ENG 136: Narratives of and by Working Class Americans

Course Description and Goals

This interdisciplinary course examines the rich tradition of the working class in the United States. Using wide definitions of the working class, the course explores the myth of a “classless” United States, especially as that myth is interrogated and reinterpreted through literary production about and by the working class. In this way, the goal of this course is to focus students’ attention on the production and consumption of class, status and identity as a site of social critique. It examines historical links between formulations of class and status and attendant meanings of literary canon and modes of literatures, and explores how various expressions of class position function as aesthetic, rhetorical, and ideological texts within specific cultural contexts.

Course Content:

i. Historical class structures and the attendant issues of status in the U.S. Looking chronologically at class realities and ideologies in the U.S, students will learn of the development of class formations and the “rise” of the working class and its development through the 20th and 21st centuries by reading monographs/analyses exploring class and its myriad of structures. Readings could include The Working Men’s Party’s Declaration of Independence (1829) and The Declaration of Interdependence by the Socialist Labor Party(1895) as well as investigations such as Bell Hooks’ Class Matters, Studs Terkel’s Working, and Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nickled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America.

ii. Articulations of Class. Students will approach a variety of readings, ranging from novels, plays, and poetry, to photographs and music, all of which explore the various representations of class in the United States. These readings might include Jack London’s People of the Abyss, Tillie Olson’s Yonnondio, and William Kennedy’s Ironweed.

iii. Class structures and values. In film, poetry, and novels, the course will explore how the myth of the “classless society” at the foundation of the country emerged in a variety of forms of expressive culture, all of which sought to express the hope of “mastering” economic class structures, either through economic success or through artifice.

iv. Working class writing. The course will take as its approach to working class writers the paradigm of the writer as worker, and explore the extent to which these workers write from an oppressed position that necessitates that they are represented by others, and the extent to which they represent themselves as an empowering strategy. The class might explore this paradigm by exploring novels such as those written by Stephen Crane or Jack London, both of whom write of the working class, to work by writers such as Wilma McDaniel or Tillie Olson, who write in the working class.

v. Working Class canonical formation. Because working class writing is often seen as an alternative or less important form of literature, the course will explore formulations of class and status within the American literary canon, considering arguments made in studies such as Michelle Tokarzcyk’s Critical Approaches to Working Class Literature.

vi. Geographies of the working class. Because scholarship often locates the working class within factories and an urban setting, the course will explore differences and similarities between the writing of the urban industrialized working class and the rural and agricultural working class.

vii. Gender and race. The course’s novels will take special account of working women and workers of color, looking closely at literary and expressive culture of both in the working class. This exploration might include monographs such as Nan Enstad’s Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working women, Popular Culture and and Labor Politics at the turn of the Twentieth Century, and novels such as Olive Higgins Prouty’s Stella Dallas, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street.

viii. Definitions. The course will draw on the “new working class studies” which calls for a broader understanding of work and class, looking at “how class works for people at work, at home, and in the community.” This more multi-disciplinary approach looks closely at expressive culture. Thus, course discussions may include both history and literature, and more widely, may draw on anthropology, ethnomusicology, sociology, psychology and cultural studies.
The course will take an experimental and experiential approach to literature. Since many students will have academic and personal backgrounds that will add to class discussions, the course welcomes students’ explorations into how thought and behavior regarding class has shaped the course of our collective, national lives, as well as their own individual lives.

Students must lead two discussions (one a panel), write two papers, 5 to 7 pages each, and complete a final research paper/project.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

By the end of this course, students will demonstrate the following:

• Analyze a variety of texts through the lens of history, aesthetics, and politics.
• Describe the production of persuasive written communication and compose a writing assignment with persuasive writing.
• Research course topics with library resources using both digital and hard forms.
• Analyze ethnic, racial, and gendered cultural and political responses to class in American society, their genesis and their goals.
• Demonstrate historical, cultural, and/or geographic empathy by interpreting texts through time/place/situation.
• Interpret texts with due sensitivity to both textual and contextual cues, and move those interpretations towards original arguments supported by research of primary and secondary works. (PLO 1)

All above CLOs are applicable to the Literature and English Major PLOs, and to the General Education program as well.

PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES (PLOs) ENGLISH MAJOR:

• Interpret texts with due sensitivity to both textual and contextual cues;
• Articulate an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of texts by the standards of their times and places;
• Demonstrate historical, geographic and cultural empathy by reading texts written in other times, places and cultures;
• Apply interpretive strategies developed in literary study to other academic and professional contexts; and
• Write cogently and with sensitivity to audience.

GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES

This course fulfills three of the stated learning outcomes for general education.

1. Life at the research university: Asking Questions
Through reading, discussing, asking questions, and articulating varied responses to literatures by and about the working classes, UC Merced graduates take an inquiry oriented approach to the World that reflects engagement with the mission and values of our Research University. By studying varied literatures and their approach, students generate questions, identify problems, and formulate answers by applying appropriate theoretical, evidentiary, analytical and ethical frameworks from multiple intellectual perspectives. Their developing insight into class systems in the U.S. allows them to demonstrate intellectual curiosity and an understanding of the nature of knowledge. In turn, they can articulate the benefits of attending a research university for their development as scholars, citizens, and life-long learners. Ultimately, as citizens themselves, they identify and act on their own values and talents through self-reflection in their writing and discussions, becoming at ease with the ambiguity that is inherent in the process of discovery.

2. Reasoning: Thinking Critically
UC Merced graduates are equipped with multiple tools of analysis to support accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion. By studying interdisciplinary definitions of and responses to the role of the working class in the United States, students use analytical tools from scientific, social scientific, and humanistic disciplines. Students are able to identify and evaluate sources of information. They see how to identify texts, images and media by and about the working class, all of which formulate opinions by and about the working class.
3. Communication: Explaining and Persuading. UC Merced graduates communicate in a variety of ways to diverse audiences. With required essays, presentations, and group projects, this course teaches students how to use written, visual, oral and numerical modes of communication to explore and convey ideas. In group projects they learn to work independently and collaboratively, and in presentations and essays, they learn to adjust their communications depending on occasion, purpose and audience.