

University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras
College of Humanities
English Department
Spring 2023

Madeleine A. Vala, Ph.D.
Full Professor of English
College of General Studies

LITERATURE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

English 4218 meets MW 2:30-3:50pm in LPM 212.

My Contact Information

Office: 240 AJBR

Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursday, 11-2pm on Zoom. Please let me know in advance if you plan to attend my office hours.

Department office phones: 764-0000, ext. 88862

Email: 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.

This semester, this course will be offered in face-to-face or “presencial” modality. *If unforeseen circumstances arise that affect the original modality of this course, then teaching will continue remotely assisted by technology.* Note that under certain circumstances, 11.25 of the class contact hours may be offered in an alternate modality following Carta Circular 2016-2017-04 guidelines.

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)

Please come to class with hard copies of the texts. Digital texts are subject to the vagaries of internet reception and batteries. I expect you to be able to consult the pages of your text in class, not awaiting your pdf to load.

Required Coursepack is available at Instant Print, 276 Avda. Jesus Pineiro

Course Requirements:

Paper 1	25%
Paper 2	25%
Exam	20%
Presentation	10%
Moodle Responses	10%
Participation	10%

**Percentages may be adjusted to reflect the actual work accomplished in course. I.e, if I eliminate the presentation, the other requirements will be weighted more.

Papers (55%) 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. 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 one week late and you will earn a zero instead.** I do not accept papers via e-mail, nor will I peruse a draft over e-mail. That said, I will be happy to help you with a draft in my office hours.

Note: Students are expected to know how to write formal academic essays. This includes, but is not limited to, composing thesis statements, organizing the main parts of the essay (introduction, body, conclusion), understanding the rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling in English, and using critical analysis and quotations in essays. It is strongly recommended that students go to the CDCL for assistance in essay writing.

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.

Presentation (10%) Once during the semester, you will work with your classmates to give a context presentation on the novel being studied. The aim of this is to provide a **focused** exploration of **one** aspect of the novel's historical context using primary and secondary sources. I will provide more information about the presentations in class.

Moodle Responses (10%) To ensure that you are both keeping up with the reading and processing it before class, you will submit **2 sizeable paragraphs** to the Moodle discussion board a total of **eight times** over the semester, which averages to approximately one response every two weeks. 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*, so you should not summarize plot. I will evaluate responses based on your level of engagement with the text. Be sure that you quote from the story, novel, or film in your response—this constitutes your evidence for your position. I can, however, distinguish internet interpretations from your own. **If you plagiarize any of the content of your responses or use AI to compose them, you will earn a zero for this entire component of your grade.**

Responses must be posted by **7pm** the day before class meets or I will not accept them. You may only post one response per class session, and you may only post two responses on the same text if we spend multiple days on it. **You may not post retroactively on texts already discussed, so do not wait until the last few weeks of the term to fulfill this requirement!** If you do not have internet access at home or work in the evenings, plan accordingly. You may post responses earlier than the night before class, and you can access Moodle from any computer terminal on campus.

Participation (10%) I expect active, informed participation in class discussions. That means coming to class each day having read and thought about the readings. I expect you to raise your hands before contributing and for you to be aware of the overall class conversation. That means no glamour mouths and no wallflowers. As part of your participation grade, you and a classmate will be asked to lead class discussion for 20 minutes of class one day; you will come up with a few discussion questions or issues to present to the class. In addition, I may give unannounced quizzes periodically, especially if I sense that you aren't keeping up with the reading. These will be weighted as part of your participation grade.

Centro de Competencias Linguisticas (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 essays.

Attendance: Attendance is not directly factored into your grade, as it is expected of everyone. It is not synonymous with your participation grade. Attendance to class is mandatory. Six contact hours of absences (4 classes) may lower your final grade one whole letter grade. Five late arrivals are equivalent to one absence. If you have a particular family situation or other problem that forces you to miss more than three weeks of class (6 classes), you should take the course at another time. If you wish to be excused in the event of illness, you must present a doctor's note the day you return to class.

Plagiarism: I will not tolerate academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is the representation of someone else's words as your own. 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, you will earn a zero on the assignment and may be referred to the disciplinary board for action.** 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's 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.

Rights of Students 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 particular assistance or accommodation will explicitly communicate it directly to the professor. Students who are receiving VRS services will communicate that to the professor at the beginning of the semester to facilitate appropriate planning and the necessary equipment according to the Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office (Oficina de Servicios a Estudiantes con Impedimentos [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. Differential evaluation will be provided to students with special needs who have been duly certified by OSEI. (See Circular Núm. 9 de 2002–2003.)

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.

Contingency Plan in the Event of an Emergency: In the event of an emergency or interruption of classes, the professor will continue to offer the course using either distance or online modality, as established in this syllabus. According to official information and institutional guidelines, the professor will make efforts to communicate with students via institutional email or other alternative means available to guarantee the continuity of the course offering.

Technology and Information Systems: The professor is not responsible for the lack of Internet services, computers, devices, hotspot problems on your part, or power outages in your area. 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 Students' Affairs or Decanato de Estudiantes (decanatoestudiantes.rp@upr.edu).

Also, there are technological services provided by different municipalities, "Acceso a la tecnología cerca de tí" ([Iniciativas-de-Apoyo-en-Municipios.pdf](#) (uprrp.edu))

If you encounter technical problems with MIUPI, NEXT portal, or Microsoft Office, please contact the Help Desk (help.desk@upr.edu). For problems with Moodle, please contact: ayuda.moodle@upr.edu.

****This syllabus is subject to changes.****

CLASS SCHEDULE (subject to changes)

Apart from the novels, all readings are in the coursepack.

Creating the Myth

- 1/25 Introduction and syllabus. Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus”
Martin Espada, “Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits”
- 1/30 Benjamin Franklin, “The Way to Wealth”
Benjamin Franklin, “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America”
John Truslow Adams, from *The Epic of America*

Immigrant Dreams

- 2/1 Theodore Roosevelt, from *American Ideals*, “True Americanism”
Nola Kambanda, “My New World Journey”
Anzia Yezierska, “How I Found America”
- 2/6 Jhumpa Lahiri, “The Third and Final Continent”; “Mrs. Sen’s”
- 2/8 Gregory Nava, *El Norte* (film)
- 2/13 Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, through Book One
- 2/15 Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, through Book Two, Chp. 10
- 2/20 President’s Day—no class
- 2/22 Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, through Book Three
Presentation
- 2/27 Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, to end

Commodity Dreams and Social Mobility

- 3/1 Willa Cather, “Paul’s Case”
Kate Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings”
Paper #1 due in class
- 3/6 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, through Book One, Chp. 6
- 3/8 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, through Book One
Presentation
- 3/13 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, through Book Two, Chp. 5
- 3/15 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, to end

- 3/20 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*
Terence Davies' film, *The House of Mirth*
- 3/22 Abolition of Slavery Day. No class.
- 3/27 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, through Chp. 4
- 3/29 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, through Chp. 7
Presentation
- 4/3 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, to end
Clips of Baz Luhrmann's film, *The Great Gatsby*

Suburban Dreams and Nightmares

- 4/5 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
- 4/10 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
Presentation
- 4/12 Clips of Schlöndorff's film, *Death of a Salesman*
- 4/17 John Cheever, "The Enormous Radio"
Paper #2 due

African American and Native American Dreams

- 4/19 Richard Wright, "The Man Who Went to Chicago"
- 4/24 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, through part I
- 4/26 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, to end
Presentation
- 5/1 Sherman Alexie, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"
- 5/3 Rebecca Roanhorse, "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience"
- 5/8 from Studs Terkel, *American Dreams: Lost and Found*
- 5/10 from Studs Terkel, *American Dreams: Lost and Found*
Exam review.
- 5/15 Final exam