**Summer Seminar: Faith and Fiction in American History**

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**Course Description**  
Spiritual themes and messages pervade American fiction, from the earliest literary productions of the new republic to the most recent recipients of the Pulitzer Prize. American novels thus present an expansive range of complex entry points to those who would explore the religious history of the United States, in all of its wild diversity and shared patterns.

We will use a rich selection of American novels to consider the ways in which Americans have confronted large existential questions, such as whether human beings are intrinsically good or evil, whether individual freedom and community cohesion are mutually exclusive, whether religion promotes racial division or reconciliation, or, whether an immigrant has to leave her rituals and beliefs behind to fit into a new culture. We will watch some of American literature’s most compelling characters confront these issues in a series of gripping narratives.

The course is designed to help students achieve greater historical awareness, sharper tools of criticism, more effective modes of expression and a high level of aesthetic satisfaction. This course approaches its objectives from three complementary angles. First, it uses a selection of important American novels as the source material for a survey of American religious history. The emergence of deism, the grip of Calvinism, the rise of revivalism, the perception of secularization, the ceremonies of Native peoples, the faiths of immigrants, the religious implications of race, the political impact of spiritual commitments: We address such key elements of this history as we read, discuss and contextualize the books for this course. Second, we engage the novels as works of art in their own right, worthy of critical engagement as artistic expression rather than simply as historical artifacts. And finally, we consider the advantages and limitations of fiction as an instrument of religious analysis.

**Required Texts**  
Novels:  
Catharine Sedgwick, *A New England Tale* (1822); Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859); Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896); James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953); Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972); Ayad Akhtar, *American Dervish* (2012)

COPIES OF ALL REQUIRED TEXTS ARE ALSO ON RESERVE AT WIDENER LIBRARY

**Student Responsibilities**  
Students are expected to read carefully, attend class consistently, and contribute thoughtfully to our discussions. Each class member will submit two-page analyses of the assigned books on the days indicated; each analysis should identify one of the religious themes featured in the book and analyze the ways in which the novel engages the issues associated with that theme. The final project will be a 7-8-page paper that compares and contrasts the approaches to religion in *American Dervish* with the other course texts.

**Reading and Assignment Schedule**  
**Week One**  
June 24: Introduction: The Intertwined Histories of Faith and Literature  
June 26: Nathaniel Hathorne, “Young Goodman Brown” (1835)

**Week Two**

July 1: Quakers, Calvinism and the Enlightenment; *A New England Tale*, Preface-Chapter 8

July 3: *A New England Tale*, Chapter 9-End (2-page analysis due)

**Week Three**

July 8: Awakenings and Abolitions; *Our Nig*, Preface-Chapter 6

July 10: *Our Nig*, Chapter 7-End (2-page analysis due)

**Week Four**

July 15: Modernism and Fundamentalism; *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Chapter 1-16  
July 17: *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Chapter 17-32 (2-page analysis due)

**Week Five**:

July 22: Gods of the City; *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Parts I and II  
July 24: *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Part III (2-page analysis due)

**Week Six**

July 29: Borderland Faiths; *Bless Me Ultima*, all

July 31: *The Chosen* (Film) (2-page analysis due)

**Week Seven**

August 5: New Diversities; *American Dervish*, all

August 7: Final Reflections (Final Paper due)

**GRADE BREAKDOWN**

**Class Participation, 20%**

This course is designed to combine the advantages of both lecture and seminar.  Much of the most meaningful education that takes place in this course will occur when you speak thoughtfully to the material and respond respectfully to your peers.  While maintaining a classroom of civility and an atmosphere of mutual support, I encourage you to challenge or refine my interpretation of arguments and events.  Claim the material, make it your own, and develop your own insights. To be of any value to you or the class, however, your comments must be rooted in the course readings and the lecture material. This sort of engaged learning requires your presence, your preparation and your participation.  The course insists on all three and will evaluate you accordingly.

**Synopses, 30% total (6% each)**

On the days indicated, you will submit a 2-page synopsis of that week’s assigned novel. The synopsis should highlight at least one of the religious themes addressed in the book. Papers will be graded on both their evidence of thoughtful reading and their clarity of prose.

**Final Paper (50%)**

This 7-to-8-page paper will focus on *American Dervish*, comparing and contrasting its treatment of Islam to the ways in which the other books have handled their religious topics. This assignment invites you to reflect on the whole of the course, using any skill or insights you gained from the session in analyzing *Dervish*. The paper will be graded on both its evidence of thoughtful reading and the clarity of its prose.

**Accessibility Statement:**

Students requesting accommodations or with accessibility needs for this course should contact the Accessibility Services office at Accessibility@dcemail.harvard.edu or 617-998-9640.

**Policy on Collaboration:**

You are encouraged to consult with one another on papers, and you may also share library resources. You may find it useful to discuss your ideas with your peers, but you should ensure that the written papers you submit for evaluation are the result of your own research and reflect your own approach to the topic. For all other questions on academic integrity, see <http://www.summer.harvard.edu/policies/student-responsibilities>.