

University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras  
College of Humanities  
English Department  
Fall 2021

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Full Professor of English  
College of General Studies

## LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

English 4218 meets MW 2:30-3:50pm on Zoom.

### My Contact Information

**Office:** 240 AJBR; this term, virtually on Zoom.

**Office hours:** Mondays, 2:30-5:30pm, and Wednesdays, 10:30-11:20am and 1-2:20pm.

Please let me know in advance if you plan to attend my office hours.

**Email:** [madeleine.vala@upr.edu](mailto:madeleine.vala@upr.edu)

**Course website** is available on Moodle

### Course Description

What is the American Dream? Many would intuitively state that it is the rags to riches success story, where hard work is financially rewarded. Others, such as Puritan colonists or ex-slaves, may argue that the American Dream means freedom, dubbed by Thomas Jefferson as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” However defined, the myth of the Dream is central to American culture and its literature. The first use of the phrase dates from Henry Truslow Adams’ 1931 text from the Great Depression, *The Epic of America*, but its ideology dates from the some of the first writing about the Americas. This course will examine the concept of the American Dream in short stories and novels across historical periods in U. S. literature, with particular emphasis on the twentieth century; at the same time, we will discuss the ways contemporary politics challenges the American Dream. What are the core features of the American Dream? Whom does it include and exclude? Why are so many literary examples of the American Dream about its failure rather than its success? After exploring the representation of the United States in immigrant narratives, we will turn to portrayals of the Dream within the hegemonic, largely white, contexts of the wealthy social elite and middle-class suburbia. Finally, we will examine the challenges faced by minority, non-immigrant groups in the United States: African Americans and Native Americans. To what extent is the American Dream accessible for these groups? Throughout the course, we will question the ways class position, race, nationality, and gender inform this quintessentially American myth.

By the end of the term, I aim for you to develop into more sophisticated readers, writers, and thinkers. In order to accomplish these goals, you need to be committed to your education; this means coming to class prepared, engaging in discussions, and seeking extra help when necessary. The reading load for this course is moderate—you will read approximately 150 pages a week, particularly when novels are assigned.

This semester, the course will be offered remotely assisted by technology, using Zoom, Moodle, and GoogleMeets platforms.

**Required Texts:**

Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Vintage)

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (Penguin)

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner)

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Penguin)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel and Grau)

You may use electronic editions, but I think buying print copies, new or used, will be welcome respite from digital formats since the pandemic began.

All other texts are available on Moodle.

**Guidelines for Online Classes**

- This course is being offered online using Zoom, GoogleMeets, Moodle, and email. **We will meet synchronously online at least once a week on Zoom on Wednesdays. This may change.**
- You will receive a Zoom invite before each class. You do not need to confirm your attendance via email, just show up for the class. I do not plan to record our sessions, though I may sometimes. Please let me know now if you disagree to being recorded so we can strategize a way for you to attend classes anonymously.
- Appropriate attire for our sessions is the same as a physical classroom: semiformal, relaxed, but fully attired.
- You are required to have a functional camera, audio, and internet connection. You are expected to have your camera on **during the entire class**, and you must turn on your camera before speaking. Please attempt to join the online class with limited background noise and your primary source of lighting in front of you (not behind).
- You should be in a room where you can focus adequately on class; under no circumstances should you be attending class while in your car, in a waiting room for an appointment, or while at work. When you are not speaking, turn your audio off to reduce background noise.
- Only you should be attending the class (no boyfriends, parents, siblings). Cats and dogs are welcome to make their appearances, provided they are not distracting.
- Be prepared to join with audio and camera each class. If you have been experiencing connection problems with your internet or hotspot, or power outages, make sure you have a backup plan. All UPR-RP students can make appointments to go on campus

to use computers, printers, access reliable internet services, and visit available libraries. For appointments, please contact the Dean of Student Affairs or Decanato de Estudiantes ([decanatoestudiantes.rp@upr.edu](mailto:decanatoestudiantes.rp@upr.edu)). Also, there are technological services provided by different municipalities, “Acceso a la tecnología cerca de ti” ([Iniciativas-de-Apoyo-en-Municipios.pdf](http://Iniciativas-de-Apoyo-en-Municipios.pdf) ([uprrp.edu](http://uprrp.edu))). If you encounter technical problems with MIUPI, NEXT portal, or Microsoft Office, please contact the Help Desk ([help.desk@upr.edu](mailto:help.desk@upr.edu)). If you have problems with Moodle, please contact: [ayuda.moodle@upr.edu](mailto:ayuda.moodle@upr.edu)

### **Course Requirements:**

Paper 1	25%
Paper 2	25%
Exam	20%
Participation	15%
Responses	15%

\*\*Percentages may be adjusted to reflect the actual work accomplished in course.

**Papers (50%)** In this course, you will write two papers, ranging from 5 to 8 pages, on any of the texts discussed in class. All papers should be typed, double-spaced, and written in 12-point Times with 1-inch margins top and bottom, and 1.25 inch margins left and right. Do not double space between paragraphs. Please include page numbers and staple your essay. I strongly discourage you from turning in drafts and final papers late. Failure to turn in a *complete* draft on the day a draft is due will lower your final paper grade by 5 points. Final papers will be marked down three points for each day late, including weekend days. Thus an otherwise 95 essay due on Thursday becomes a 92 on Friday and an 83 on Monday; if you did not come to workshop with a draft, the essay then becomes a 78. **I will not accept a paper more than ten days late and you will earn a zero instead.** I will be happy to discuss with a draft during office hours.

### **Exam (20%)**

Rather self-explanatory. You will have a cumulative final exam on material from the semester. Reading carefully and taking notes throughout the term is the best way to prepare for the exam.

**Participation (15%)** I expect active, informed participation in class discussions. That means coming to class each day having read and thought about the readings. Treat everyone respectfully during discussions, even if they disagree with you. For synchronic class discussions, you will be divided into groups for the term and must come to class responsible for your group’s questions. These activities will be weighted as part of your participation grade.

**Moodle Close Reading Responses (15%) Read this carefully.** Throughout the semester, you are divided into groups A and B. You will alternate who initiates a thread and who replies according to your group. On Mondays, you will submit **2 paragraphs** each of at least 5 sentences to the Moodle Discussion Forum by noon about the reading

we will address in our upcoming synchronous class meeting on Wednesday. Your responses may include a few questions, or comment on a particular issue that interests you from the reading. This is your forum for comment, and I will grade these largely based on your level of engagement with the text. You should not summarize plot or give an overview of the story. Be sure that you quote from the story in your response—this constitutes your evidence for your position. Be aware that I can distinguish internet interpretations from your own. If you plagiarize any of the content of your responses, you will earn a zero for this entire component of your grade (15%). You must and may only post once per week (i.e., no retroactive postings).

On Wednesday, the other group (B in response to A, or A in response to B) will write a 1-paragraph reply to ONE of your classmates' threads by noon. In your reply, you should expand on, disagree with, or connect your classmate's comment to an issue from another text read earlier. These replies need to be a sizable paragraph of 4-5 sentences. All of your replies will require detailed evidence! You need to be much more rigorous and concrete than simply writing, "I like your point; I hadn't thought of it that way." Show how another part of the story supports or contradicts your classmate's interpretation and cite it. This is the "default" setting of asynchronous responses—I may change what I decide to have you do as an assignment on a given week, and I will notify you.

Note that you will not always submit a written response to the forum; sometimes, I will ask you to submit an audio comment of no more than 5 minutes.

### **Attendance**

Attendance is not directly factored into your grade, as it is expected of everyone. It is not synonymous with your participation grade. It is essential that you participate in all class activities. If you know that you are going to be unavailable for a class activity, you must contact me with a valid explanation in advance. Exceptions to this policy are cases of serious illness or emergency, documented by a letter from the appropriate office. Six contact hours of unexcused absences may lower your average in the course to be lowered an entire letter grade (for example, from an A to a B). Late arrivals to scheduled Zoom activities will affect your participation grade in this class, as will early departures.

### **Plagiarism**

I will not tolerate academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is the representation of someone else's words as your own. It is a serious offence and a cowardly act. You must give proper credit to any ideas or words that are not your own. Turning in a paper that has been written for another class is also a form of plagiarism. **If you are caught plagiarizing, punishment varies from earning a zero on the assignment (ie, not simply an F) at the minimum to university expulsion at the maximum. I will refer cases of plagiarism to the disciplinary board.** Please ask me if you have any questions about how to cite information.

Article 6.2 of the UPR Students General Bylaws (Board of Trustees Certification 13, 2009-2010) states that academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to: fraudulent

actions; obtaining grades or academic degrees by false or fraudulent simulations; copying the whole or part of the academic work of another person; plagiarizing totally or partially the work of another person; copying all or part of another person answers to the questions of an oral or written exam by taking or getting someone else to take the exam on his/her behalf; as well as enabling and facilitating another person to perform the aforementioned behavior. Any of these behaviors will be subject to disciplinary action in accordance with the disciplinary procedure laid down in the UPR Students General Bylaws.

### **Students' Rights with Disabilities**

The University of Puerto Rico complies with all state and federal laws and regulations related to discrimination including "The American Disabilities Act" (ADA) and Law #51 from the Puerto Rico Commonwealth (Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico). Every student has the right to request and receive reasonable accommodation and Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS). Those students with special needs that require some type of particular assistance or accommodation shall explicitly communicate it directly to the professor. Students who are receiving VRS services shall communicate that to the professor at the beginning of the semester to facilitate appropriate planning and the necessary equipment according to La Oficina de Servicios a Estudiantes con Impedimento (*OSEI*), administered by the Dean of Students Office. Any other student requiring assistance or special accommodation shall also communicate directly with the professor. Reasonable accommodations requests or services DO NOT exempt the student from complying and fulfilling academic and course related requirements and responsibilities.

### **Gender and Sexual Identity Discrimination Policy**

The University of Puerto Rico prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in any of its forms, including that of sexual harassment. According to the Institutional Policy Against Sexual Harassment at the University of Puerto Rico, Certification Num. 130, 2014-2015 from the Board of Governors, any student subjected to acts constituting sexual harassment, must turn to the Office of the Student Ombudsperson, the Office of the Dean of Students, and/or the Coordinator of the Office of Compliance with Title IX for an orientation and/or a formal complaint.

### **Centro de Competencias Lingüísticas (CDCL): Centro de Competencias**

**Lingüísticas (CDCL):** The University's writing center, <http://generales.uprrp.edu/competencias-linguisticas/englishmodules/>, has materials available to assist you with the writing process. Take advantage of this service as you are working on your essay drafts.

## CLASS SCHEDULE (subject to changes)

### Current Voices

- 8/18 Introduction. Martin Espada, “Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits”;  
Zeina Hashem Beck, “Correcting My Mother’s Essay” (video);  
Found poem, “What Would You Take?” (video)

### Creating the Myth

- 8/23-8/25 Benjamin Franklin, “Information to Those Who Would Remove to  
America”; John Truslow Adams, from *The Epic of America*;  
Theodore Roosevelt, “True Americanism”; Emma Lazarus, “The New  
Colossus”; Anzia Yezierska, “How I Found America.” *Group A writes  
response by 8/23 at noon; Group B writes reply by 8/25 at noon.*

### Immigrant Dreams

- 8/30-9/1 Jhumpa Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s”; “The Third and Final Continent”  
Gregory Nava, *El Norte*. *Group B writes response by 8/30 at noon;*  
*Group A writes reply by 9/1 at noon.*

- 9/6-9/8 Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, through Book Two, Chp. 10.  
*Group A writes response; Group B writes reply.*

- 9/13-9/15 Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, to end.  
*Group B writes response; Group A writes reply.*

### Commodity Dreams and Social Mobility

- 9/20-9/22 Willa Cather, “Paul’s Case”; Kate Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings”  
Paper #1 due 9/22. *No responses due this week.*

- 9/27-9/29 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*.  
*Group A submits audio response; Group B writes reply.*

- 10/4-10/6 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*.  
*Group B submits audio response; Group A writes reply by 10/6 at noon.*

- 10/11-10/13 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, to end;  
Terence Davies’ film, *The House of Mirth*.  
*Group A writes response; Group B replies.*

- 10/18-10/20 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*.  
*Group B writes response; Group A replies.*

- 10/25-10/27 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*;  
Baz Luhrmann’s film, *The Great Gatsby*.  
*Group A submits audio response; Group B writes reply.*

### **Suburban Dreams and Nightmares**

- 11/1-11/3 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*.  
*Group B submits audio response; Group A writes reply.*
- 11/8-11/10 Volker Schlöndorff's film, *Death of a Salesman*  
John Cheever, "The Enormous Radio"  
Paper #2 due 11/10. *No responses due this week.*

### **Native American and African American Dreams**

- 11/15-11/17 Sherman Alexie, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"  
Rebecca Roanhorse, "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience"  
Richard Wright, "The Man Who Went to Chicago"  
*Group A writes response; Group B replies.*
- 11/22-11/24 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*  
*Group B writes response; Group A replies.*
- 11/29-12/1 from Studs Terkel, *American Dreams: Lost and Found*
- 12/6 Final exam