45-49 points = B  
40-44 points = B-  
35-39 points = C+  
30-34 points = C  
Less than 30 points = F

Note that you can decide how many journals you want to write based on how many points you want to earn. If you can write 8 5-point journals, are happy with a B, and attend all the class meetings, you can dispense with writing any more journals and earn the grade you want. However, I would not count on writing only 5-point journals and skip the first four. If you are happy with a C, you need only write 3-point journals on ten occasions to secure the grade that you want. No one who receives less than 30 points will receive a passing grade for this 40% of the final grade.

### Essays

You must submit three 5-7 page essays. Each essay will count for 20% of your final grade in the course. These essays are due no later than 4:00 PM on (Monday) September 29, (Monday) November 3, and (Saturday) December 13. No late essays will be accepted for any but the most pressing reasons. If you fail to submit an essay on time, you will receive a *zero* for that 20% of the course. Each essay must be typed, double-spaced in 12 point Times font.

These essays are due at the end of each pod or grouping of readings for the course, and each essay should present a thesis based on the readings for that pod. Therefore, essays for the first pod should address *The Autobiography* and/or *Connecticut Yankee*, essays for the second pod should address *Huckleberry Finn*, *Brother to Dragons*, and/or *Beloved*, essays for the third pod should address Aristophanes' *The Knights*, *All the King's Men*,

and/or *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Essays may be truly comparative, focusing on comparisons and/or contrasts between the works, or they may focus on one of the works for a particular pod, but they should in either case consider elements that tie the works in the pod together. You may choose to draw on secondary literature or to rely on your own careful reading of the text to carry your point, but you should at least consult major academic databases to situate your arguments in some scholarly context. At this stage in your college education, I think it is quite reasonable to let you form your own thesis and to argue your own point, and I will give you a wide latitude to define your essays for yourself, *but* your essay should approach the works in a manner that will contribute to our communal purpose, to better understand American political and social life through the study of literature. Essays that do not make any connections to this topic are obviously not very valuable for our purposes and will not receive a very high grade.

These essays are an opportunity for you to share your thoughts about the issues that we are discussing with the class. Therefore, the classes on September 30, November 4, and December 14 will be largely devoted to discussions of your essays. You will be asked on at least one of these days to make a presentation on your essay, and you should always be prepared to do so. When making a presentation on your essay, *do not* plan on just reading your essay out loud to the class. This is not a good way to explain your work verbally to others. Instead, you should plan on explaining *what* your thesis is, briefly outlining the major pieces of evidence that you have used to support it (including referring to sections of the texts of the works), and presenting your reasons for thinking that your point advances our study of American politics broadly understood.

Essay grades will reflect the quality of the thesis that you have chosen and your use of evidence from the texts to argue your thesis. Poor theses will result in poor grades. You may choose to expand one of your earlier one page reading journals into an essay, but if you do so, you should be careful to revise and expand the earlier submission into a complete and cogent argument that addresses any doubts or concerns that I (or other members of the class) have raised about the original submission. Do not expect that you can simply use B.S. to blow what was once one page into five without adding any substance and expect a passing grade.

I will grade your essays with my customary rigor, and I will not just give you a passing grade for having bothered to write something. If the writing is unacceptable or if you do not demonstrate that you have read the texts and thought about the questions, I will never hesitate to give you an F. Furthermore, you should remember that these papers call for your very best, professional quality work and that consistently poor grammar, syntax, or spelling may result in a lower grade. Proofread your essays and make sure that your sentences, paragraphs, and your thesis all make sense.

Be sure to cite your sources correctly. I would prefer that you use a parenthetical reference format with author/date citations in the text [e.g. (Warren 1948, p. 343)] and a works cited page at the end of the paper, but you are free to use MLA if you prefer so long as you cite thoroughly and correctly. You must submit your essay to me as M.S. Word document in electronic form. I will check your essay against a number of anti-

plagiarism databases if I have any reason to believe that it is not your own work. *If you use words, ideas, essay structure, or organization derived from other authors without appropriate quotation marks or citation, you are committing plagiarism. I will punish plagiarism by giving you an F in the course and by reporting your case to the appropriate authorities for action by the judicial council. I will not be lenient or make exceptions to this zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism. You are all advanced students who know what plagiarism is and can be held accountable for it. Do not expect to avoid either detection or prosecution.*

### Required Readings

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Bantam Edition

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Plume Edition

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Penguin Classics Edition

Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, Penguin Classics Edition

Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*, Harcourt Brace Jovanich/Harvest Edition

Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*, LSU Press Edition

Thomas Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Bantam Edition

There is an Introductory Reading Packet for each section of the course. These readings are available as a Word email attachment and will be circulated at least a week ahead of time.

### Readings and Essay Assignments

Week I (Monday, September 1) – Introductory Lecture: Literature and American Politics  
- Discussion of Syllabus and Course Requirements

#### Reading Pod #1

Week II (September 9) – Introductory Readings from Alexis de Tocqueville

Reading Journal #1 – What jumps out to you from Tocqueville's writings about the character of the Americans? What in your personal experience confirms or refutes Tocqueville's view of our character?

Week III (September 16) - Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

Reading Journal #2 – Discuss Franklin's "plan" (the beginning of Part III), the letter of

Benjamin Vaughn (bridge between Part I and Part II), or Franklin's method for achieving moral perfection (Part II) in light of Tocqueville's observations about the special character of the Americans.

Week IV (September 23) – Mark Twain, *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Reading Journal #3 – Is Hank Morgan a disciple of Benjamin Franklin? Discuss two or three particular incidents in *Connecticut Yankee* that appear to confirm (or perhaps undermine) the view of the American character that we have discussed in Tocqueville and/or Franklin. Does Twain think that the American character is superior to that of the Medieval Arthurians?

Week V (September 30) – First Essay Day – You must submit your first essay to me by 4:00 PM on Monday, September 29 and bring a copy to class prepared to lead a discussion of your thesis with the class. Each student will be asked to explain and defend his/her thesis on at least one paper day.

- Finish reading/review Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and *Connecticut Yankee*.

Reading Pod #2

Week VI (October 7) – Introduction to the Second Pod of Readings

Reading Journal #4 – Discuss Jefferson's attitude towards people of African descent and the problems raised by their presence, as slaves, in America. How do you think we should judge Jefferson? How does Jefferson judge himself and his contemporaries?

Week VII (Monday, October 13) – Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*

Reading Journal #5 – Discuss the turn in the novel that takes place when Huck and Jim miss the Ohio in the night. How does the perspective on the American problems with slavery and race differ in the first and second parts of the novel? Are the resolution of Jim's predicament and the conclusion of the novel satisfactory?

Week VIII (October 21) – Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons*

Reading Journal #6 – Why does RPW (the narrator of the poem, who may or may not be identical to the author) want to ask Jefferson about his attitude toward the events Kentucky? Do you think that Jefferson's attitude towards those events in the poem is consistent with the attitudes that the historical Jefferson reveals in his letters and other writings? Why should we be concerned with this issue?

Week IX (October 28) – Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Reading Journal #7 – How does the shift in perspective in *Beloved* change our assessment of slavery in the earlier readings? In what ways does it reveal a new perspective on the

corrupting influence of slavery on both masters and slaves? How do you think it illuminates contemporary problems?

Week X (November 4) – Second Essay Day - You must submit your second essay to me by 4:00 PM on Monday, November 3 and bring a copy to class prepared to lead a discussion of your thesis with the class. Each student will be asked to explain and defend his/her thesis on at least one paper day.

- Finish reading/review Pod #2 Readings

### Reading Pod #3

Week XI (November 11) – Introduction to the Third Pod of Readings

Reading Journal #8 – Respond to one of the following two suggestions. Your response should include an explanation of Tocqueville’s point *and* some response based on your own experience as a citizen of a democratic polity. Whether or not you think Tocqueville is *right*, you should outline some reason for your response. Suggestion 1) Democratic Politics are *inherently* prone to corrupting the morals of political leaders. Suggestion 2) Democratic peoples *demand* that their “leaders” behave as their servants.

Week XII (November 18) – Aristophanes’ *Knights*

Reading Journal #9 – Do you think that Aristophanes’ presentation of Kleon and the Sausage-Seller reveals something important about the character of democratic political leaders that is applicable to political leaders in the United States? Why or why not? Give examples from the text *and* from your knowledge of recent American politics?

Week XIII (Monday, November 24) – Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men* (chapters 1-5)

Reading Journal #10 (DUE NOVEMBER 23) – Discuss “the turn” of Willie Stark from moral crusader to machine politician. Why did Stark change? Do you think his change was inevitable? Do you think it was good? Was there some other way that he might have accomplished his ends?

Week XIV (December 2) – Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men* (entire)

Reading Journal #11 – Discuss how Burden’s view of the world informs his political activity in one of two periods in his life – 1) the period of the “Great Twitch” (described in Chapters 7-9), or 2) the period from his meeting with Sugar Boy in the public library to his declaration that he will go back into politics with Hugh Miller (Chapters 9-10). Point out some particular passages that you think indicate how Burden’s ideas shape his political activity.

Week XV (December 9) – Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*

Reading Journal #12 – Discuss two key connections that you see between Wolfe’s novel and the other works that we have read in the class. How are they related? Discuss specific passages.

Week XVI (Sunday, December 14) - Third Essay Day – This final (exam) class meeting will take place at my house, and we will feed you dinner (chili, home-baked bread, chocolate) in exchange for your productive attendance. You must submit your third essay to me by 4:00 PM on Saturday, December 13 and bring a copy to class prepared to lead a discussion of your thesis with the class. Each student will be asked to explain and defend his/her thesis on at least one paper day. No essay, no chocolate.