

LIT 6309

Willpower in Nineteenth Century American Literature

Fall 2025

Prof. Ashley Barnes

Thursdays, 10:00 am-12:45 pm

JO 4.112

This class examines literary answers to one of the central problems that worried nineteenth-century Americans (and twenty-first century ones, too): how do you know what you want? And how do you know if you want the right things? The answer to this question will take us on a journey that is usually described as secularizing, moving from an awe-struck faith in God to a disillusioned modernity. We will consider, among other texts, Edgar Allan Poe's portrayals of compulsion and Charles Brockden Brown's exposure of the failures of reason; feel revived by declarations of virtuous desire from Transcendentalists like Emerson and Whitman; and wind up with what seem like realistic affirmations of self-determination in the work of W. E. B. DuBois and Charles Chesnutt. But does the literature really support such a straightforward trajectory up and out of a Christian sense of depravity? We'll investigate these and other major authors (Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Elizabeth Stoddard, Pauline Hopkins) who collectively suggest that the question of willpower has never resolved into confident self-knowledge, and that the modern self, in the American imagination, remains plagued by bad appetites.

Student Learning Objectives/Outcomes:

- Students will explain the significance of the aesthetic choices that authors have made in dramatizing the felt conflict between freedom and necessity.
- Students will track continuity and change across a range of US authors in the long 19C, asking how well the familiar literary-historical categories suit the texts and testing new descriptions and connections.
- Students will improve close reading skills.
- Students will engage with scholarship to advance their own arguments and reflect on what kind of scholar they want to become.
- Students will practice key grad-student tasks: taking the oral exam and pitching papers to conferences.
- Students will produce an arguable interpretation of the course material by comparison to another text of their choice and communicate their findings to their peers.

REQUIRED BOOKS (other editions are okay; these are suggestions)

- Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland* (Penguin Classics, 978-0140390797)
- Herman Melville, *Bartleby & Benito Cereno* (Dover Thrift, 9780486264738)
- Elizabeth Stoddard, *The Morgesons* (Penguin Classics, 9780140436518)
- Pauline Hopkins, *Of One Blood* (Washington Square Press, 9780743467698)
- Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Penguin Classics, 978-0140186864)

Other short readings listed on the schedule will be xeroxed and handed out in class.

Always bring to class that day's assigned reading, IN PRINT, plus paper and pen or pencil.

About AI: The use of generative AI tools is unauthorized in this class and thus is a violation of UTDSP5003. Students should present their work, from routine homework to essays and presentations, without the use of generative AI, including but not limited to summarizing the assigned reading; brainstorming, ideating, outlining, writing, or studying; and creating text, tables, code, analysis, video, or images.

This classroom will be (with few exceptions) **a screen-free, "digital detox" space.** Our course this fall offers face-to-face time, unmediated by apps and tabs. The goal is to work together to practice forms of perception, conversation, and shared inquiry that require undistracted patience to enjoy.

The instructor will occasionally provide class materials electronically or via print copy to all students registered for this class. These are intended to supplement the classroom experience. These materials may be

downloaded during the course; however, these materials are for registered students' use only. Classroom materials may not be reproduced or shared with those not in class or uploaded to other online environments except to implement an approved Student Access Resource Center accommodation. Failure to comply with these University requirements is a violation of the [Student Code of Conduct](#).

STUDENT EVALUATION

You'll demonstrate your achievement of the course goals by the following measures:

Class attendance & participation*: 10%

Each class meeting. The cumulative grade reflects your preparedness for each class session, manifested in active listening, asking and answering questions, and collaborating with peers.

Reading journal: 20% (about 250-400 words each week)

Due Wednesdays @ noon. Post your ideas about the week's reading on a shared document online.

Identify a passage that stood out to you; explain what seems significant about it; then pose a follow-up question for discussion. *Plan to share your journal entries in class discussion—always bring a printed copy of your latest post with you!*

Class reflections: 10% (about half a page, handwritten in class each week)

Each class meeting. At the end of class, you'll spend a few minutes processing the discussion to identify a new idea and a new question as takeaways. I'll gather these and return them the next week.

Midterm essay: 15% (about 2000 words)

Due Fri. Oct. 10 by midnight. This essay prepares for the oral exam. Argue your answer to a broad thematic question by interpreting two or three of the course texts.

Midterm oral exam: 10%

To be scheduled for the week of Oct. 13. One-on-one conversation that follows up midterm essay.

Final essay: 10% prep (essay pitch, group panel proposal, in-class conference presentation: *due dates below*)
25% final draft (about 3000 words) *Due Fri. Dec. 12 by midnight.*

The final essay will develop an arguable interpretation of a course text by comparison to some other text of your choice. Plan the essay by writing a proposal and organizing a panel for our in-class conference.

*Class Attendance & Participation

Regular and punctual class attendance is expected. Because the course meets only once a week, missing a single class meeting means losing a significant occasion to achieve the learning objectives for the course. Repeat absenteeism, or a pattern of leaving early or arriving late, will lower your attendance & participation grade and may lower your overall course grade.

Participation includes engaging in group or other activities during class that solicit your feedback on homework assignments, readings, and class discussion. Successful participation is also defined as consistently adhering to University requirements, as presented in this syllabus. Failure to comply with these University requirements is a violation of the [Student Code of Conduct](#).

Be advised: Literature invites us into representations of a world that has never been, and continues not to be, perfect. We will read fiction written over a hundred years ago by authors whose moral compasses may not match ours. We will not shy away from meaningful conversations when we confront these differences. We will respectfully engage with hard topics, biases, and historical injustice, assuming good faith in one another as we grapple with difficult questions.

And: Texas Senate Bill 17, the recent law that prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and activities at public universities in Texas, does not in any way apply to academic course instruction. Students should not feel the need to self-censor or limit their participation in academic courses pertaining to topics of race and racism, structural inequality, LGBTQ+ issues, or diversity, equity, and inclusion, and related topics.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND RESOURCES

You are responsible to abide by [UTD policies](#), which include *academic integrity*. If your assignment is referred to the UTD Office of Community Standards and Conduct (OCSC), respond to email (from Maxient) promptly and meet with a Conduct Officer. The Officer will review your work, meet with you, investigate, and determine the outcome. [The UTD 2021 Student Handbook is a helpful resource.](#)

Accommodations

Registered students eligible to receive accommodations will provide an accommodation letter on official letterhead to their course instructor. Only students who provide such a letter should be accommodated. A student's disability and accommodations are confidential and will not be disclosed except in the case of imminent harm to the student or others.

Sharing Confidential Information

If you share personal information (in email, in person, or in an assignment), know that UTD instructors and staff are legally required to report information about sexual misconduct to the UTD Title IX Coordinator.

If you are sexually assaulted, harassed, or a victim of sexual misconduct, domestic violence, or stalking, you are encouraged to report these incidents to the UTD Police at 972-883-2222 or to the Title IX Coordinator at 972-883-2218. [Visit UTD Compliance for additional information and resources.](#)

Student Accessibility

UTD Office of Student Accessibility: Administration Building, AD 2.224 (972-883-2098)
studentaccess@utdallas.edu

UTD Academic Integrity Resources

If you have questions, speak to your Instructor or Program Director or consult the following UTD policies and resources:

[UTD OCSC Home Page](#)

[UT System and UTD Info on Conduct](#)

[UTD and UT System Policies](#)

[UTD Student Code of Conduct](#)

[UTD Academic Integrity standards for students](#)

UTD Resources

[Academic Support Resources](#)

[Getting Started with eLearning](#) on Blackboard

[eLearning Support Center](#) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week email and online chat (or 1-866-588-3192)

READING AND WRITING SCHEDULE

Thurs. Aug. 28 / Class introduction; Edgar Allan Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse"; Jennifer Fleissner, preface, *Maladies of the Will*

Thurs. Sept. 4 / Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland* (read thru ch. XIII)

Thurs. Sept. 11 / *Wieland* (to the end)

Thurs. Sept. 18 / Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Minister's Black Veil," "Young Goodman Brown," "The Birth-Mark"; Edgar Allan Poe, "William Wilson" and "Ligeia"

Thurs. Sept. 25 / Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," "Circles," "Experience"; Walt Whitman, excerpts from "Song of Myself"

Thurs. Oct. 2 / Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Thurs. Oct. 9 / Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (extracts); *in-class writing workshop ahead of midterm essay*

Thurs. Oct. 16 / **no class; oral exams scheduled this week;** but begin reading Elizabeth Stoddard, *The Morgesons* (read thru ch. XXI)

Thurs. Oct. 23 / *The Morgesons* (to the end)

Thurs. Oct. 30 / Pauline Hopkins, *Of One Blood* (read thru ch. XIV); *in-class writing workshop: pitching a CFP*

Thurs. Nov. 6 / *Of One Blood* (to the end); William James, "The Will to Believe"; **essay pitch due in class**

Thurs. Nov. 13 / Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (read thru ch. 17); *in-class writing workshop: prepping for mini-conference*

Thurs. Nov. 20 / *The Marrow of Tradition* (to the end); W. E. B. DuBois, excerpt from *The Souls of Black Folk*; **panel proposals due in class**

Thurs. Dec. 4 / **in-class mini-conference: group presentations of final essay work-in-progress**

FINAL ESSAY DUE Friday Dec. 12 by midnight