

American Studies 301  
**AMERICAN CHARACTER**

Fall 2008  
TTh, 11:30 am-12:45 pm, MH-682

Professor Elaine Lewinnek  
Office hours: TTh, 10:30–11:15 am, and also by appointment  
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This course analyzes four famous American characters: Benjamin Franklin, John Henry, Sara Smolinsky, and Gidget. Examining diverse sources – Franklin’s almanac, Henry’s songs, Smolinsky’s novel, Gidget’s movie, and more – this course investigates the power of popular culture and its relation to American identities. In considering diverse historic periods, races, classes, gender, and regions, this course questions along which schisms Americans have been divided, how subcultures interact with the dominant culture, and whether there is such a thing as an overarching American character.

### **Learning Goals**

Like most American Studies classes, this class aims to enhance your understanding of America’s diverse past, to improve your ability to critically analyze historical and cultural evidence, and to help you communicate your interpretations in discussions and writing.

American Studies 301 meets General Education Category III.C.2, “Implications, Explorations, and Participatory Experience in the Social Sciences,” which aims to integrate, apply, and extend knowledge learned in III.C.1. Therefore, completion of GE Category III.C.1 is a prerequisite for enrollment. This course also meets GE Category V, “Cultural Diversity.” This course’s GE learning goals are to understand broad unifying themes in the social sciences from cross-disciplinary perspectives; to solve complex problems that require social scientific reasoning; to relate the social sciences to significant social problems and to other related disciplines; to understand that culture is socially constructed and fundamental to social interaction; to appreciate the complex relationships that gender, ethnicity, and class bring to a discussion of society and culture; to understand that because we live in an inter-connected world, we need to understand the diversity and relationships within and among cultures; and to recognize and evaluate how one’s cultural history affects one’s sense of self and relationship to others.

### **Required Texts**

This course requires three paperback books, available at the Little Professor Bookstore, 725 N. Placentia Avenue, near the corner of Nutwood and Placentia:

- Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers: A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (first published 1925; you may use any edition)
- Kirse Granat May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002)

## **Grading**

This course will entail a combination of lecturing and class discussion. Plan on arriving at every Tuesday's class having completed that week's assigned reading and prepared with questions and comments. Nearly every week, there will be a short quiz to assess your immediate understanding of that week's reading, and there are no make-up quizzes – but at the end of the semester I will drop your lowest quiz grade.

After each of our first two books, there will be a midterm exam in class, including short identification questions as well as a longer essay. To help you prepare for these exams, all course powerpoint images will be available on our Blackboard website under "course documents." Downloading each powerpoint before class will make taking notes far easier.

This course will culminate in a final take-home exam that will assess your ability to understand and analyze material from all course readings and discussions; to synthesize course themes, and to write a clear essay that is grounded in evidence and expresses your individual viewpoint.

Your final grade will consider:

Weekly pop quizzes: 1% each, 15% total

Midterm Exams: 25% each, 50% total

Final Exam: 35%

Grades will be calculated using a standard scale. An A+ is 98-100, A is 93-97, A- is 90-92, B+ is 87-89, B is 83-86, B- is 80-82, C+ is 77-79, C is 73-76, C- is 70-72, D+ is 67-69, D is 63-66, D- is 60-62, and F is anything 59 or below.

While class participation is not directly reflected in your grade, it will be taken into account if your grade is on the borderline. Attendance is vital for the quizzes and to do well on the exams. If you must miss a class, you should check our Blackboard page for that week's resources, obtain class notes from a reliable classmate, and then ask me if you have specific questions. Class time will frequently include analysis of songs, movies, images, and other primary sources that are very difficult to catch up on if you are absent or even daydreaming.

## **Policies**

I will communicate with you by email throughout the semester, so you need to regularly check whatever email account Blackboard has on record for you. Please keep all graded assignments so that any discrepancies can be easily and fairly straightened out. Plus and minus grades will be used. Late work will be penalized one letter grade for each week late, unless you have made arrangements with me beforehand. This course does not include an extra-credit option. Incompletes will be granted only due to exceptional circumstances. Plagiarism – using the words of another author without citing your source – will lead to an F on the assignment and a report to the campus Judicial Affairs Officer. If you have a disability or special need for which you may be requesting an accommodation, please inform me as well as the Disabled Student Services Office as early as possible in the semester.

Whenever you have questions, I encourage you to talk to me, in class, after class, by email, or in my office hours. I look forward to a thoughtful semester exploring American characters.

## Tentative Course Schedule

Week 1 (Aug 26)

Introduction: Popular Culture, American History, and American Characters

Week 2 (Sept 2)

Ben Franklin and the Complexity of American Characters.

Read Jill Lepore, "The Creed: What Poor Richard Cost Benjamin Franklin," *The New Yorker* Magazine (January 28, 2008), available at

[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/01/28/080128crat\\_atlarge\\_lepore](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/01/28/080128crat_atlarge_lepore) and under "external links" on our Blackboard Page.

Week 3 (Sept 9)

Songs as Sources

Read *John Henry*, chapters 1 and 2

Week 4 (Sept 16)

Reconstruction and the Failed American Revolution

Read *John Henry*, chapters 3 and 4.

Week 5 (Sept 23)

Railroads and the Incorporation of America

Read *John Henry*, chapter 5 and 6.

Week 6 (Sept 30)

Swinging the Machine

Read *John Henry*, chapters 7, 8, and Coda.

Week 7 (Oct 7)

Oct 7: Midterm 1

Oct 9: In class we will view and analyze the movie *The Jazz Singer* (1927).

Week 8 (Oct 14)

Immigration, Urbanization and Consumer Culture.

Read *Bread Givers*, chapters 1-6.

Week 9 (Oct 21)

The Rise of Adolescence and the Middle Class

Read *Bread Givers*, chapters 9-13, 15, and 16.

Week 10 (Oct 28)

Waves of Feminisms.

Read *Bread Givers*, chapters 17-21.

Week 11 (Nov 4)

Nov 4: Midterm 2

Nov 6: In class we will view and analyze the movie *Endless Summer* (1966)

Week 12 (Nov 11)

Nov 11: Veteran's Day, Campus Closed

Nov. 13: Suburbanization and Stereotypes of the 1950s.  
Read *Golden State*, Introduction, chapters 1 and 2

Week 13 (Nov 18)  
Surf Cultures  
Read *Golden State*, chapters 4 and 5

Nov 24-30 is Thanksgiving Vacation

Week 14 (Dec 2)  
Protest Cultures  
Read *Golden State*, chapters 7 and 8

Week 15 (Dec 9)  
Conclusions: American Characters, American Adolescents  
Read *Golden State*, chapter 9

Week 16  
Take-home exam due Thursday, Dec 18, by noon in my office, UH-408.  
You may hand in your exam before Dec 18 in the American Studies office, UH-313.