

MOBY-DICK

ECL 522: American Lit 1800-1860
Professor Jessica Pressman
Fall 2024

Course Description:

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is the big book of American literature. Massive in scope and scale (its nearly 800 pages depict an obsessive trek to kill a great whale, the detailed history and process of whaling, critiques of slavery and freedom in the young American nation, meditations on a changing natural environment, and much more), the novel is genre-defying and gloriously poetic, cosmic and complex, historical and hilarious. The book has commanded and challenged attention and judgment since its publication in 1851, and it continues to do so in ever-emerging adaptations across media forms and readerships.

This course invites students to read this Great American Novel collaboratively and collectively as a community. We will situate the book in its historical context—the expanding debate over slavery, U.S. expansionist politics, industrial capitalism, and much more—as well as its relevance to our contemporary historical moment (the age of dictators, global capitalism, ecological damage, and more). We will consider this novel as a touchstone for understanding the operations of literary value, taste, and culture; for, Melville's novel was a flop in its time and had to be recuperated in the early decades of the 20th century. We will also explore how this novel invites contemporary concerns and modes of study, including the emergent fields of ecocriticism and Blue Humanities. We will read the novel, along with relevant criticism from across more than a century, bolstered by selected adaptations and supporting documents.

This course offers a rare opportunity to dive deep into *Moby-Dick* to navigate its ripples and currents, to ask “why” this work remains so relevant, to understand and appreciate it as a literary text and a historical document.

Learning Outcomes

In this class, you will

- **Learn** to close read a literary text for aesthetic and historical components.
- **Situate literature/art** in historical context so as to understand how cultural production constitutes and constructs history and society.
- **Examine** how a work of literature achieves canonical value and status by way of external, social, and political forces.
- **Trace** a longer history of contemporary issues back to mid-19th century America: including tyrannical leadership, polarized perspectives, race/gender/class conflicts, ecological destruction, and more.
- **Hone** your skills as a critical thinker, listener, and writer by focusing on the development of a thesis statement and the ability to prove it through textual explication

Administrative Information

Class Meetings: T/Th 11-12:15 Hepner Hall, room 150	Course Website: https://fall2024- ecl522.jessicapressman.com/
Professor's Office: AL 261 Office hours: Th 12:30-1:30 AND Additional times and dates by appointment; email me for an additional appointment (in- person or on Zoom) out of the regular office hours timeslot. Zoom meeting room: 943 624 7815 https://SDSU.zoom.us/my/jpressman	Email: jpressman@sdsu.edu <i>*Do not expect a response within 24 hours</i>
English Subject Librarian: Markel Tumlin Special Collections Librarian: Anna Culbertson	mtumlin@rohan.sdsu.edu aculbertson@sdsu.edu

NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change... and probably will change!

ASSIGNMENTS:

The assignments for this class are low-stakes but plentiful so that you have a chance to practice writing regularly and get feedback on your work. All assignments build upon each other, so there is no “busy work”; you can use your blogs posts for the midterm or final, for example.

Participation 20%

Weekly Blog 25%

2 Short Essays 15% each, 30% total (3 pages, double-spaced)—these can be rewritten for a better grade

Final Essay Proposal 1%

Final Essay 24% (8-10 pages, double-spaced)

Extra credit: up to 1%

Participation 20%

This is your class, and your participation is vital to its success. You must attend all class meetings in order to receive full credit for participation. Come to class prepared to discuss the text in depth; this means having read the entire text before class. I expect you to speak and listen.

- Your participation grade includes *engaging in dialogue* in class. This means speaking and listening actively, attentively, and respectfully. (If you have fear of speaking in public,

this seminar is a good place to learn to address that fear. Please come see me early in the term to discuss strategies for dealing with this fear).

- Your participation grade includes a meeting with the professor.

Grading Rubric for Classroom Participation

A= attend class regularly, prepared to participate, and participate actively (generously and generatively) in class discussion

B= attend class regularly, prepared to participate

C=attend class regularly

Weekly Blog 25%

You will write (approx. 350-500 words) blog responses to the reading (any text and any idea/section from that text) and each provide a comment on a peer’s blog each week (due before the next week’s class meeting, so before Thursday). The goal of the blog posts is to extend the conversation and coverage of the course by allowing you to 1) express, share, and comment upon interests, questions, and concerns related to the readings and also to 2) enable the professor to address and incorporate these topics in that week’s meeting. It is also a place to draft ideas and text for use in your essays.

--Blog posts are due on Monday at 6pm weekly; late posts will not receive credit.

--You will be given an overall grade for blog posts, based on completion and content, not a grade for each post. Rubric for grading is available on our website and below.

Grading Rubric for Blog

Your Blog Grade is based on 2-parts: 1) a completion grade, and 2) a content grade

The completion component of the blog grade requires you to have the following number of posts:	The content component of the blog grade is based on the following grading rubric
<p>A= 11-13 posts B= 8-10 posts C= 6-7 posts D= 4-5 posts F= 3 or less</p>	<p>A= Post contains a focused thesis or question and close reading of a passage, B= Post contains a close reading of content but no focused question or thesis C= Post contains no analysis of text (no close reading), just summary and undirected ideas D=Post contains little substantive thinking as content</p>

2 Short Close Reading Essays: 15% each (30%)-- *You can revise each for a better grade. See the schedule for revision deadline.*

These short essays (approx. 1500 words= 3-4 pages) are an opportunity to focus on one aspect or passage from a single text from our syllabus, to provide an in-depth analysis and to practice close reading/ explication. This essay also intended as a scaffolding assignment, meaning it is there to support you in developing the thinking and writing skills to produce the final essay, to provide a benchmark for your writing (and grade). You can revise one of your blog posts or write new content that demonstrates your ability to 1) develop a [thesis](#), and 2) use a text to support, through textual [explication/analysis/close reading](#), your argument. The short essay is an exercise in diving into the formal operations of a text to see HOW it operates and develop an argument about WHY that matters. You will

- 1) select a single short text or passage of a text
- 2) pursue a focused argument about that passage: what you see in it and why that matters (WHAT, HOW, SO WHAT)

YOU CAN REVISE these short assignments for a better grade, and you are encouraged to do so. Revision is due before next discovery is due

Final essay proposal--thesis statement and description of the project 1%

This assignment helps ensure that you are on the right track for your final essay and enables me to give you feedback that can assist in your development. You will write a 150 word abstract of your final project explaining your argument, purpose, and proposed media format. The abstract should contain a thesis statement, brief explanation of your purpose, and a description of the project (including proposed media format and rationale for that design).

***Can be revised for a better grade*

Final Essay or Conference Presentation (5-7 pages/10 minutes): 24%

The goal of this final project is to present the culmination of your learning by way of sharing your takeaway passion-point from the class: what most interested and inspired you? what would you like to continue to study in the future? how would you contribute to the conversation outside of class or pursue next steps in researching this topic?

You can deliver your final project as a talk or an essay (including a creative or digital project), but *whatever format your essay/presentation takes, it MUST contain the following:*

- 1) a thesis statement
- 2) close-reading explication of the text
- 3) engagement with (not just citation of) at least 2 scholarly sources

Conference Talk: You will present an 8-10- minute analytic talk that presents an argument and research exploration on a topic/text of your choosing from our semester. Your presentation should be prepared (preferably written, with accompanying slides) and practiced.

Essay: You will write a final essay (8-10 pages) that explores a topic or text from the course through a thesis-based argument and explication (close reading). You can write a creative-critical essay that takes the form of a work of a webart, video, hypertext, etc.

-You can use your blogs to form the basis of your final essay, but the requirements listed above must be met.

-You will briefly present your final project during the last week of class.

Extra Credit: “Discovery” up to 1%

This blog assignment can be written at any point during the semester is intended to inspire you to read beyond the texts assigned in class. For this blog, you will select a reading that is *not* on our syllabus and write a blog post about why it is important to your understanding of our class learning. (See our “Additional Reading/Research” page) Your post should contain a thesis and textual explication/close reading to receive credit.

****NOTE: All assignments are docked 1/3 of a grade for each day they are late (for example, an A becomes an A- if turned in one day late)****

REQUIRED READING-- *Books available in the SDSU bookstore*

--Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851), Penguin edition (2002), intro by Andrew Delbanco

****You MUST have the book, not an e-reader digital**version***

Suggested Reading:

Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby-Dick?:* (Viking, 2011)

READING SCHEDULE

****NOTE: Schedule might change****

Part I: Getting Our Sea Legs

Week 1: Introductions

August 27: Introduction to the class

August 29: Introduction to the class & each other

Week 2: Historical Context

September 3: Ralph Waldo Emerson, “American Scholar” (1837)

September 5: Gilbert King, “The True-Life Horror That Inspired ‘Moby-Dick’ (2013)

Week 3: Prefatory

September 10: Philip Hoare, “What ‘Moby-Dick’ Means to Me” (*The New Yorker*, 2011)

Additional Reading: Nathaniel Philbrick, excerpt from *Why Read Moby-Dick* (2011)

September 12: Andrew Delbanco, “Introduction” (pp. xi-xxviii)

Part II: Diving In

Week 4: “Etymology” and “Extracts” & Chapters 1-12

September 17: “Etymology” and “Extracts”, Chapters 1-4 (pp. 3-32)

September 19: Chapters 5-12 (pp. 33-63)

Week 5: Chapters 13-33

September 24: Chapters 13-27 (pp. 64-132)

September 26: Chapters 28-33 (pp. 133-160)

Week 6: Chapters 34-36

October 1: Chapters 34-36 (pp. 161-181)

October 3: *No class meeting—Rosh Hashanah*

****Short Essay: Close Reading 1—Due Sunday 10/6 at midnight, posted to the blog****

Week 7: Chapters 37-57

October 8: Chapters 37-42 (pp. 182-212)

October 10: 43-57 (pp. 213-296)

Week 8: Chapters 58-86

October 15: Chapters 58-73 (pp. 297-358)

October 17: Chapters 74-86 (pp. 359-414)

Week 9: Chapters 87-108

October 22: Chapters 87-96 (pp. 415-465)

October 24: Chapters 97-108 (pp.466-515)

****Short Essay: Close Reading 2—Due Sunday 10/27 at midnight, posted to the blog****

****Revisions to Essay 1 Due Sunday 10/27 at midnight, email the professor ****

Week 10: Chapters 109-Epilogue

October 29: Chapters 109-132 (pp. 516-593)

October 31: Chapters 133-epilogue (pp. 594-625)

Part III. Ripples and Ramifications

Week 11: The Canon & The Construction of Literary Value- How the Big Book Became the Great Big Book

November 5: Matthew Willis, “Melville Reborn, Again and Again” (2014)

O.W. Riegel, “The Anatomy of Melville's Fame” (1931)

November 7: Special Collections visit--**Meet in Love Library**

****Revisions to Essay 2 Due Sunday 11/10 at midnight, email the professor****

Week 12: Adaptations

November 12: selected poems by Steve Mentz from *Sailing Without Ahab: Ecopoetic Travels* (2024): “Ideas” (21), [...] (38), “The Chart” (54), “The Chase—Second Day” (145-8)

- view Leroy Neiman paintings

November 14: excerpts from *Emoji Dick* (2010): “The Chase” (pp.699-716) and “Epilogue” (pp. 717)

****Final project proposals due Sunday 11/17 at midnight, posted to the blog****

Week 13: Blue Humanities

November 19: John R. Gills, “The Blue Humanities” (2013)

November 21: Steve Mentz, “A Poetics of Planetary Water: The Blue Humanities after John Gillis” (2023)

Week 14: Thanksgiving Week—No class meetings—Thesis Review

November 26: *No class meeting*. Asynchronous peer review in Google docs

November 28: *No class meeting*. *Thanksgiving*

Week 15: Workshopping final projects in DH Center

December 3: Workshopping final projects

December 5: Presenting final projects

Week 16: Conclusion

December 10: Concluding Conversation

Final Essay due, Sunday, December 15, at midnight, posted to the blog*

OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Communication

Students are provided with an SDSU Gmail account, and this [SDSU email address](#) will be used for all communications. University Senate policy notes that students are responsible for checking their official university email once per day during the academic term. For more information, please see [Student Official Email Address Use Policy here](#).

Medical-related absences

University policy instructs students to contact their professor/instructor/coach in the event they need to miss class due to an illness, injury, or emergency. Please inform me as soon as possible if you are missing class due to an illness or a Covid-related situation.

Finding Help on Campus

Need help finding an advisor, tutor, counselor, or require emergency economic assistance? The [SDSU Student Success Help Desk](#) is here for you. Student assistants are available via Zoom

Monday through Friday, 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM to help you find the office or service that can best assist with your particular questions or concerns.

Other important resources:

- CAL Student Success Center: <https://cal.sdsu.edu/student-resources/student-success>
- College of Education Student Success Center: <https://education.sdsu.edu/oss>
- Center for Student Success in Engineering: <https://csse.sdsu.edu/>
- CoS Student Success Center: <https://cossuccess.sdsu.edu/>
- FSB Student Success Center: <https://business.sdsu.edu/undergrad/advising>
- HHS Advisors: <https://chhs.sdsu.edu/student-resources/advising/>
- IVC Student Success and Retention: https://ivcampus.sdsu.edu/student_affairs/retention
- PSFA Advisors: https://psfa.sdsu.edu/resources/student_advisors

Accommodations

SDSU via the Student Ability Success Center (SASC) provides accommodations for students with documented disabilities or medical conditions covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In keeping with current public health guidance, I cannot provide arrangements to students without an ADA-qualified disability or medical condition.

If you are a student with a disability and are in need of accommodations for this class, please contact the Student Ability Success Center at sascinfo@sdsu.edu (or go to sdsu.edu/sasc) as soon as possible. Please know accommodations are not retroactive, and I cannot provide accommodations based upon disability until I have received an accommodation letter from the Student Ability Success Center. SASC registration and accommodation approvals may take up to 10-14 business days, so please plan accordingly.

SDSU as “safe space”

The CSU has affirmed its commitment to ‘protecting access, affordability, intellectual freedom, inclusivity, and diversity for all students . . . including supporting DACA students.’ Discrimination, harassment, or retaliation against students, faculty, and staff on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability, nationality, immigration status and other categories of identity is prohibited. If you have concerns about your status at the university, please visit <http://studentaffairs.sdsu.edu/EOP/> for information or contact the Dean of Students or the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs in your College.”

Academic Honesty (especially in the age of AI & Chat GBT)

I take teaching seriously, and I expect you to take seriously your work as a student. That means that academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Academic dishonest includes, but is not limited to: (a) using assignments that you wrote for another class, (b) representing work done by someone else as your own (i.e., plagiarism), and (c) copying someone else’s work on an assignment, basic cheating. Plagiarism and Cheating of any kind will result at least in an "F" for that assignment (and may, depending on the severity of the case, lead to an "F" for the entire course) and may be referred to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities for further action. If you have questions at all, you should consult me immediately.