Expository Writing 20 – Slave Narratives

Written from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century in the United States, slave narratives represented the story from slavery to freedom, the escape from the South to the North, and the intellectual journey towards literacy and public speaking. This course examines some famous representatives of the genre and the complex questions it provoked as well as post-Civil Rights modifications of such narratives. In the first weeks, we will investigate the popular Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) as well as the sensational and widely read account of William and Ellen Craft’s flight to Boston, Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom (1860). We will analyze what roles literacy and rhetoric played in these texts, and hone in on the relationship between the black American writers of slave narratives and their white editors, who oversaw what was published, edited the narratives, vouched for their truth-value, and appended them with documents. In our second unit, we will focus on Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987) to look at how modern writers modified and updated the genre after the 1960s. How did African American authors rewrite the slave narratives and their conventions? How do their portrayals of the slave community and the language of slavery differ from their predecessors? Finally, we will examine how the genre of the slave narrative changes in the hands of a white film director. How does Quentin Tarantino’s Django Unchained (2012), Oscar-nominated yet also denounced as incendiary, modify the genre and the interaction between white editors and black American slaves? In what ways does Steve McQueen’s Twelve Years a Slave return to the more traditional representation of slavery? Our primary readings will be accompanied by seminal essays on the slave narratives, their literary development, and their high current cultural stakes.

**Required Texts:**

**Recommended:**
Steve McQueen, dir. *Twelve Years a Slave*. DVD. (2014).

All other course readings will be available via our course iSite.
Unit 1: Black Letters, White Envelopes: The Antebellum Slave Narrative
This unit introduces two crucial examples of the genre and examines the conventional literary elements that make up a slave narrative. We will investigate the importance of literacy, education, and mastery of literary tropes in the slaves’ struggle to become accepted as equal human beings – and how some slave narratives manage to question these conventions. At the end of this unit, we will participate in a guided tour of the Boston Heritage Trail, which includes the house where William and Ellen Craft were hidden.

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) (90 pages).


Response Paper #1 (1-2 pages):
Close reading of one passage or sentence from either Douglass or Craft.

Essay #1 (4-5 pages):
For this assignment, you will practice the art of close reading, the interpretive process of analyzing the language and structure of a text. You will focus on two to three passages and textual details in either Douglass’s or Craft’s narratives and learn to forge an argument out of your textual observations.

Field Trip: Exercise on Transferability
What questions does a historian ask of slave narratives?

This session will introduce you to the debate among historians over the usability of slave narratives as historical sources. The brief essays we read will demonstrate what questions historians ask of their sources and how these questions differ from what a literary critic asks. Our field trip to the Black Heritage Trail in Boston touches on this debate, displaying some actual sites of the abolitionist struggle and safehouses of the Underground Railroad. It also provides a social and cultural context of the white abolitionists, which will illustrate how far editors/audience and writers of slave narratives were apart – even spatially in Boston.

Unit 2: The Neo-Slave Narrative: Remembering Slavery After the Civil Rights Movement

This unit hones in on the neo-slave narrative, a genre arising in the post-Civil Rights era when the slave narratives were rediscovered as a source of the black American literary tradition. We will examine how Toni Morrison continues and complicates the question of the mastery of language, white literary conventions, and the problem of finding a language adequate to represent the atrocity of slavery, and the issue of resistance in the slave community.


Response Paper #2 (1-2 pages):
Please present two scenes (one from a slave narrative, one from Morrison’s Beloved) you would like to compare or contrast through a lens of your choice.

Essay #2 (5-7 pages):
I would like you to analyze Beloved through the lens of a slave narrative you previously read in Unit 1. How does this historical novel serve (or doesn’t serve) as a modernization of and contemplation on themes or problems raised in the slave narrative, such as rhetoric, literacy, intimacy, memory, violence against women, etc.? You are expected to develop new ideas that differ from those you explored in essay #1.

Unit 3: The Slave Narrative in the Hands of a White Director

The final third of the semester builds on your knowledge of slave narratives and asks you to transfer your skills and experience with these sources to a cinematic adaptation of slave narratives. We will examine in what ways Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained (2012) can be read as a slave narrative and how he, as a Tennessee-born successor to the white editors of slave narratives, addresses and complicates this position self-consciously. We will compare Tarantino’s cinematic representations of scenes familiar to readers of slave narratives to selections from Steve McQueen’s Twelve Years a Slave (2014).

Response Paper #3 (2 pages):
For this response paper you will analyze closely the formal elements of a short sequence of shots from Django Unchained or Twelve Years a Slave.

Essay #3 (10-12 pages):
In this final unit you will have the opportunity to undertake independent research on how Quentin Tarantino’s and/or Steve McQueen’s films work in the tradition of the slave narrative. Your paper will present an argument that situates yourself in the discussion on the representation of slavery in film and/or literature.
Some suggested secondary literature:
Audrey Fisch (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). (This title contains an extensive bibliography.)
Course Policies and Requirements

Grading:
I will grade only the revisions (that is, the last version) of your essays, not the drafts or response papers. Course grades will be determined as follows:

- 25% Participation (in-class discussion, exercises, conferences, and workshops)
- 25% Unit 1 Essay
- 25% Unit 2 Essay
- 25% Unit 3 Essay

Your participation grade includes credit for turning in each of your assignments. You are expected to submit all response papers and drafts on time, and failure to do so will affect your participation grade.

Attendance:
Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. If you are absent without medical excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade. On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the college can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours: otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident Dean, as you will also be required in the case of protracted or repeated illness. Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Completion of Work:
Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course—not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Resident Dean. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have...
not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

Lateness:
For all assignments promptness is mandatory and part of the grade so please schedule your work accordingly. **THERE WILL BE NO GUARANTEE THAT YOU WILL RECEIVE TIMELY FEEDBACK IF YOU TURN IN AN ASSIGNMENT LATE.** The penalty for late written work will be a deduction of 1/3 of the final grade for each day that it is late. (So if you were three days late in turning in an essay that would have received an “A-,” you would receive a “B-” for it.) Please note that weekends are included in the deduction of a grade for late work. Late work any more than 5 days after the due date will not be accepted. While I do not offer any extensions, please contact me if you have a medical reason or family emergency that will prevent you from turning in your work on time.

Collaboration:
The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students, and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the Student Handbook, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

Academic Honesty:
Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. **All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless that is explicitly part of the assignment.** Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to disciplinary action.

Electronic Submissions:
You will submit at least some of your work electronically this semester. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with Microsoft Word doc or docx. It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.