

Department of English

English 488-D: “Literary Fantasies of Assimilation and Passing: Case-Studies in Jewish American, African American, and other Identities”

Class Time: MWF, 11-11:50

Credit Hours: 3

Professor: Ranen Omer-Sherman

Office: 401 Ashe Building

Office Hours: M/W 3:00-4:30 and by appointment

Email: rosberman@mail.as.miami.edu

Tel: (305) 284-4072

Texts:

Jen, Gish. *Mona in the Promised Land*

Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*

Johnson, James W. *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*

Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand and Passing*

Roth, Philip. *Goodbye Columbus*

Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain*

On Reserve Electronically (also hard-copy) in Richter or as handouts (see syllabus)

Excerpts from Brooke Kroeger’s *Passing: When People Can’t Be Who They Are*

Book of Esther

Werner Sollors, Excerpt from his essay “Passing; or Sacrificing a *Parvenu*”

W.E.B. Du Bois’s “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”; Eva Hoffman “Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language”

Grace Paley’s “Zagrowsky Tells” and “The Long-Distance Runner”

Hasia R. Diner’s “Drawn Together by Self-Interest: Jewish Representations of Race and Race Relations in the Early Twentieth Century”

Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use”

Bernard Malamud’s “Black is My Favorite Color,”

“Angel Levine” and “The Jewbird”

Adrienne Rich’s “Split At the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity”

Please note Miami University’s website for African-American resources:

http://findit.library.miami.edu/findit/African_American_Studies_guide.php?subject_id=African+American

And online Jewish Studies resources (books, articles, etc.):

http://www.library.miami.edu/guides/Judaic_Studies_guide.html#additional

For useful definitions of “Passing” in relation to Gender and Race:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passing>

“Cross”

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?
—Langston Hughes

“A petty, silly matter of no real importance which another generation will comprehend with great difficulty.”

—W.E.B. Du Bois, on black-for-white passing in Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand*

“The real guilt of Jewish intellectuals lies in their facile, perhaps unconscious, but certainly unrealistic, identification with the ‘power structure.’ Negroes call this ‘passing for white.’ Speaking personally...I would like to see the more positive distinctions between whites and Jewish Americans maintained. Not only does it make for a necessary bit of historical and social clarity...but I consider the United States freer politically and richer culturally because there are Jewish Americans to bring it the benefit of their special forms of dissent, their humor and their gift for ideas.”

—Ralph Ellison

“Passing may lead an individual who succeeds in it to a feeling of elation and exultation, an experience of living as a spy who crosses a significant boundary and sees the world anew from a changed vantage point, heightened by the double consciousness of the subterfuge.”

—Werner Sollors

Course Description:

This course offers students a comparative exploration of the variety of challenges to identity and selfhood represented in the African- and Jewish- American literary imagination's grappling with the consequences of the erasure/repression of ethnic/racial origins. One of the central themes of the course is that of "Passing," an Americanism not usually found in the dictionary, and refers to the crossing of any line that divides social groups. Though the camouflaging of various aspects of one's identity may be an ancient or even universal human condition, racial passing is particularly a phenomenon of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century (though we will see one literary instance that carries this into our own time).

At various times it has included Jews "passing" for Gentiles, Polish immigrants preferring to be taken for German, Japanese Americans passing as Chinese Americans—and vice versa. But "Passing" is used most frequently as if it were short for "crossing over" the color line in the United States from the black side to the white side. Ratna Roy's definition may be useful here: "assimilating into white society by concealing one's antecedents. And according to Joel Williamson, passing means "crossing the race line and winning acceptance as white in the white world." Other ethnicities will also be addressed in the later part of the course.

Note: Free tutoring for the writing component of this course is available in the Writing Center, located at 5225 Ponce de Leon.

All cell phones and beepers **MUST BE TURNED OFF** during class.

Grading Policy:

Class Participation 20%

Based on your contribution to class discussion, contribution to group presentations, as well as attendance.

Position papers (3) 10%

Come to class on the due date with a short paper (**2 pages**) addressing your impressions of the reading we are doing. Take an interpretive position on that week's readings. The papers need not involve outside research, but they should have a clear thesis statement supported by a logical argument and backed up with evidence from the texts under analysis. Position papers will be the basis of class discussion the week they are due, so extensions will be granted only under extraordinary circumstances.

Essay 30%

You will also write one longer essay of 8-10 pages, not including "Works Cited." By **March 24** you must hand in a one-page **abstract** of your essay, consisting of a statement of your thesis (much more evolved than a mere announcement of your "topic"), the main points you will make to support that thesis, and an idea of what kind of evidence you will need to find to back it up. I will get the abstracts back to you promptly with comments and suggestions on where to go from there. Beyond that, you are encouraged to consult with me early and often in the course of writing your essay. Extensions on essays will be granted *only for valid*

reasons at my discretion and only if requested before the due date. Final paper due **April 30**: No exceptions.

ESSAYS AND POSITION PAPERS MUST BE TYPED.

Final exam 40%

Class discussion: This class will meet three times a week in both discussion and lecture format. Most of that time will be devoted to discussing the assigned texts, occasionally in small groups. In these discussions, you will be asked to raise questions, pose problems, interpret material, and debate the possible implications of what we've read. You must learn to challenge each other and even, at times, to *challenge me*.

My Comments on Your Papers:

You must be willing to take both the positive and negative reactions gracefully. Positive reactions don't make you a genius, and negative ones don't brand you a fool. All they do is point out how and why an essay managed to communicate or failed to communicate what you intended. All reactions teach you something, so try to learn from them.

Paper Submission Guidelines:

- All assignments prepared outside of class must be typed.
- Please use a 12pt, readable font such as Times, Times New Roman, Courier, or Arial, using a font that makes your writing difficult to read is counterproductive.
- Title all essays (but no cover page!), left-justify the text and use 1-inch margins.
- Number the pages.

Grades: You should also be aware that I have high expectations for all members of this class. In my opinion, a "B" is a very respectable grade, and indicates work well done. I reserve "A"s for those who perform exceptionally well, in effort as well as achievement, in written as well as oral work. Following is a general outline of how I determine essay grades. Please note that this outline in no way serves as a contract. Essay grades should be viewed as a continuum between the qualities listed in **A** and the deficiencies listed in **D**. The qualities in the **A** category are those which will pull an essay's grade up; similarly, the deficiencies listed in the **D** category will pull the grade down. Thus the existence of intermediary grades **C** and **B**, + and -. Note that **C** is deemed the average grade.

A The truly excellent essay: shows unusual polish and style; presents a fresh, highly original approach to its subject; integrates and interprets quotations seamlessly to support assertions; avoids clichés; presents controversial or unorthodox ideas successfully; has an absence of mechanical and grammatical flaws; displays an adept use of language; has a strong opening which entices the reader to continue and a conclusion which leaves the reader in command of the essay's implications; is well structured; and displays a comfortable, readable, mature writing style. After reading, the reader feels that they have learned something and is ready to read the essay again.

B An above average essay presents an interesting point of view and shows attention to the use of language or to structuring the essay and contains a minimum of technical errors. Little is included to distract or disturb the reading process. Reading is a pleasure.

C The average essay meets the assignment and has a clear purpose (thesis) that is supported by the body of the essay. Some technical and/or structural flaws may be present. The paper is often too vague or general and does not use examples or quotations from the text adequately. The reader is not instructed and is not tempted to read the paper again.

D The below average essay fails to make its point, or the purpose of the essay is unclear. The essay may also contain a combination of the following deficiencies: failure to respond to constructive advice offered by instructor; highly clichéd writing; has incoherent structure; contains logical contradictions; does not meet minimum page length or other specific assignment requirements; preaches rather than persuades; does not provide adequate evidence (including quotation of text) to support its assertions.

F Failure results from an egregious combination of the errors listed in D above. Failure to turn assignment in. Disregard of assignment instructions.

Note: Your abstract, **due March 24**, presents the text(s) you will analyze, the thesis that you will develop, and an overview of how you plan to develop and support your thesis. The thesis should be an opinion that in some way responds to a “how” or “why” question. The thesis should be an opinion that in some way responds to a “how” or “why” question. It should go beyond what is already obvious about the text(s). If you are comparing works, make sure you don’t just say something like “in text 1 we see X and in text 2 we see Y;” instead, be sure to also arrive at the next step, an explanation of what the comparison reveals, such as “X and Y allow us to see Z.” If you have any doubts about what constitutes a thesis, and especially if these doubts continue after receiving my comments on your proposal/abstract, please come for help during office hours.

Course Schedule:

This syllabus is only a close approximation of how the course will be structured. I reserve the right to reschedule readings, films, and activities, but for the most part we will follow the order mapped out here. **Remember that passionate class participation is mandatory.**

Course Calendar

Jan 21 Introduction; Homework: locate a working definition of “passing” that satisfies you and bring it in to class for next time to help launch our work together as a class. **Handout:** U.S. laws against miscegenation

Jan 23 The Book of Esther: the most ancient “passing” narrative (**handout**); Theorizing Passing

Jan 26 “Not Some Social Agenda Struggle” and “That’s Not Me” (handouts and Reserve)

Jan 28 “Leviticus 18:22,” “Conduct Unbecoming,” and “Passing Notes, Passing Tones” (handouts and Reserve)

Jan 30 W.E.B. Du Bois’s “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”; Eva Hoffman “Lost in Translation: Life

in a New Language” (Richter Reserves)

Feb 2 *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* Group Presentation

Feb 4 *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Feb 6 *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Feb 9 *Quicksand* Group Presentation

Feb 11 *Quicksand*: Professor Ira Dworkin Guest Speaker

Feb 13 *Passing* Group Presentation

Feb 16 *Passing* and Werner Sollors, Excerpt from “Passing; or Sacrificing a *Parvenu*” (Richter Reserves)

Feb 18 *Goodbye Columbus* (the long title story only today) Group Presentation

Feb 20 *Goodbye Columbus* (“Goodbye Columbus” and “Conversion of the Jews”)

Feb 23 *Goodbye Columbus* (“Eli the Fanatic”)

Feb 25 *Goodbye Columbus* (“Eli the Fanatic”)

Feb 27 Grace Paley’s “Zagrowsky Tells” and “The Long-Distance Runner” (Richter Reserves)

Mar 1 Hasia R. Diner’s “Drawn Together by Self-Interest: Jewish Representations of Race and Race Relations in the Early Twentieth Century” (Richter Reserves)

Mar 3 *Mona in the Promised Land* Group Presentation

Mar 5 *Mona in the Promised Land*

Mar 8 *Mona in the Promised Land*

Mar 10 Take home Midterm assigned: due March 24 Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (Richter Reserves)

Mar 12 No class scheduled

March 13-21: Spring Recess

Mar 22 No class scheduled

Mar 24 Abstracts for research papers due! Midterm due! Bernard Malamud’s “Black is My Favorite Color,”

“Angel Levine” and “The Jewbird”

Mar 26 *Middle Passage* Group Presentation

Mar 29 *Middle Passage*

Mar 31 *Middle Passage*

Apr 2 Adrienne Rich’s “Split At the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (Richter Reserves)

Apr 5 *Interpreter of Maladies*

Apr 7 *Interpreter of Maladies*

Apr 9 *Interpreter of Maladies*

Apr 12 *The Human Stain*; “Central Casting: The Race Card” (handout from *The New Yorker*)

Apr 14 *The Human Stain* Group Presentation

Apr 16 *The Human Stain*

Apr 19 *The Human Stain*

Apr 23 Individual Presentations of Research

Apr 26 Individual Presentations of Research

Apr 28 Individual Presentations of Research

Apr 30 Last Day Final paper due

Guidelines for Literary Analysis:

An analysis of a literary work is the result of the process of separating it into its parts in order to study the whole. Typically, you must break a text down into various parts and then select a single aspect (or set of aspects) for close study. Often what you are analyzing is one of the elements of form (narrative style, characterization, dialogue, setting, symbolism, etc.), the treatment of a theme or issue, and/or the relationship between an element of form and a theme. You cannot possibly analyze every word of a literary work. You might begin with a general idea, or arrive at one by thinking about some smaller detail that catches your attention. Regardless of where you start to write critically, and how your various drafts progress, your final draft will present a general thesis statement that is developed through the analysis of a particular part (or particular parts) of the text(s) being analyzed. As you develop your analysis, it is crucial that you quote examples from the text to support your main points.

After each quote indicate the source using a parenthetical reference, e.g.: (Oz, 21). *Every time you use a quotation, comment on it to integrate it smoothly into your discussion.* It can help you develop your ideas to imagine how your reader might disagree with your thesis and supporting points and to use whatever methods and strategies you can (making judicious use of textual support) to persuade the reader, or at least encourage him/her to take your opinion seriously. Finally, you will turn in a much stronger essay if, once you've written a complete draft, you let it rest for a while, and then give it a fresh critical reading and do more final editing.