

U.S. History: Post Civil War Citizenship

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Introduction

This is generally a required course, the purpose of which is to teach students the connectedness and relevance of historical events from the Reconstruction to the present. In a Great Books context, two possibilities are presented here: one more obvious, the other more subtle – but still accessible. First, the course can be used to demonstrate how certain historical texts of fiction and non-fiction illuminate the dominant ideals and events of an era. Second, great history books can be used to introduce the ideas and problems of an era, as well as the historiographical issues. Certainly those history books considered great contain transcendent interpretations, but they also contain passages that illuminate the ongoing nature of history writing. The theme of this sample course is citizenship: what are the problems and possibilities attendant to living in a democratic society?

Theme and Larger Questions

Citizenship provides a present-day, philosophical relevance to the course. Students often fail to see the connection, or complain of the lack of connection, between themselves and history. History is conceived by them as a storehouse to be dipped into at need, or as a collection of curiosities and trivia. The theme of citizenship will help them understand how historical actors and eras attempted to pursue the good life in different technological and social contexts. A larger, connecting philosophical theme is not necessary with the second variation, “Great History Books Covering the U.S.”

Larger questions important to the course in its first variation include:

1. How do social structures of an era interfere with or augment the pursuit of the good life?
2. In what ways have politics affected the historical actors or a population’s sense of the availability of the American dream?
3. How has progress helped or hurt individuals’ or a group’s efforts to pursue happiness?
4. What is the role of science in society?
5. Do cities serve as beacons of hope and opportunity, or as loci of problems and failures?
6. What problems do race and ethnicity pose for groups pursuing the good life?
7. Have gender roles changed for the better from Reconstruction to the present?
8. Has America become more or less democratized, or egalitarian, in the past 150 years?
9. How have history books interpreted historical events such that the importance of an era is conveyed to the present-day reader?
10. How have wars either interfered with, or augmented, Americans pursuit of the good life?

Course Objectives

What students must be able to do by the conclusion of the course:

- Read works of fiction and non-fiction analytically, with attention to detail.
- Write a grammatically proficient, well-organized, logical, persuasive essay on historical events and their relation to the present. Aside from presenting some argument related to historical events, or the problems of an era, the essay will also relate that argument and to today's news.
- Demonstrate proficiency in basic academic research and produce an 10 page book comparison paper, turned in on time, that meets Chicago Manual of Style documentation and mechanics requirements, and which integrates all secondary sources in the paper's exposition.
- Be able to generally recall the important problems and events of the time period between Reconstruction and the present.

Annotated Bibliography of Possible Texts

Notes:

1. These lists can be expanded, as they are but a sampling of possibilities, but they should be considered strong recommendations for syllabi construction. The two lists represent the two respective ways in which the course can be constructed;
2. The bibliography is limited to author, title, year of publication. Particular publications of texts can be selected to suit the course and instructor. It should be noted that traditional great books courses eschew long scholarly introductions or afterwards;
3. Lists are constructed alphabetically by author;
4. Discretion is needed in terms of whether to present a whole work or excerpts. While *The Great Gatsby* or *Hiroshima* can be easily fit into a 16-week semester, books like Studs Terkel's *Working* must necessarily be excerpted;
5. While many of these authors are American, no conscious effort was made to focus on American authors. What matters most is how the author portrayed American life, and participation in American society, during an era;
6. The closer one gets to the present (i.e. last 25 years), the more difficult it becomes to select texts that are definitive statements of the problems and promise of participation in American society.

Version 1 – Great Books on U.S. History Topics**Authors from the National Great Books Academic Community Core Author List**

Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. 1900.

Dreiser's fictional portrayal of a woman's struggles in late nineteenth-century urban areas sets up the fears and aspirations of Progressives. Carrie demonstrates the confined nature of women's roles in the age of American Victorianism.

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903.

Provides insights into African Americans post-Civil War journey, as well intra-racial relations and prospects for the twentieth century.

Ellison, Ralph. *The Invisible Man*. 1947/1952.

Ellison captures the confusion of an African American intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s. The protagonist demonstrates the invisibility of the plight of African Americans even to those sympathetic to his/her historical frustrations. Once again, the frustrations of urban life attend the protagonists' journey.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925.

Displays a slice of the ambitiousness and insecurities of the Jazz Age. Discussions about the novel and its author give students a sense of the criticisms and mentality of expatriate authors. Can be used with film accompaniment.

Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*.

Students should be exposed to the thinking of the twentieth century's most recognized and respected economist. Although English, American economists and political leaders rested the post-war economy on his thinking until the 1970s. Even if some of the theory lies over the heads of survey students, Keynes' work should be excerpted for its assumptions and accessible tenets.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987.

A novel that could serve as a kind of companion to DuBois' *Souls*, Morrison's *Beloved* captures the female perspective on the challenges of post-slavery life. Sethe's effort to escape the slave mentality helps demonstrate the problems of Reconstruction to students. Can be used with film accompaniment.

Orwell, George. *1984*. 1949.

Orwell's dystopian fantasy brings to the surface fears about growing state power and dysfunctional human relationships. Orwell introduces the student to nightmare political

fears, namely fears of totalitarianism, in the mid-twentieth century. Can be used with film accompaniment.

Twain, Mark. *Roughing It*. 1872.

Twain's tale of the West, replete with mining, religion, prostitution, and boom-bust capitalism, captures the speculative, tentative nature of life in America's mountain frontier.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. 1937.

Wright's self-analysis of the emotional and material consequences of living in the Jim Crow South demonstrates the era's problems to today's students. This disturbing, realist account demonstrates the necessity of civil protest against the system.

Recommended Works

Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. 1907/1918.

Adams work breaks down the artificial barrier between pre- and post-Civil War surveys. His reflections on his heritage and place in American society give the reader a sense of the larger changes in American life, changes still working themselves out at the turn of the twentieth century. The reader should gain an understanding of domestic and international politics from the perspective of an elite ruling family.

Addams, Jane. *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. 1910.

Addams' account of her Progressive Era work give the reader a ground-level view of urban reform. Moreover, it underscores the work and views of women involved in the effort to clean up America's cities.

Algren, Nelson. *The Man with the Golden Arm*. 1949.

Algren's tale of Frankie Machine provides a look at the downside of urban life in the 1940s. The slow degradation of Frankie conveys the hopelessness some felt about the promise of the American dream. Algren's account of Frankie's drug use causes empathy and repulsion with those in his plight. Can be used with film accompaniment.

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 1962.

Carson demonstrates the fragility of ecological systems in the industrial era. Her sensitive yet scientific portrayal of environmental pollution spawned a movement of cleanup, but also toward sustainable living. Students will gain a better understanding of how environmental issues became transcendent politically for a time in the 1970s.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. 1985.

This tale of upper-middle-class life tells, despite its class confinement, of the philosophical and material problems of suburbia in the 1980s. DeLillo's conveyance of alienation, disconnect, and familial troubles provides young students with a sense of the problems of the decade.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963.

Students gain a sense of the anxieties of women during the height of 1950s affluence. Study of Friedan's work provides a gateway, a segue into 1960s women's rights activism.

Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. 1946.

The use of atomic weapons are systematically and analytically portrayed. Hersey covers the event, its survivors, and the short and long-term consequences. The work provides an entry-point to the should we/shouldn't we debate about atomic weapons usage to end the war.

Kennedy, Robert F. *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. 1968.

Kennedy's brief but powerful account properly relays the intensity and momentousness of the encounter with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Students should gain an understanding of the seriousness of the crisis.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. 1957.

Not unlike Friedan's unhappy portrait of 1950s women, Kerouac's work captures the dissatisfaction of American males with the confined role of men. Kerouac inspired the Beat generation, as well as a later decade of those disaffected with "classic" American family and moral life. Can be used with film accompaniment.

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. 1922.

Lewis' portrayal of the ascendant conformism of American life explains intellectual disaffection (i.e. expatriates) with American life in the early twentieth century. The book will demonstrate to students that the conformism of the 1950s was no novel event.

Neihardt, John G. and Nicholas Black Elk. *Black Elk Speaks*. 1932.

Use to introduce Native American interpretations of removal and cultural contact. Newer editions can be utilized to demonstrate post-1960s efforts to revive Native American spirituality.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. 1905.

Sinclair's muckraking exposé of the meatpacking industry and the plight of immigrant labor brings to light the profiteering of big business in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. *The Jungle* is scathing commentary, or balance, to the Horatio Alger version of American class mobility. Sinclair's story emphasizes the importance of labor history in urban areas, and the reason socialism gained currency in American politics at the turn of the century.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. 1939.

The Joads' journey across the western U.S. in the midst of the Dust Bowl and Depression poetically highlights the plight of the working class in the 1930s. Steinbeck's portrayal of the human consequences of structural problems in America leaves students to question the nature and practical meaning of injustice. Can be used with film accompaniment.

Terkel, Studs. *Working*. 1972.

Insight is gained into the various natures of employment in a capitalist economy in the later half of the twentieth century – before the service economy revolution. Terkel paid attention to the fears, joys, insecurities, and whimsical nature of work life.

Problems and Pitfalls

With List of “Great Books on U.S. History Topics”:

- Questions must be posed to students BEFORE tackling books from either list. These questions should cover both universal and particular topics.
- Students must read both fiction and non-fiction with same attention to detail, underlining and highlighting key passages.
- Each work needs a brief lecture introducing the author and the topic covered in the book. Understanding the author is important to understanding the time, but the author’s times do not limit her/his relevance to today.
- Avoid pretension that each book thoroughly and factually explains the topic at hand. Emphasize that universals matter more than particulars.
- Do not be afraid to discuss inaccuracies and exaggerations, especially in fiction books (i.e. fictional characters).

Reading and Exam Notes

About homework assignments: To pass *any primary source reading assignment* that you receive, you are required to:

- Read and thoroughly underline every main idea and important point in the assigned text.
- Produce a one-paragraph summary of the theme (that is, the message or meaning the author is trying to convey through the selection).
- Reminder: Students will be marked pass or fail in class on whether they have done this assignment completely, and students will be expected to read it aloud when called upon. These paragraphs are designed to give students the practice they need to write summaries and paraphrases for their research papers and in-class exams. Indeed, since summaries and paraphrases are required sections of all student research papers, each student will therefore be doing part of his or her research paper by executing one of these assignments.
- If you have any questions concerning how to find a main idea or write a summary, it is your responsibility to follow up with the instructor after he has *finished explaining in class how to do it*.

About in-class and take-home essay exams:

- *If you do write on the computer, you must bring a floppy disk to save your work.* You are strongly encouraged to use a word processor for in-class essay exams, but if you are not proficient on a computer and can do better work writing your essay by hand, you are permitted to do so.

All take-home essay exams *must* be handed in *typed* in accordance with standard college practice.

- Each student will do a research paper based on the literature assignments which the class will be studying, and will compose in-class essays upon the literature assignments during the semester. Each literature assignment will be analyzed by the professor and discussed with students. This system is designed to help prepare you to write your in-class essays comfortably and knowledgeably. It will also increase your reading and analytical skills, an important goal of the course. A third advantage is that one set of these discussions will directly assist you in understanding the book *your* research paper is being based upon.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is intellectual theft. Formally, it is the appropriation for one's *own* gain the ideas, language, or work of another without sufficient public acknowledgment that the material is *not* one's own. This is strictly not allowed. If a student is caught plagiarizing, the *minimum* punishment will be an 'F' (zero) on the assignment.

Sample Syllabus for Great Books on U.S. History Topics

Week One

- Orientation: Course work and requirements (Reader Response papers, research paper draft, Chicago style (Turabian), and Final 10-page minimum paper).
- Grading and class policies.
- Role of assigned texts and individual components of course explained.
- Importance of Discussion emphasized
- Discussion question: What *exactly* is history?

Week Two

- Finish ‘What is History?’ discussion
- Lecture/Discussion on Reconstruction
- Begin introduction of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Week Three

- Sample Discussion Questions for *Beloved*
 1. What were the differences for men and women in adjusting to post-slave life?
 2. What about Morrison’s prose or style differs from books you’ve read before?
 3. What passages transcend the historical time as it is presented? What philosophical issues are in the book?
 4. If a male slave were the central character of the work, how might the story differ?
 5. What historical events or characters are mentioned in the book?
 6. What does the book tell you about the mentality of an ex-slave?
 7. How well was a ex-slave able to participate in her local community?
 8. What was the state’s responsibility to ex-slaves?
- Finish Morrison discussion
- Quiz 1

Week Four

- Lecture/Discussion on American West
- Reader Response #1 on Morrison due

- Begin introduction of Mark Twain's *Roughing It*

Week Five

- Sample Discussion Questions for *Roughing It* or Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*
 1. How does Twain's humor affect you? Can you see his sense of humor?
 2. What does one learn about mining towns in the middle to late nineteenth century by reading *Roughing It*?
 3. What social issues arose in the context of mining? How was one to participate in the civic life of a mining community?
 4. What historical entities or events appear in *Roughing It*?
 5. According to Twain, what was the good life to miners?
 6. What is the state's responsibility in controlling boom/bust cycles?
 7. What is the state's responsibility in terms of controlling vice?
 8. What passages or discussions in the book transcend the times? What philosophical issues are in the book?
- Finish Twain discussion
- Quiz 2

Week Six

- Lecture/Discussion on Gilded Age
- Reader Response #2 on Twain due
- Begin introduction of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* or Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams*

Week Seven

- Sample Discussion Questions for *Sister Carrie*
 1. What is Carrie's most harrowing encounter upon arriving in Chicago?
 2. How does Carrie support herself?
 3. What historical entities or events appear in *Sister Carrie*?
 4. What are the varieties of male types encountered by Carrie?
 5. How does *Sister Carrie* relate to the plight of women today, or how does the book transcend circumstance? What philosophical issues are in the book?
 6. What makes the novel "great"?
 7. What could or should the state do to alleviate the experiences of women like Dreiser's Carrie?
- Finish Dreiser discussion
- Quiz 3

Week Eight

- Lecture/Discussion on Progressive Era and World War I
- Reader Response #3 on Dreiser due
- Begin introduction of Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull-House* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*

Week Nine

- Sample Discussion Questions for *Twenty Years at Hull-House*
 1. What seeds Addams' interest in constructing Hull House?
 2. Why does Hull House succeed?
 3. What historical entities or events appear in Addams' book?
 4. What problems in the book transcend circumstance? What philosophical issues are in the book?
 5. What makes Addams' book a 'great' non-fiction work on U.S. history?
 6. What were your feelings about Addams as an actual historical figure? Do you like her?
 7. Should Addams' services at Hull-House been sponsored by the city, state, or federal government?
- Finish Addams discussion
- Quiz 4

Week Ten

- Lecture/Discussion on 1920s (specifically address expatriates)
- Reader Response #4 on Addams due
- Begin introduction of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Week Eleven

- Sample Discussion Questions for *The Great Gatsby*
 1. What historical events are appear in the book?
 2. What discussions in the book transcend circumstance? What philosophical issues are present in the work?
 3. How do you feel about the various characters?
 4. How does the protagonists aspirations interfere with his circumstances?
 5. How is *The Great Gatsby* representative of the Jazz Age?
- Finish Fitzgerald discussion
- Quiz 5

Week Twelve

- Lecture/Discussion on 1930s
- Reader Response #5 on Fitzgerald due
- Begin discussing John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Week Thirteen

- Sample Discussion Questions for *The Grapes of Wrath*
 1. What is the state's responsibility to its citizens in times of trouble? Could the Joads' experience have been helped?
 2. What historical events are referenced in the book?
 3. How does Steinbeck pull you into the plight of the Joads?
 4. How do the characters transcend their times?
 5. What do you think are Steinbeck's philosophical concerns? What philosophical issues are in the book?
 6. How are the ideas of Progress and Justice present?
 7. How does this work poke holes in the idea of "the American dream"?
- Finish Steinbeck discussion
- Quiz 6

Week Fourteen

- Lecture Discussion on the 1940s and World War II
- Reader Response #6 on Steinbeck due
- Begin discussing John Hersey's *Hiroshima*

Week Fifteen

- Sample Discussion Questions for *Hiroshima*
 1. What was the bomb victims' bodily and emotional experience?
 2. What is Hersey's writing style? How does it affect the experience?
 3. What historical events are referenced in the book?
 4. What passages or problems in the book transcend circumstances of the times? What philosophical issues are in the book?
 5. How representative is *Hiroshima* of the experience of atomic warfare?
 6. How does a consideration of Hersey's sources affect the power of his story?
 7. Was dropping the atomic bomb necessary?
 8. What are the role of atomic weapons in our military today?

- Final Papers Due

Week Sixteen

- Final Meeting: Tie together books, questions, and answers in a lecture/discussion.
- Quiz 7
- Final Papers Returned

Final Paper Suggestions

Track #1 – Great Books in U.S. History

For the Final Paper students can be asked to relate all of the readings, together, to the theme of citizenship. The central question, the question to be answered with each paper's thesis, is this: How do the readings reflect the problems and possibilities associated with being a citizen in the United States? A "prospectus" (paper plan) will be required. Final drafts will be graded according to the following criteria:

1. Final length: 12 page *minimum* with footnotes;
2. All books used in the course must be cited. Internet citations are strictly prohibited;
3. Thesis and supporting information (as in Reader Response papers);
4. Grammar and formatting (i.e. only Turabian format for footnotes is allowed).

In terms of content, papers that demonstrate the most depth of thinking on the topic of citizenship will receive the highest score. For instance, defining citizenship a certain way (narrowly or broadly) in your paper will affect your ability to analyze the topic in relation to the readings. Relate the overall topic not only to the books read, but also to the historical events covered that affect one's ability to be a good citizen. Thinking matters more than style in your paper, but grammar and sentence structure errors often reveal cracks in thinking.