The Great American Novel
ENG 4936 Honors Seminar (11800 Section 8SH1)
Fall 2025

Course Meetings: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, period 5
(11:45 AM - 12:35 PM) in FLI 0115
Instructor: Professor Susan Hegeman / shegeman@ufl.edu/
Office hours: Fridays, 1-3 pm in Turlington 4119, or by appointment.

Course Description

The term "the Great American Novel" originated in 1868, in an essay by a minor novelist named John William DeForest, whose disappointing conclusion was that such a thing did not exist -- or at least not yet. Since that time, there have been many candidates for this title, so much so, that it is a cliché of literary marketing. In this class, we will investigate DeForest and others' criteria for the "Great American Novel," and consider them in historical and social context. We will also read novels that have at various times been identified this way, beginning with DeForest's half-hearted nominee for the title, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. We will then proceed through 20th century nominees for the title, including William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, John Dos Passos's *The Big Money*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Students will have the opportunity to propose and argue for their own GAN, which we will then read as a group.

Course Goals and Learning Outcomes

- Students will learn about American literary history, in terms of both popular and critical reception.
- Students will learn about the theory and history of the novel as a form in the United States.
- Through careful reading of some challenging and rewarding examples, students will develop their skills in interpreting novels, through close reading and contextual analysis
- students will develop advanced skills in critical thinking, analysis, argumentation, and oral communication
- students will develop advanced critical writing skills through the completion of academic research papers

Required Course Materials

Books

The following books are listed in the order in which we will read them. ISBN numbers and publishers are provided for the recommended print editions. Other editions, including e-books, are acceptable, but students are responsible for keeping up with locations of passages discussed in class, and for being able to properly cite the editions referenced in papers.

- Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). This book is out of copyright, and so is available from many publishers. A free epub edition is available in a variety of formats ([Project GutenbergLinks to an external site.Links to an external site.](#)). If you get a hard copy, be sure it is from a reputable publishing house, or you may be disappointed with the text quality.
- William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) Vintage; Reissue edition (ISBN 978-0679732181)
- John Dos Passos, *The Big Money* (1936) Mariner Books (ISBN 978-0618056835)
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952) Vintage (978-0679732761)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) Vintage (978-1400033416)

A final novel will be selected collectively, by the class. All other assigned and recommended readings will be available via Canvas or online.

Course Content Note

The course materials describe, and we will discuss, potentially disturbing topics, including racial and sexual violence and abuse. If you ever feel the need to leave a class discussion, either for a short time or for the rest of the class session, you may do so without academic penalty. You will, however, be responsible for any material you miss. If you do leave the room for a significant time, please get notes from another student or contact me individually. You are welcome to discuss your personal reactions to the course material with me in office hours. If you or a friend are in distress, please contact *U Matter, We Care* or the Counseling and Wellness Center at 352 392-1575.

Students are encouraged to employ critical thinking and to rely on data and verifiable sources to interrogate all assigned readings and subject matter in this course as a way of determining whether they agree with their classmates and/or their instructor. No lesson is intended to espouse, promote, advance, inculcate, or compel a particular feeling, perception, viewpoint, or belief.

Course and University Policies

This course complies with all UF academic policies. Those polices--including Class Attendance, Accommodations for Disabilities, Grading, Course Evaluation, Academic Honesty, and In-Class Recording--as well as Academic and Campus Health and Wellness Resources for students are available here: [Academic Policies and ResourcesLinks to an external site.(https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/Links to an external site.](https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/).)

Course-Specific Policies

Class Comportment Expectations

Respectful interactions among students are expected. Participation grades will be negatively affected by a failure to adhere to professional, polite, scholarly, and respectful communication in all formats, both written and oral.

Academic Honesty and use of Generative AI

According to the [Student Conduct CodeLinks to an external site.](#),
"Plagiarism includes but is not limited to:
1. Stealing, misquoting, insufficiently paraphrasing, or patch-writing.
2. Self-plagiarism, which is the reuse of the Student's own submitted work, or the simultaneous submission of the Student's own work, without the full and clear acknowledgment and permission of the Faculty to whom it is submitted.
3. Submitting materials from any source without proper attribution.
4. Submitting a document, assignment, or material that, in whole or in part, is identical or substantially identical to a document or assignment the Student did not author."

Do not use Generative AI (LLMs such as Chat GPT, etc.) for your writing, research, or other work for this class. LLM outputs, simulations of training data found on the internet, are inaccurate and often biased. Using LLMs makes your work bland, vague, and wrong, and impedes the development of skills. Building skills as a thinker, reader, and writer equips you for success as a professional, for participation as a citizen, and for fulfillment as a human. That development only happens with effort, practice, errors, time, and revision. Your work in this course should be entirely made by you, and work not made by you will be considered an academic integrity violation and evaluated accordingly. Similarly, all assignments, feedback, and grades will be made by me without Generative AI. Ideas are social, so let's make them together.

Course Requirements and Grading

GRADING SCALE

A	4.0	94-100	940-1000	C	2.0	73-76	730-769
A-	3.67	90-93	900-939	C-	1.67	70-72	700-729
B+	3.33	87-89	870-899	D+	1.33	67-69	670-699
B	3.0	83-86	830-869	D	1.0	63-66	630-669
B-	2.67	80-82	800-829	D-	0.67	60-62	600-629
C+	2.33	77-79	770-799	E	0.00	0-59	0-599

BREAKDOWN OF FINAL GRADE

Attendance and participation	200 points; 20% of final grade
discussion questions	200 points; 20% of final grade
GAN group project	200 points; 20% of final grade
Final Paper	400 points; 40% of final grade

Attendance and participation (200 points; 20% of final grade)

In this seminar, we will all learn by respectfully listening to, reading, and engaging with each other's ideas. It is therefore expected that students come to class prepared to discuss the material assigned for that day. Students will be graded on their attendance and on the quality of their oral and written contributions to classroom discussion. The best grades will be given to those who offer informed, incisive, and relevant comments regarding the course readings and related discussions. Poor attendance will adversely effect students' participation grade.

University policy requires that absences be accepted with prior notice for university sponsored events (e.g., athletics) and religious holidays.

Discussion questions (20% of grade)

Students will submit discussion questions for each novel we read, via Canvas "Discussions." These will be incorporated, as much as possible, into our seminar discussions of the novels. Questions will be graded on a credit/no credit basis.

GAN Group Project (20% of grade)

Students will work in groups to propose a novel to read in the last few weeks of the course. They will present an argument for why it is a Great American Novel. The course will vote on the proposals to select the final reading for the course.

Final paper (400 points; 40% of final grade)

Students will write a formal academic paper, of 2100-3000 words. The paper will substantially address a work of literature assigned for the class. Full details on the paper assignment, including topics and formatting guidelines, are available on Canvas, under the "Assignments" navigation tab. The paper is due on December 8.

Papers will be graded holistically on the following criteria, in general order of emphasis:

- Argumentation: clear thesis, logical sequence of argument, logical conclusions
- Use of appropriate evidence from the texts
- Demonstrated understanding of contextual issues in relation to works discussed (accurate explication of concepts and arguments; accurate use of terminology and historical information; accurate application to texts)
- Mechanics: punctuation, spelling, word choice and usage, sentence construction, paragraphing
- Proofreading and citations

Schedule of Readings, Discussions, and Assignments

This represents my current plans for readings and discussions. As we go through the semester, those plans may need to change based on the interests and needs of the class as a whole. Any such changes will be communicated early, in class and via Canvas. Students are responsible for staying informed about any changes in the class schedule by regularly consulting the Canvas course page.

AUGUST

- 22 course introduction: review syllabus
- 25 Buell, "The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel"
- 27 DeForest, "The Great American Novel"
- 29 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin Chapters 1-13*
    - o Recommended: Reynolds, "Uncle Tom's Cabin"Links to an external site.Links to an external site. (on its historical context; some spoilers)

SEPTEMBER

- 1 LABOR DAY NO CLASS
- 3 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- 5 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- **7 discussion question on Stowe is due**
- 8 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- 10 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- 12 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
- 15 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
- 17 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
- 19 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
- **21 discussion question on Faulkner is due**
- 22 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*
- 24 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

- 26 Discussion: literary prestige and evaluation
  - READINGS: Manshel Historical Fiction.pdf
  - "Inside the Booker Prize: arguments, agonies and carefully encouraged scandals"
- 29 Dos Passos, *The Big Money*
  - recommended: USA Trilogy supplements.pdf (Preface written for the Modern Library edition of all three volumes, tables of contents of *The 42nd Parallel*and *1919*)

OCTOBER

- 1 Dos Passos, *The Big Money*
- 3 Dos Passos, *The Big Money*
- **5 Discussion question on *The Big Money* is due**
- 6 Dos Passos, *The Big Money*
- 8 Dos Passos, *The Big Money*
- *10 Ellison, Invisible Man*
  - Recommended: "The Debate Between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington"
  - Louis Armstrong, "Black and Blue"
- 13 *Ellison, Invisible Man*
- 15 Ellison, *Invisible Man*
- 17 HOMECOMING NO CLASS
- **19 Discussion question on Invisible Man is due**
- 20 Ellison, *Invisible Man*
- 22 Ellison, *Invisible Man*
- *24* Groups present GAN proposals
- 27 Groups present GAN proposals
- 29 Groups present GAN proposals
- 31 CLASS CANCELED

NOVEMBER

- 3 Discuss the publishing industry
  - Reading: selections from Dan Sinykin, Big Fiction: *How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*
- 5 Morrison, *Beloved*
- 7 Morrison, *Beloved*
- **9 Discussion question on *Beloved* is due**
- 10 Morrison, *Beloved*
- 12 Morrison, *Beloved*
- 14 Morrison, *Beloved*
- 17 Course-selected novel

- 19 Course-selected novel
- 21 Course-selected novel
- 24 Thanksgiving holiday
- 26 Thanksgiving holiday
- 28 Thanksgiving holiday

DECEMBER

1 Course-selected novel
3 Course-selected novel
8 Final paper due