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**ENGLISH 285**

**THEMES IN AMERICAN WRITING**

**BULLETIN INFORMATION**

ENGL 285 - Themes in American Writing (3 credit hours)

**Course Description:**   
Reading a variety of American texts that exemplify persistent themes of American culture.  
Prerequisites: ENGL 101 and 102 or equivalent

**SAMPLE COURSE OVERVIEW**

In this section we will work to define, interrogate, and understand the alien in American culture. “Who and what is an alien?” posed Henry James in his travel narrative, *The American Scene* (1903).  How has the “alien” defined national identity across history, policy, popular culture, and literature?  And why do fictional aliens continue to represent the American nightmare?  Yellow fever, “yellow peril,” Alien and Sedition Laws, Ellis Island, Jim Crow, body snatchers, and AIDS are some of the topics we will cover in this course.  We will watch a few classic films in which aliens are central, such as Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982); and will trace the alien into our contemporary moment (Patriot Act, border patrols, disease).  From private and elite policy to populist and pervasive imagery, the alien remains pivotal to American fictions of all kinds.  In this course, we will explore possible reasons for our enduring fascination with the alien.

**ITEMIZED LEARNING OUTCOMES**

**Upon successful completion of English 285, students will be able to:**

1. Demonstrate familiarity with the US authors taught, their formal, thematic, and social concerns, and their fit within their literary/historical periods.
2. Articulate the role of literary and other creative works in the formation of national identities
3. Define, compare, contrast, justify, and interrogate the major American literary movements covered in class.
4. Engage in meaningful debate about the literary texts we have studied.
5. Write effective analytical essays interpreting literary texts.

**SAMPLE REQUIRED TEXTS/SUGGESTED READINGS/MATERIALS**

These can all be purchased at South Carolina Bookstore (Green & Main Streets); if you prefer to buy them from an alternative source, make sure you purchase the correct editions.

1. Nathaniel West, *Miss Lonely Heart and Day of the Locust.*  New Directions Press, ISBN 0811218228
2. Edgar Allan Poe, *Great Tales and Poems of Edgar Allen Poe*.  Pocket Books, Enriched Classics, ISBN 10:1416534768
3. Tony Kushner, *Angels In America*. ISBN 1559362316
4. Arturo Islas, *The Rain God: A Desert Tale.*Harper Collins, 1991, ISBN 0380763931
5. Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. Seven Stories Press, ISBN-10: 1583226982

**SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS AND/OR EXAM**

1. **Formal Essay:**  You will have one 3.5-5 page essay due in this course that will focus on one of the literary texts covered in our readings.  The essay will be thesis-driven and will require a close reading of the literature to illustrate and support your interpretation of the material.  I will provide a detailed assignment sheet outlining the guidelines for the essay well in advance of the due date
2. **Group Presentation:**  Each of you will be put into a research group that will focus on a particular interpretation of “alien” in American society.  You will collectively choose an example that you think best represents the alien, collect and analyze evidence to support your “alien” and present your finding to the rest of the class.  For example, if your topic is disease, you might focus on representations of breast cancer in the media, looking at the level of intimacy/alienation suggested.  Your presentation can include newspaper articles, advertisements, personal interviews, video, performance, music, artwork, and/or visual aids of any kind.  Each group will need to get a proposal approved prior to their presentation date.  A detailed assignment sheet will be provided
3. **Film Review**:  You will write a two-page film review focusing on the representation of “alien” in the film.  I will assign each of you to one of the films we will watch in the course and will provide a detailed assignment sheet.
4. **Participation:**  Your active presence and attention to the questions and ideas that get raised during our class discussions is essential to the success—to say nothing of collective enjoyment—of the class.  When I evaluate your level of participation, I will be thinking *not only* of your attendance record, but how prepared you were for each class period (materials, contributions to discussion).  Under no circumstances should you ever sleep, text, phone, read the newspaper, do work for other courses, or any other activity other than what our focus is for that class period during our time in class together.
5. **Blackboard/Quizzes:**  Every week I will post a discussion thread on Blackboard and you will be required to post a 250-word response.  Make sure that you write your responses in a Word document first, so that you can check your word-count, and then copy it to the Blackboard Discussion Board under the appropriate thread.  Submissions that have less than 200-words will not be accepted, nor will those not written in complete, grammatically correct sentences.  You should have 10 250-word posts by the end of the term.  I will give unannounced reading quizzes periodically during the semester.
6. **Final Exam:**  We will have a final exam in this course and I will provide a review session and study guidelines in advance.
7. **First Assignment:** Write a 2-page reflective piece on what you think “alien” means, is defined by, and what best represents the alien to your mind.  I expect you to look up a definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* available online through the University of South Carolina Library page to help you with this.  Be prepared to share your thoughts on this in class.

**SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE WITH TIMELINE OF TOPICS, READINGS/ASSIGNMENTS, EXAMS/PROJECTS**

**Week 1:** Syllabus, Introductions, Keywords Discussion

Poe, “Fall of the House of Usher”

**Week 2:** Poe, “The Black Cat”

Poe, “William Wilson”

**Week 3:** Islas, *Rain God: a Desert Tale* (to p. 100)

Islas, *Rain God: a Desert Tale* (to p. 145)

**Week 4:** Islas, *Rain God: a Desert Tale* (conclude)

Groups I & II present

**Week 5:** Davis, *Ecology of Fear*

Davis, continued

**Week 6:** West, *Day of the Locust* (to p. 75)

**Week 7:** West, *Day of the Locust* (end)

**Week 8:** Groups III & IV Present

Butler, “Bloodchild”

**Week 9:** film, *Alien*

film, *Alien*

**Week 10:** Butler, “Speech Sounds”

Butler, “Crossover”

**Week 11:** *Blade Runner;* Essay Due

*Blade Runner*

**Week 12:** Kushner, *Angels in America*

**Week 13:** film, *Angels in America*

Kushner, *Angels in America*

**Week 14:** *Angels in America*

**Week 15:** Groups V & VI present

Conclusions; Review

**Final Exam according to university exam schedule**