

English 263
**American Democracy and
 The Dictatorial Imaginary**
 American Literature From 1800

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Course Number 32633 / **Course Location** VKC 254
Office 404H / **Hours** Tues. & Thus. 11-12 and by appointment



If men were angels, no government would be necessary.—Federalist Papers #51

Description

From the Declaration of Independence onward, the official documents of the United States have defined the country against despotism and tyranny, promising instead democracy, equality, and a balance of power. In both its political theories and political practice, the United States has been famously suspicious of concentrated power, with “dictator” among the most extreme accusations leveled against American presidents since George Washington.

However, the canon of American literature is drawn to and drawn of dictatorial figures of absolute authority. From Herman Melville’s Ahab to Sinclair Lewis’s Buzz Windrip, some of American literature’s most indelible figures are tyrants. Even Emmanuel Leutze’s lauded 1851 painting above, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, depicting George Washington as exemplary martial leader, peering out majestically from among the drab if hardworking oarsmen who surround him, shows just how much the American artistic imaginary loves the “Great Man.” Why is it that the strong man exerts such influence on an American imaginary that emerges from a democratic culture? Is it a dreaded nightmare or a secret desire, an attempt to warn against or a prophecy? What can we learn about the United States and its literature when we turn to these texts about tyranny? How might they help us think about the promises and threats of American democracy, who it includes and excludes under its banner? How do changes in the cast of tyrants tell us about how the United States has changed across its history? And, finally, why is the dictator so singularly masculine? What do these imaginaries reveal about the United States’ historical and current politics of race and gender?

In this course, we will trace the dictatorial imaginary through 19th, 20th, and 21st century American literature, from *Moby Dick* to Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. We will think about the various roles that the tyrant has occupied—ship’s captain, tycoon, demagogue, husband, and father—as well as the various historical moments in which his figure has been invoked. We will consider the different forms in which we encounter dictatorial characters, what it means for such a figure to be part of Mark Twain’s historical farce versus Alice Walker’s historical fiction, or the social realism of Sinclair Lewis versus the magical realism of Junot Diaz. We will think with the communities who are imagining the dictators we encounter as well as consider the perspective of the cultural hegemony that these

novels resist, critique, inform, reform, and are part of. And we will contemplate the differences of where these novels locate the dictator, whether it is a fear of the authoritarian emerging from American soil or haunting the land of the free from islands close (the Dominican Republic) or farther away (England).

In addition to the intensive exploration of the assigned novels, we will encounter representations of the autocrat in film, art, and popular culture. This course will also offer the opportunity to do guided research into related subjects and investigate the cultural as well as political history in which these novels are imbricated.

Aspirations

This course looks to acquaint you with an array of seminal texts of American literature and the accompanying cultural and political contexts. It hopes to develop your critical reasoning capacities as well as strengthen your textual and visual analysis through the close reading of novels, films, and images. Furthermore, through this course's visual and literary texts, it hopes to introduce you to a variety of cultural and historical perspectives. Finally, it is structured to allow you to become more comfortable embarking on independent research and interweaving primary and secondary texts into complex argumentation. Thus, it sets forth the following objectives:

Objectives

By the end of the class, you will be able to

- 1) **employ** close reading techniques to analyze literary and visual texts.
- 2) **differentiate** among a range of genres of novel, including the historical novel, the political novel, the satiric novel, and the domestic novel, as well as intellectual movements—naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism.
- 3) **analyze** the meaning and context of historical arguments
- 4) and **relate** historical arguments to literature (thus integrating the disciplines of literary and political history).
- 5) **generate** a research question,
- 6) **conduct** independent research using peer-reviewed publications
- 7) and **construct** complex argumentation by interweaving primary and secondary texts.

Required Materials

All films and e-books can be found at reserves.usc.edu/ares/

Books

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. 1899. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993.

E-Version: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/160/160-h/160-h.htm#link2H_4_0001

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. 2007. New York: Riverhead Press, 2008.

Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. 1935. New York: Signet Classics, 2014.

E-Version: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0301001h.html>

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. 1851. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

E-Version: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm>

Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. 1889. New York: W.W. Norton, 1982.

E-version: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/86/86-h/86-h.htm>

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. 1982. New York: Mariner, 2003.

Films

The Color Purple. Dir. Steven Spielberg. 1985.

There Will Be Blood. Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. 2007.

The Class Ethos

This class will be primarily text-based, building first and foremost on close reading. In class, then, I ask you to try to anchor your comments to a piece of text. This will enable everyone in the class to be on the same page. Thus, I ask you to arrive to class having done the assigned reading—and having thought thoroughly about the assigned reading—in advance, so that you're prepared to ask questions, express opinions, and respond to the comments of your classmates with respect and intelligence. I ask that we, as a class, operate under the belief that we all share an equality of intelligence, that all ideas deserve consideration. I ask you to be empathetic toward your peers and to acknowledge everyone's contribution with kindness. And I encourage you to speak up for your ideas, and try out new ones. Take outrageous positions. Fall on your face. Respectfully challenge and critique each other. Have fun. And let's take inspiration from what French philosopher Jacques Ranciere calls the artist's lesson:

The artist's emancipatory lesson, opposed on every count to the professor's stultifying lesson, is this: each one of us is an artist to the extent that he carries out a double process; he is not content to be a mere journeyman but wants to make all work a means of expression, and he is not content to feel something but tries to impart it to others.

Course Policies In-Class Work

Participation in classroom exercises is an important element of the education this class offers. These exercises may include group-work, essay development, as well as formal role-play and debates. You cannot receive credit for this in-class work if you are not present. While I do not grade you on attendance, it is the precondition for receiving credit for the work that we will do in class. However, note that your lowest in-class work grade will be dropped. (For more information on **Attendance**, please see the heading below).

Weekly Questions and Responses

Engaged work at home sets the stage for successful classroom activity. Thus, before our first class of each week, half the class will be responsible for posting a short question (less than 200 words) to the course blog in response to the reading (Group A). I'm not expecting you to have complete theories immediately upon reading these texts, some which are very challenging. I know that I certainly don't always have some magnificent idea after a first reading. However, I do expect you to offer a question based on attending closely to the text—a question, after all, is an opening, the beginning of a search. *What is it that puzzled you? What was it that excited you? What words or concepts were curious? What passages seemed particularly rich? What do you now wonder about the historical moment after reading a particular passage?* This question is your opportunity to crowdsource for answers. These questions will not only help shape our discussion in class that day, but then the other half of the class (Group B) will be tasked with a short response to these questions—after having processed our class discussions—by the end of the week (once again, this should not be onerous, try to answer in 300 words or less). At intervals throughout the semester, we will reverse question askers and question responders so that we'll have an ongoing dialogue throughout our course, within the classroom and over the web.

In-Class Presentations

To begin developing the research skills that you will employ in the term paper as well as hone your oral speaking skills, you will be charged with delivering one oral presentation of 12-15 minutes to the class involving outside research. This presentation, which will be directed by a prompt (that can be as broadly or narrowly construed as you like), asks you to explore the generic, historical, and/or political dimensions of a text we are reading, thus allowing you to indulge in interests that predate this course or to explore a novel area of inquiry. This presentation provides context for the class's discussion of the chosen text (similar in function if not in scope to my occasional introductory lectures). The study of literature, after all, is not

limited to the pages of the book but also includes the work's cultural and political situation. Possible topics are listed (with due dates) on the reading schedule. There are more topics than students so not every topic will be selected. You will sign up for this assignment during the first class of the semester and I will provide you with an initial bibliography (3-5 sources) for your topic at least two weeks before its due date, but you are expected to go beyond the sources provided (5-8 sources)..Audiovisuals encouraged!

After delivering the presentation you will have 24 hours to hand in your presentation script (3-5 pages), which will be used to evaluate your presentation.

Take-Home Midterm

There will be a take-home midterm that I will **hand out at the end of week 4** and will be **due by the end of week 6**. The midterm will consist of four questions, two for each category, and you will be responsible for answering a question from each category. One category will focus on the relationship between a single text and its historical period and the other will think about the ongoing relationship among the texts studied (from "The Declaration of Independence" through *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*). You will be able to use your books and notes to respond to these questions. I expect to see thesis-driven arguments that show awareness of our ongoing classroom debates and provide relevant historical context.

Open Book Final Exam

There will be a two-hour final examination during the regularly scheduled examination time. The examination will consist of two essay questions, each question asking for evidence from at least two different texts. One question will focus on works studied since the midterm examination (From *It Can't Happen Here* to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*); one question will focus on the full range of the course. While only two questions will be offered, each question will allow you to make choices about the texts you may use to answer the question. It is open book but you may not use your class notes.

Term Paper

A term paper of 2400-3000 words will be **due May 1** (the last day of study days) that will develop a thesis-driven argument that is supported with evidence from primary texts (i.e. the readings assigned in the course) along with secondary scholarship (at least three or more academic citations).

Term Paper Proposal

The term paper proposal will be **due at the end of Week 9**. It should be a 300-600 word description of your topic with notice given to the existing scholarship on your subject. (Suggestion: try to think about how your idea might intervene in the discussion you encounter in your research). Please also include a bibliography of at least five scholarly sources—books, chapters, articles, etc.—that you have already consulted or intend to consult as you work on your essay. While this proposal is due in Week 9, you are welcome to work on a later author. However, to do so, you should read ahead and consult with me before drafting your proposals.

Formatting

Unless otherwise stated, all assignments should be double-spaced, typed in 12-point Times New Roman font with one-inch margins. Works cited should employ MLA format. Pages should be numbered in the upper right corner and have the following information:

Your Name
English 263
Bernstein (i.e. Professor's Name)

Date
Assignment Name (e.g. Term Paper)

Late Work

It is your responsibility to finish each assignment by its due date and time. I am willing to consider giving extensions, but they must be asked for in advance and will not be awarded retroactively. If you turn in a paper late without having cleared it with me first, it will be marked down 1/3 of a grade for each day it is late and will receive no written comments. (Thus, if you hand in a paper on Friday that was due on Tuesday, and it merits a B grade, you will receive, due to the lateness penalty, a C). If you find yourself falling behind, please let me know so we can discuss your options. (I cannot help you—and that is all I want to do—unless you let me know that you need to be helped). I want each of you to succeed, but I can't help you if you don't keep me in the loop when problems arise. It all comes down to your essay—if I can see you trying, I will try to help you.

Grading Timeline

Just as you promise to turn in your papers in a timely fashion to me, I promise to return them with comments to you. I promise you that I will take no longer than two weeks to return any assignment you hand in to me on time. If, for any extraordinary reason, I am unable to do so, you will hear from me

Grading

In-Class Work	10%
Weekly Question/Response	10%
Take-Home Mid-Term	15%
In-Class Presentation (3-5 pages)	15%
Open Book Final Exam	20%
Term Paper (8-10 pages) (incl. Term Paper Proposal)	30%

Grade Scale

A: 94-100	A-: 90-93	B+: 87-89
B: 83-86	B-: 80-82	C+: 77-79
C: 73-76	C-: 70-72	D+: 67-69
D: 63-66	D-: 60-62	F: 59≤

Plagiarism

Taking the words of another author and passing them off as your own undermines both your learning process and the academic community of which you are now a member. If you are caught plagiarizing you will receive a failing grade for this course and you may also be dismissed from USC. Generally, to avoid plagiarism you must do the following: give credit to the proper sources for any ideas you reference that are not your own; avoid turning in papers written for another class; and be careful when you work with tutors, friends, or family members, as if the person helping you alters your work substantially, this is plagiarism as well. For a complete definition of what constitutes plagiarism, see your *SCampus* Student Guidebook (in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). If you have further questions, don't hesitate to ask me.

Attendance

If you find that you must miss a class, tutorial, or other deadline, please e-mail me in advance so I can plan my lessons accordingly. We're a small class, so the loss of any one of you is not inconsequential. You are allowed one absence for any reason. (You do not need to tell me the reason or obtain a doctor's note, etc.). For one absence, any in-class work missed will be written off.

Technology

While I am happy to have you use laptops, tablets, and other electronic reading/writing devices in class, I ask that you please restrict your usage to

only materials relevant to class and to please keep your phones silent and away for the duration of class.

Also, I do ask that you check your email every twenty four hours of the school/work week, as I will communicate with you over it. You can email me at sanders.bernstein@gmail.com at any time, though I may take 24-48 hours to respond—and if you email me on the weekend, will probably not reply until I am back in the office on Monday morning.

Disability Services & Programs

The Office of Disability Services and Programs (DSP) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. Please be sure to let me know about any accommodations you may need as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in Grace Ford Salvatori Hall, Room 120 and is open 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., Monday-Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Emergencies at USC

If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology. (See <http://emergency.usc.edu/>)

Student Resources

Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: sarc.usc.edu

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. equity.usc.edu

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student—personal, financial, and academic. studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa

Reading Schedule

Week 1: *Page Count: ~30*
 1/9 *Introduction*

1/11 Federalist Paper 51 (4 pages)
 Declaration of Independence (2 pages)
 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol IV. Ch. VI and VII (11 pages)

Imperial Autocracy

Week 2: *Page Count: ~90 pages*
 1/16 Moby-Dick (Ch. 1, 3-4, 10-12, 16, 26-31, 33-4, 35, 36-7) ~60 pages
 1/18 Moby-Dick (Ch. 41-42, 46, 94, 109, 119, 135, & Epilogue) ~30 pages
Project 1: Moby Dick and Antebellum American Slavery

Manufactured Authoritarianism

Week 3: *Pages: 1-128*
 1/23 A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1-83; to Ch. XVII)
Project 2: Satire / Daniel Beard's Illustrations

1/25 A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (83-128; to Ch. XXIV)
Project 3: Historical Fiction/The 19th-Century Cult of King Arthur

Week 4: *Pages: 128-258*
 1/30 A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (128-216; to Ch. XXVII)
Project 4: CYKAC, Slavery, and Industrialization

2/1 A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (216-258; to end)
Project 5: CYKAC and Late 19th-Century Newspapers/ Daniel Beard's Illustrations
 MIDTERM HANDED OUT

Week 5: *Pages: 258-400*
 2/6 There Will Be Blood (screen at home)
Project 6: Muckraking Fiction/Naturalism

Sexual Tyranny

Pages: 1-40 (to Ch. XVI)
 2/8 The Awakening
Project 7: The Novel of the New Woman

Week 6: *Pages: 40-116 (Ch. XVI to end)*
 2/13 The Awakening
Project 8: The United States' Patriarchal Politics Part I

Homegrown Fascism

Pages: ~1-43 (Ch. 5)
 2/15 It Can't Happen Here
 MIDTERM DUE

Week 7: *Pages ~43-163 (Ch. 5-Ch. 18)*
 2/20 It Can't Happen Here (Ch. 5-Ch. 15)
Project 9: The Revolt Against the Village

2/22 It Can't Happen Here (Ch. 15-Ch. 18)
Project 10: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Election of 1936

Week 8: *Pages: ~163-282 (Ch. 18-Ch 29.)*
 2/27 It Can't Happen Here (Ch. 18-Ch. 25)
Project 11: The American Modernist Novel

3/1 It Can't Happen Here (Ch. 25-Ch. 29)
Project 12: The Politics of American Modernism

Week 9: *Pages: ~282-381* (Ch. 29 to end)
 3/6 It Can't Happen Here (Ch. 29 to Ch. 35)
Project 13: The Counterfactual Novel/Speculative Fiction

3/8 It Can't Happen Here (Ch. 35 to end)
Project 14: Art and Fascism

TERM PAPER PROPOSAL DUE

SPRING BREAK ***NO CLASS***

Dictatorship of the Hearth

Week 10: *Pages: 1-113*
 3/20 The Color Purple (1-75)
Project 15: Alice Walker and Her Literary Predecessors

3/22 The Color Purple (75-113)
Project 16: African-American Political History Part I

Week 11: *Pages: 113-214*
 3/27 The Color Purple (113-176)
Project 17: The Domestic Novel

3/29 The Color Purple (177-214)
Project 18: African-American Political History Part II

Week 12: *Pages: 214-288*
 4/3 The Color Purple (214-288; to end)
Project 19: The United States' Patriarchal Politics Part II

4/5 The Color Purple (film; screen at home)
Project 20: Adaptation

Haunting Despotism

Week 13: *Pages: 1-119*
 4/10 The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (1-75)
Project 21: The American Diasporic Novel

4/12 The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (75-119)
Project 22: U.S. and the Caribbean

Week 14: *Pages: 119-233*
 4/17 The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (119-201)
Project 23: Postmodernism

4/19 The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (201-233)
Project 24: Immigration and Nativism

Week 15: *Pages: 233-335*
 4/24 The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (233-307)
Project 25: The Postcolonial Novel

4/26 The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (307-335; to end)
Project 26: The Politics of Spanglish

5/1 **Term Paper Due**
 TBD **Final Exam**