

American Studies 101: Introduction to American Myths, the Challenge of Identity

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Office Hours: R-230K: Weds, 12:30-1:20pm or by appointment

Texts: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

Going To Meet The Man by James Baldwin

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

The Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson

"On The Discovery of What It Means To Be American" by James Baldwin

Films: *Bladerunner* by Ridley Scott

Platoon by Oliver Stone

Bird by Clint Eastwood

Sketch of the Course: This course will examine dominant myths and counter-myths in the United States of America today. We will first look at the power of myth (culture-shaping ideas), and its ability to provide meaning and significance. Being meaning-making creatures, our society in America, like all human societies, strives to articulate myths that appeal broadly in order to bring the individuals of that society together. There are both positive and negative aspects to this sometimes-conscious endeavor. This course will provide the students with the necessary tools to both observe and critique these myths in an effort to better understand them, and themselves as members of the society creating and sustaining them.

Progress of the Course: We will begin with an introduction to the critical analysis of texts: we must be able to recognize the tools that authors deploy in order to tell meaningful stories. By giving ourselves the skills to recognize the parts of a story, we necessarily enhance our ability to comment intelligently upon it. Beginning with the nuts-and-bolts of textual analysis, we will proceed to ask what type or genre of story is being told: from adventure stories to love stories, from myths of destiny to myths of belief, the ability to name what type or types of story are being told enables us to better understand it. Obviously, this requires some degree of historical comparison. While most of the "texts" we'll examine throughout this course are from the twentieth century, many if not most of them depend on historical contexts that clarify their overall meaning. An example of this would be the history of American slavery and race-based discrimination that informs James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"; another example might be the history of money and social value that lies behind Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Awareness of historical contexts is essential to effective textual analysis, and we will make a concerted effort throughout to improve our capabilities in this regard. This progression from the nuts-and-bolts details of a text, to the larger and broader ideas and historical contexts, is often a model of effective critical writing on the influential texts of a given culture. Another way of stating this is to say that essays of effective critical analysis often move through the "layers" of a text, from the simple nuts-and-bolts at the "surface," to the "depths" of less obvious and often more complicated ideas. By the end

of the quarter, we will have dramatically improved our skills in this type of analytical writing, remembering that the most elusive myths are our own.

What the Student Will Learn: In order to interpret what I'm calling American Myths, the student will need tools, as well as objects to use those tools on. The tools we will be developing have their origin in the analysis of language. This also applies to images and visual media. In other words, we will be "reading" critically, even when our "text" happens to be in a largely visual medium, such as a movie. As for the "objects" of our study, we will be dividing our attention between analysis of fiction, both short stories and full-length novels, non-fiction prose, and motion pictures. Because these "objects" of "cultural production" take great amounts of time and energy to create, we will necessarily take a considerable amount of time to examine them thoroughly. Because we are sensitive creatures we can often jump to conclusions too quickly; to be able to interpret movies and novels and short stories effectively, we need first to suspend our judgment until we have gone through these objects of our analysis carefully. Another way of saying the same thing is to stress the need for sympathetic attention: give the "text" its due, and attempt to understand things from that perspective.

The Syllabus:

A syllabus explains the nature of a college course, and it outlines both expectations and standards for the students. It helps clarify what the students will be required to do, and why. You should understand this syllabus as a contract, one that you agree to abide by when you register for the course. By registering for the class, you accept the terms it imposes, in terms of attendance, participation, class behavior, assignments and due dates, respect for yourself, your classmates and your professor. This is standard for college classes and you will be expected to abide by that standard. Please keep a copy of the syllabus (and time schedule) with you in your course folder; I will be asking you to carry them with you like a textbook and will be referring to them periodically throughout the term. Please keep a copy of the syllabus and time schedule with you in your course folder.

The Tools:

- 1) Reading Appreciatively: Observing what the author/director does, and how he/she goes about doing it. Another way of putting this is to ask, "what does this 'text' do?" Being able to answer this question as fully as possible is central to being an effective critical interpreter.
 - a) metaphor
 - b) symbol
 - c) intertextuality
 - d) character
 - e) theme
 - f) plot
 - g) point of view
- 2) Reading Critically: Asking why the author does something
 - a) Why is this metaphor deployed at this moment?

- b) Why is this character symbolized this way?
- c) What if the plot went another way?
- d) Why is the author using this particular point of view?
- e) What is significant about this intertextual reference?
- f) Can we imagine this theme handled differently?
- g) What does this interpretation say about the author?

Requirements: There will be two exams, a 5-page paper, class seminars and a portfolio of critical response papers. The exams include a one-hour mid-term and a one-hour final, both having a combination of multiple-choice, short answer, and essay questions. The examinations are graded on a 300-point scale. The 5-page paper will be graded on a 200-point scale. The portfolio will be due at the time of the final exam and will include 1-page response papers to all the “texts” we read during the quarter. The portfolio response papers will be graded for the basics of English writing skills, for the degree of engagement with the “text,” and for a balance between appreciation of the text and insightful critique of it. Each of these is part of the final grade; all must be completed on time or a failing grade will result. There will also be occasional in-class quizzes on the “text” of the week; missing these small-point quizzes can be the difference between an “A” and a “B” grade.

Grades and Privacy: The FERPA guidelines (see BCC student handbook) strictly and legally bind instructors and students in regards to grades and privacy. Your grade is between me the instructor, and you, the student. Obviously, you may share your grades with anyone you choose to, but I will not share grades with anyone but you. This applies to Running Start students who are still attending high school as well; as long as you are at the college, you are treated like any other student here. Do not have parents or girl/boy-friends act as a surrogate contact or delivery person regarding grades or any graded document pertaining to class. Consequently, I will not discuss grades via email, as it is highly accessible. Please look for your grade at the official BCC online posting site.

Grading Scale:

Mid-Term Exam: 300 points

Final Exam: 300 points

5-page Paper: 200 points

Response Papers: 100 points

Seminars and In-Class Participation: 100 points

A= 950-1000 B = 830-869 C = 690-759 D- = 550-599

A- = 900-949 B- = 800-829 C- = 650-689 F = 0-499

B+ = 870-899 C+ = 760-799 D+ = 600-649

What is Expected of the Student in the Portfolios: Be formal. You must write the response papers for each “text.” These short essays are both your practice in critical analysis, as well as your opportunity to explore and articulate your own understanding of that text. Writing about a topic is a way of engaging with it, and without thorough engagement our analyses tend to be limited or worse. When we write about another “text” we increase our own skills while we broaden and deepen our understanding and

appreciation for the work of other minds. The essays in the portfolio must be in proper English or your grade will suffer; reading sloppy essays is wearying at best, and misleading at worst. If you do not write clearly then no one will understand what you really meant to say. Do your utmost to edit these final portfolios to the best of your ability. Your critical response papers are due as per the due dates on the Tentative Time Schedule and also together in the Portfolio at the end of the quarter.

Late Papers:

Papers are due in class at the beginning of class time. Papers later than the due date will not be accepted. Papers that are handed in five minutes after the beginning of class will be considered late and will not receive a grade for credit. Rough drafts must also be turned in on time; incomplete rough drafts or substandard rough drafts will lose 10 points on the final draft grade. If you fail to turn in a rough draft and/or participate in Peer Review, you will lose 20 points off your final draft grade. That means you could not score higher than 80/100 on a 100-point paper, even if your paper were a perfect paper.

Plagiarism and Academic Honesty:

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's words or ideas as your own. You are plagiarizing when you copy someone else, in part or whole, or when you receive "help" to the extent that the paper is no longer in your words or is no longer your own idea. This is an immensely serious issue that goes to the heart of writing and learning; this course is an opportunity for each student to learn how to write and read English better, and plagiarizing someone else's work destroys that opportunity. Do your own work and you will learn all the more for your effort.

Obviously, copying an article or book, or even using a sentence from one of these sources without putting quotation marks around it and citing the author is plagiarism. If you do use other sources, whether they are books, magazines, or literary journals, etc., you must document them. Since many of the papers in this course focus on the writings of others, we'll learn early on how to document sources, using the MLA (Modern Languages Association) method. Plagiarism can be grounds for failing the course. If I catch you plagiarizing an assignment, you will certainly fail that assignment; plagiarizing found in the portfolio would be more serious yet. If I suspect you of plagiarism, I reserve the right to place more weight on your in-class writings to calculate your final grade. Be aware that BCC provides a website guide (<http://www.bcc.ctc.edu/writinglab>) to plagiarism that you can use if you have any doubts as to general and school-specific policies on this issue. Please use this guide if you are at all uncertain if you might be plagiarizing other texts of any sort.

A good resource for Plagiarism is the Writing Lab:
<http://bellevuecollege.edu/writinglab/Plagiarism.html>

Attendance and Classroom Behavior: Regular attendance is critical to achieving success in this class. We will be using a combination of lecture and class discussion in order to gain the skills necessary for effective textual analysis. As noted above, we will also be having unannounced quizzes from time to time throughout the quarter; missing these

could be the difference in your grade. There will also be group exercises that require a small group of students to present their findings or to answer questions about a given text; full participation will enhance your individual learning. While the matter of attendance often appears to be balanced between threats to a students' grade and encouragements as to student performance, I lean heavily towards the latter. The student is ultimately responsible for the depth of her or his own learning, and active participation is the key to achieving that learning. The ability to discuss texts cogently, particularly with other people who have different interpretations of the same texts, is a profound opportunity that absence from class prevents

There are no excused absences in this class. Either you are present in class or you are absent. If you are late to class, it counts for half an absence. If you are 20 minutes late, it counts for an absence. I want everyone to take note that the College offers online courses which require students to go online everyday, but without the need to convene in a regular classroom at a given time. If you think that attendance will be a problem for you, then please take another course, perhaps an online course. By self-evaluating your own capabilities in regards to attendance, you will do yourself, your grade, and everyone else a big favor by deciding in advance which class is suited to your learning style.

Regular attendance in this class is mandatory. If you miss class you will not be able to keep up with the coursework and this will adversely affect your grade. We will be doing a great deal of in-class writing and group discussion, which is not replaceable with outside work, such as extra papers. I will also be giving random in-class quizzes on the readings. Therefore, coming to class prepared and on time will be a key to keeping a good grade up. Being prepared for class means having your texts with you in class, including your dictionary and syllabus and time schedule. "Being prepared for class" means completing assignments on time and reading the materials before coming to class. Consistent tardiness is nearly as bad as lack of class preparation, and will also not be tolerated, as it disrupts the class session and the quality of learning therein. Frequent tardiness will result in a talk with me and point deductions from the grade book.

The attendance policy for this class is: 1-5 absences, no grade change; 6-7 absences, grade drops one full letter grade; 8-9 absences, grade drops two full letter grades; 10 or more absences, "F" grade. Coming to class late or leaving early can also be counted as an absence, especially if it happens frequently. Please keep track of your own absences; don't expect me to report on your attendance habits. In other words, be responsible for yourself and your own behavior. This attendance policy is structured like that in the BCC Arts and Humanities website, www.bcc.ctc.edu/artshum.

If you don't want to be in this class, or if you feel you must read the newspaper or favorite magazine during class time, please do everyone a favor and leave. The class depends on participation for students and instructor alike, and if you find it necessary to do other things, such as talk on your cell phone, send or read text messages, etc., please go elsewhere and let the rest of us work without disruption. If I perceive that you are a disruption, whether to yourself, to classmates or to me, I reserve the right to ask you to leave the class. Thank you.

Affirmation of Inclusion:

Bellevue College is committed to maintaining an environment in which every member of the campus community feels welcome to participate in the life of the college, free from harassment and discrimination.

We value our different backgrounds at Bellevue College, and students, faculty, staff members, and administrators are to treat one another with dignity and respect.

<http://bellevuecollege.edu/about/goals/inclusion.asp>

The Student Code:

“Cheating, stealing and plagiarizing (using the ideas or words of another as one’s own without crediting the source) and inappropriate/disruptive classroom behavior are violations of the Student Code of Conduct at Bellevue College. Examples of unacceptable behavior include, but are not limited to: talking out of turn, arriving late or leaving early without a valid reason, allowing cell phones/pagers to ring, and inappropriate behavior toward the instructor or classmates. The instructor can refer any violation of the Student Code of Conduct to the Vice President of Student Services for possible probation or suspension from Bellevue College. Specific student rights, responsibilities and appeal procedures are listed in the Student Code of Conduct, available in the office of the Vice President of Student Services.” The Student Code, Policy 2050, in its entirety is located at:

http://bellevuecollege.edu/policies/2/2050_Student_Code.asp

Important Links:

MyBC and BC Student Email Accounts:

All students registered for classes at Bellevue College are entitled to a network and e-mail account. Your student network account can be used to access your student e-mail, log in to computers in labs and classrooms, connect to the BC wireless network and log in to MyBC. To create your account, go to: <https://bellevuecollege.edu/sam> .

BC offers a wide variety of computer and learning labs to enhance learning and student success. Find current campus locations for all student labs by visiting the [Computing Services website](#).

Disability Resource Center (DRC):

The Disability Resource Center serves students with a wide array of learning challenges and disabilities. If you are a student who has a disability or learning challenge for which you have documentation or have seen someone for treatment and if you feel you may need accommodations in order to be successful in college, please contact us as soon as possible.

If you are a person who requires assistance in case of an emergency situation, such as a fire, earthquake, etc, please meet with your individual instructors to develop a safety plan within the first week of the quarter.

The DRC office is located in B 132 or you can call our reception desk at 425.564.2498. Deaf students can reach us by video phone at 425-440-2025 or by TTY at 425-564-4110. Please visit our website for application information into our program and other helpful links at www.bellevuecollege.edu/drc

Course Content:

Please be aware that this is a college course and that all students will be expected to complete all assignments, including readings (and other textual materials) that may contain adult content. As per BCC and Arts and Humanities Division policies, all students are adults (including students under 18) and will be expected to participate fully without the option for alternative assignments. In particular, this course will read Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a book about the Vietnam War, and see *Platoon*, a film that contains potentially shocking material. All students will be expected to complete all the assignments without exception. Please keep in mind that the college environment is one that promotes and expects everyone to respectfully participate in the learning process. This includes the Affirmation of Inclusion statement posted in every classroom, and applies also to the expectations of mutual respect in speaking and listening in class. This course will follow the guidelines for course content explained more fully in the Arts and Humanities website, www.bcc.ctc.edu/artshum.

Writing: Please do your utmost to write formally and effectively. The Writing Lab (D204, in the Academic Success Center) is available on campus if you have any cause to believe that you need help with your writing. Remember that conversation with parents, peers, or workmates is very different from writing. In conversation we can correct what we are saying: "Wait, I really meant...." When we are writing, our own written text has to say everything for us, and all the elements of writing are necessary to achieve this. In other words, if your document is not punctuated correctly, your meaning may be lost or misconstrued completely. The college offers The Writing Lab, as well as developmental English courses, in order to prepare the students for the sort of critical and analytical writing required for this course. Because the overwhelming majority of requirements for this course require effective writing, if you don't have these skills already, please consider another course.

Last Points: This course is designed to be both fun and informative. In other words, I expect you to work hard in order to develop the skills of effective textual analysis; I also believe that this skill-development provides great pleasure. The ability to effectively analyze the "texts" of our own culture, and that of other cultures, enables us to appreciate the skill and imagination creative work requires. This ability also deepens our understanding of ourselves and of the world we live in; lacking this ability, we tend to act without self-knowledge, dominated by the myths we unknowingly hold.