

Classics of American Literature

(84 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 250

Taught by [Arnold Weinstein](#)

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Accessing the great American books—the classics—is a unique way of understanding the history of this country and of adding to our own personal estate of literary wealth.

These classic stories and poems of American literature are found in the pages of Franklin, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Twain, Whitman, Faulkner, James, Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Morrison, and others.

As Professor Arnold Weinstein reminds us: "American classics are wonderfully rich fare. America is a mythic land, a place with a sense of its own destiny and promise, a place that has experienced bloody wars to achieve that destiny. The events of American history shine forth in our classics."

And yet, when was the last time you read them? Possibly not as recently as you'd like. Why? Not because you wouldn't love it. But perhaps the demands of your daily life or some other reason have prevented this pleasure. Now, here is the opportunity to gain an extraordinary familiarity with each of these authors within a manageable amount of time, as well as review the great works you may already know.

What Explains Greatness?

These books are both "American" and "Classics." The course has been crafted to explain just why it is that some works become classics while others do not, why some "immortal" works eventually fade from our attention completely, and even why some contemporary works now being ignored, or even laughed at by critics, may be considered immortal some day.

One memorable work at a time, you'll see how each of these classic masterpieces shares the uncompromising uniqueness that invariably marks masterpieces of the American literary canon.

What links these writers to each other—and to us as readers today—is their shared awareness that the past is alive and changing as each generation of writers and readers steps forward to interpret it anew, from *Sleepy Hollow* to *The Great Gatsby*. Professor Weinstein contends that the literary canon itself is alive, growing, and changing with each new generation.

The course was born out of Professor Weinstein's conviction that American literature is our "great estate," and that claiming this rightful inheritance—great writers' shared awareness of a

living past and the lessons we can take from it—should be nothing less than a unique and joyous learning experience.

Experience Two Centuries of America's Greatest Works

Professor Weinstein believes America's classic works should be savored as part of our inner landscape: part of how we see both America and ourselves.

He leads you through more than two centuries of the best writers America has ever produced, bringing out the beauty of their language, the excitement of their stories, and the sheer importance of what they had to say about life, power, love, adventure, and what it means, in every sense, to be American.

Perhaps you recall Melville's prowling Ahab, on the search for Moby Dick, and the power of the "grand, ungodly, Godlike man" or that quiet diner in *The Grapes of Wrath* and the pain of one of John Steinbeck's "Okies" trying to purchase a dime's worth of bread... or the parlor in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and the lifetime of tension that Eugene O'Neill puts into a request that a father simply turn on the lights.

Rip Van Winkle falls asleep for 25 years for some mysterious reason—but what exactly was it? Why did Emerson believe in "self-reliance," and why do we?

Twain, our greatest showman, tells a story with an inkling of Peter Pan: Tom Sawyer never does grow up, but Huck Finn must face the racism of the South and somehow get past his own polluted conscience—can he do it? James brings American innocents to Europe for them to inherit the world—but do they?

The 84 carefully crafted lectures in this course, each 30 minutes long, are your royal road to recapturing a major part of the American experience—and our intellectual and cultural heritage. Just review the lecture titles. All of this can be yours, and the journey will be as rewarding as the arrival.

Discover the Story of America's Immortal Writers

Consider that:

- Emily Dickinson was virtually unheard of in her own time.
- William Faulkner was out of print until the mid-1940s.
- F. Scott Fitzgerald died believing he had been forgotten.

Readers of their own time would have been astounded if they could have foreseen the immortality these writers would one day achieve, just as we are astounded that they once could have been overlooked.

Most of us don't know that when Walt Whitman self-published *Leaves of Grass*—seemingly in answer to Ralph Waldo Emerson's memorable wish for the poet America deserved—he

sent Emerson, America's most revered man of letters, a copy. When Emerson replied back to him in extraordinarily flattering terms, Whitman published Emerson's letter, virtually forcing the new poet's acceptance by a literati that would otherwise have preferred to flee from Whitman's startlingly new, often sexually explicit poetry.

Perhaps you share the common picture of Emily Dickinson: a passively gentle, quietly reclusive spinster locked in her father's Amherst, Massachusetts home. If so, allow Professor Weinstein to introduce you to her friend, clergyman and author Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who said of "gentle" Emily: "I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her."

Gain Insights into the Great Works

Through this course, you will learn to:

- explain the role of "self-reliance" and the "self-made man" in the evolution of American literature
- identify the central tenets of American Romanticism
- describe the evolution of the American ghost story, from Poe and Hawthorne to James and Morrison
- outline the epic strain in American literature, from Melville and Whitman to Faulkner and Ellison
- explain the importance of slavery as a critical subject matter for Stowe, Twain, Faulkner, and Morrison
- summarize the perspective on nature revealed in such important poets as Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, and Eliot
- identify the main tenets of Modernism in the work of Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner
- identify the major contributions of O'Neill, Miller, and Williams to American theater
- summarize the major threads of the complex relationship between America's great writers and the past.

Savor the Joy of Great Reading

Dr. Weinstein is the Edna and Richard Salomon Distinguished Professor at Brown University, where he has been teaching literature to packed classrooms since 1968. An accomplished author, he was recently voted Brown University's Best Teacher in the Humanities. The Brown University Student Course Evaluations, summarizing the results of end-of-year surveys, reported: "By far, students' greatest lament was that they only got to listen to Professor Weinstein once a week."

The course is designed to lead you to read or reread masterpieces that interest you most. And, thanks in part to the deeper understanding gained from the lectures, you will likely experience such joy from great reading that you may wonder why you have spent so much time on the books of today.

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. Introduction to *Classics of American Literature*
2. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*—The First American Story
3. Washington Irving—The First American Storyteller
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson Yesterday—America's Coming of Age
5. Emerson Today—Architect of American Values
6. Emerson Tomorrow—Deconstructing Culture and Self
7. Henry David Thoreau—Countercultural Hero
8. Thoreau—Stylist and Humorist Extraordinaire
9. *Walden*—Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow
10. Edgar Allan Poe
11. Poe—Ghost Writer
12. Poe's Legacy—The Self as "Haunted Palace"

Part 2

13. Nathaniel Hawthorne and the American Past
14. *The Scarlet Letter*—Puritan Romance
15. Hawthorne's "A"—Interpretation and Semiosis
16. *The Scarlet Letter*—Political Tract or Psychological Study?
17. Hawthorne Our Contemporary
18. Herman Melville and the Making of *Moby-Dick*
19. The Biggest Fish Story of Them All
20. Ahab and the White Whale
21. *Moby-Dick*—Tragedy of Perspective
22. Melville's "Benito Cereno"—American (Mis)adventure at Sea
23. "Benito Cereno"—Theater of Power or Power of Theater?
24. Walt Whitman—The American Bard Appears

Part 3

25. Whitman—Poet of the Body
26. Whitman—Poet of the City
27. Whitman—Poet of Death
28. The Whitman Legacy
29. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—The Unread Classic
30. Stowe's Representation of Slavery
31. Freedom and Art in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
32. Emily Dickinson—In and Out of Nature
33. Dickinson's Poetry—Language and Consciousness
34. Dickinson—Devotee of Death
35. Dickinson—"Amherst's Madame de Sade"
36. Dickinson's Legacy

Part 4

37. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—American Paradise Regained
38. *Huckleberry Finn*—The Banned Classic
39. *Huckleberry Finn*—A Child's Voice, a Child's Vision
40. *Huckleberry Finn*, American Orphan
41. Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*—Black and White Charade
42. Henry James and the Novel of Perception
43. *The Turn of the Screw*—Do You Believe in Ghosts?
44. Turning the Screw of Interpretation
45. Stephen Crane and the Literature of War
46. *The Red Badge of Courage*—Brave New World
47. Stephen Crane—Scientist of Human Behavior
48. Charlotte Perkins Gilman—War Against Patriarchy

Part 5

49. “The Yellow Wall-paper”—Descent into Hell or Free at Last?
50. Robert Frost and the Spirit of New England
51. Robert Frost—“At Home in the Metaphor”
52. Robert Frost and the Fruits of the Earth
53. T.S. Eliot—Unloved Modern Classic
54. T.S. Eliot—“The Waste Land” and Beyond
55. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—American Romance
56. *The Great Gatsby*—A Story of Lost Illusions?
57. Fitzgerald's Triumph—Writing the American Dream
58. Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*—Novel of the Lost Generation
59. *The Sun Also Rises*—Spiritual Quest
60. Ernest Hemingway—Wordsmith

Part 6

61. Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*—Female Desire Unleashed
62. *The Garden of Eden*—Combat Zone
63. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*—The Idiot's Tale
64. *The Sound and the Fury*—Failed Rites of Passage
65. *The Sound and the Fury*—Signifying Nothing?
66. *Absalom, Absalom!*—Civil War Epic
67. *Absalom, Absalom!*—The Language of Love
68. *Absalom, Absalom!*—The Overpass to Love
69. *The Grapes of Wrath*—American Saga
70. John Steinbeck—Poet of the Little Man
71. *The Grapes of Wrath*—Reconceiving Self and Family
72. *Invisible Man*—Black *Bildungsroman*

Part 7

73. *Invisible Man*—Reconceiving History and Race
74. *Invisible Man*—“What Did I Do, to Be So Black and Blue?”
75. Eugene O'Neill—Great God of American Theater
76. *Long Day's Journey Into Night*—There's No Place Like Home
77. Tennessee Williams—Managing Libido
78. *A Streetcar Named Desire*—The Death of Romance
79. *Death of a Salesman*—Death of an Ethos?
80. *Death of a Salesman*—Tragedy of the American Dream
81. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—Dismembering and Remembering
82. *Beloved*—A Story of “Thick Love”
83. *Beloved*—Morrison's Writing of the Body
84. Conclusion to *Classics of American Literature*