

Instructor: Adam G. Walker

walker@g.harvard.edu

Office Hours: TBD

Religion and Transcendentalism: Douglass, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Whitman

This course will explore relationships between religion and American Transcendentalist literature. Students will acquire a variety of literary methods for thinking and writing about intersections between religion, secularization, and literature. While our course focuses on the five authors, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman, we will also attend to other authors, such as Margaret Fuller, and William Ellery Channing. Secondary critical readings will highlight the ways in which critics have thought about the relationship between literature, religion, and secularization and will examine how recent scholarship is opening up new ways of thinking about this relationship. Other subjects that will come up in our readings and discussions include popular religion and piety, political theory, race and abolition, gender and sex, canon formation, and comparative religion and literature.

Questions that we will pursue include: What is religion; and what is secularization? How does our understanding of religion shape our interpretation of American thought and literature? How might we reconsider Transcendentalist literature within the contexts of religious surplus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? How did the intersections of literature and religion in the nineteenth century enable American writers to transgress formal boundaries and to invent new forms?

Tutorial Goals: Throughout the course, we will exercise skills of literary criticism and close reading, learn how to conduct scholarly research, and write a 20-25 pp. research paper. Students will engage with texts through a number of critical methods including literature and theology, formalism, gender studies, and cultural studies. Students will also develop a fluency in literary and religious history across the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

General Goals

To introduce the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level, & to write a 20-25 pp. research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will be able to:

- Design a research question;
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints;
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism;
- Write with greater clarity and precision.

Course-Specific Goals

- Study the influence of religious, political, theological, and secular experience upon within Transcendentalist literature;
- Gain knowledge of genres that emerged during this period and gain familiarity with the forms of lyric poetry, devotional and political writing, and the literary essay;
- Understand intersections within literature, culture, and religion demonstrated by engagement in class discussion, research assignments, and essays based on readings from primary and secondary sources;
- Apply readings and critical methods toward your own research interests.

Graded Assignments:

- **Short Essay** (Week 4, 10%): A 5-6 page paper, that provides an extended close reading of a primary text. Extensive feedback will be given in the return of this paper, followed by an individual student conference to discuss improvements. During the conference, we will also discuss ideas for the final paper.
- **Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography** (Week 7, 15%): This includes a two-page prospectus of the final paper and an annotated bibliography of 8-10 sources. The bibliography should reproduce in a few sentences the main argument of the work you intend to make use of. It should also include, in a few sentences, how you plan on engaging with the thesis of the work you have summarized. As your tutor, I will work closely with you and will comment on the prospectus and bibliography and will provide suggestions as needed.
- **Final Paper Draft** (Week 11, 15%): A full or partial draft of your paper will be due this week. As your tutor, I will provide extensive feedback regarding the paper topic and direction, the use of critical methods, and stylistic features of the prose. We will schedule a brief consultation to go over written feedback and to discuss weaknesses and strengths of your paper.
- **Final Paper** (Reading Period, 40%): 20-25 page paper on a major literary work read in this class. This essay should incorporate concepts and criticism explored in the course and should incorporate feedback that you have received up to this point.
- **Participation & Preparation** (20%): Participation, which includes attendance, reading and discussion, preparedness for class, and completion of assignments on time.
- **Conference Presentation** (ungraded but required): On the last day of class, everyone will give a 5-minute summary on their research paper.

Required Texts:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry* (Norton, eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris).
- Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (ed. Thomas H. Johnson).

- Frederick Douglass, *The Portable Frederick Douglass and My Bondage and My Freedom*
- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and other writings* (Norton, ed. Michael Moon).
- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Penguin Classics)

SCHEDULE

Introduction

Week 0: Introduction to Religion and Transcendentalism

Primary Readings:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist” (1842)
- William Ellery Channing, “Introductory Remarks” (1841) from *The Words of William E. Channing*, D.D. (PDF provided).
- Emily Dickinson, “In the name of the Bee”
- Walt Whitman, “Gods”

Secondary Reading:

- Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (2007), Ch. 2 “Reinvigorating a Faith” and Ch. 3 “Transcendentalism Emergent”

UNIT I: A CHURCH OF NATURE

Week 1: Transcendentalist Creeds

Primary:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (1836); “Uriel” (1847)
- Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” (1862)
- Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” 1-6 (1891-92 edition)
- Emily Dickinson, “I’ll Tell you how the Sun Rose”; “I know that He exists,” “A word made Flesh is seldom,” and “I never saw a Moor”

Secondary:

- Kevin Van Anglen, “Reading Transcendentalist Texts Religiously: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Myth of Secularization.” in *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience* (1998), 152-170.
- Alan Hodder, “The Gospel According to this Moment: Thoreau, Wildness, and American Nature Religion,” *Religion and the Arts* 15/4 (2011), 460-85.

Week 2: Contexts of American Religion

Primary:

- Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address” (1838)
- Margaret Fuller, “Methodism at the Fountain” in *Margaret Fuller, Critic* (2000)

- Henry David Thoreau, “Economy,” “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” “Solitude,” and “Visitors” from *Walden*; and “January 20, 1852” in Thoreau’s *Journals* (PDF provided).

Secondary:

- Gilpin, W. Clark. *Religion around Emily Dickinson* (2014), Ch. 1: “Reshaping a Religious Repertoire” and Ch. 3 “Domesticity and the Divine.”
- Cummings, Glenn N. “Placing the Impalpable: Whitman and Elias Hicks.” *Modern Language Studies* 28 (Spring 1998): 69–86.

Week 3: The Inner Light

Visit to the Houghton Library during the last half of class to see the sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Primary:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Lord’s Supper” (his last sermon as a Unitarian minister).
- William Ellery Channing, excerpt from “The Moral Argument Against Calvinism” (1845).
- Emily Dickinson, “There’s a certain slant of light”, “Nature—sometimes sears a Sapling”, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church”
- Frederick Douglass, “The Heroic Slave” (1853)

Secondary:

- Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (2007), Ch. 10 “Free Religion and the Dream of Common Humanity”
- V. K. Chari, *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism: An Interpretation* (1964) [Excerpt Provided].

UNIT II: AMERICAN PROPHECY

Week 4: Freedom and Liberty: Self and Society

Short Essay Due

Primary:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841); “John Brown—Speech at Boston” (1859)
- Walt Whitman, “The Sleepers” (1871)
- Emily Dickinson, “On a Columnar Self”
- Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849); “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854).

Secondary:

- Daniel S. Malachuk, *Two Cities: The Political Thought of American Transcendentalism* (2016), “Introduction” and Ch. 5 “‘So We Saunter Toward the Holy Land’: Thoreau and the City of God”

- James H. Read, “The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition” in *A Political Companion to Emerson*, edited by Alan Levine and Daniel Malachuk (2014).

Week 5: Freedom & Liberty: Life-Writing

Primary:

- Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History” (1841)

Secondary:

- John Stauffer, “Frederick Douglass and the Aesthetics of Freedom,” *Raritan*, 25:1 (Summer 2005): 114-136.
- Jones, Douglas A. “Douglass’ Impersonal.” *ESQ*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/esq.2015.0003>

Week 6: The American Poet

Primary:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet” (1844); Letter to Walt Whitman (July 21, 1855);
- Margaret Fuller, “American Literature; Its Position in the Present Time, and Prospects for the Future” from her *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846)
- Walt Whitman, Walt Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855); Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson (August 1856); “Song of Myself” (1891-92 edition), “A Noiseless Patient Spider.”
- Emily Dickinson, “The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune”, “This was a Poet—It is That,” “Shall I take thee, the Poet said,” “I dwell in possibility,” “The Poets light but Lamps -” “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” “A Word dropped careless on a Page.”

Secondary:

- Catherine Tufariello, “‘The Remembering Wine’: Emerson’s Influence on Whitman and Dickinson” (1999)

Week 7: Prophecy

Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography Due

Primary:

- Walt Whitman, “To You,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”
- Emily Dickinson, 437 “Prayer is the little implement,” 564 “My period had come for prayer,” 435 “Much madness is divinest sense,” 449 “I died for Beauty--but was scarce—,” 324 “Some keep the Sabbath going to church,” 365 “Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?” 516 “Beauty--be not caused--It Is—” 1732 “My Life closed twice before its close,” 216 “Safe in their Alabaster chambers”
- Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July” (1852)

Secondary:

- Doriani, Beth Maclay. "Emily Dickinson, Homiletics, and Prophetic Power." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1992, pp. 54–75.
- David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (brief selections).
- David Howard-Pitney, "The Jeremiads of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois and Changing Patterns of Black Messianic Rhetoric, 1841-1920" in *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall, 1986), pp. 47-61.

Week 8: Bibles and Hymnals*Primary:*

- Hymns popular in nineteenth-century America (PDF provided): "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" by Charles Wesley (1747), "Holy, Holy, Holy" by Reginald Heber (1826), "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" by R. Heber (1829), "Rock of Ages" by Augustus Toplady (1830).
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Representative Men" (1850), "Brahma" (poem)
- Emily Dickinson, "The Bible is an antique Volume"
- Henry David Thoreau, "Reading" from *Walden*.
- Walt Whitman, *Passage to India*

Secondary:

- Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (2007), Ch. 1 "Searching the Scriptures"
- Michael Robertson, "'New-Born Bard(s) of the Holy Ghost': The American Bibles of Walt Whitman and Joseph Smith." In *Above the American Renaissance: David S. Reynolds and the Spiritual Imagination in American Literary Studies*. Edited by Harold K. Bush and Brian Yothers, 140–160.

UNIT III: EXPERIENCE**Week 9: Experience***Primary:*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul" (1841); "Circles" (1841); "Experience" (1844)
- Margaret Fuller, "Recollection of Mystical Experiences" (1840)
- Frederick Douglass, "The Self-Made Man" (1872)
- Emily Dickinson, "The last Night that She live," "I have never seen Volcanoes," "We dream - it is good we are dreaming" "The Heart asks Pleasure - first -" "This world is not conclusion"
- Walt Whitman, "O Me! O Life!"

Secondary:

- Alan Hodder, "The Gospel According to this Moment: Thoreau, Wildness, and American Nature Religion," *Religion and the Arts* 15/4 (2011), 460-85.

- Freedman, Linda. *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (brief selections).

Week 10: The Self and Nature

Primary:

- Jonathan Edwards, “Typology of Nature” (selections, PDF provided).
- Emily Dickinson, “She sights a Bird - she chuckles -” “A Bird, came down the Walk -” “Growth of a Man - like Growth of Nature,” “The Angel of a Landscape,” “To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,” “A narrow Fellow in the Grass.”
- Walt Whitman, “To The Garden The World,” “I Sing The Body Electric,” “Spontaneous Me,” “Ages And Ages Returning At Intervals,” “As Adam Early In The Morning.”

Secondary:

- Michael Robertson, Ch.3 “R. M. Bucke: Whitman and Cosmic Consciousness” in *Worshipping Walt: Whitman’s Disciples* (2008).
- Jennifer L. Leader, *Knowing, Seeing, Believing: Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, and Marianne Moore and the American Typological Tradition* (2016), Ch 3: “Immersed in the Reformed Hermeneutic: Origins of Dickinson’s Typological Imagination.”

Week 11: Grief, Pain, and Mourning

Final Paper: First Draft Due

Primary:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Threnody” (1846)
- Douglass, Frederick, “Our Martyred President” (1865)
- Henry David Thoreau, “House Warming” in *Walden*.
- Emily Dickinson, “My first well Day - since many ill -” “I can wade Grief,” “Tis not that Dying hurts us so -” “As imperceptibly as Grief,” “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” “I measure every Grief I meet,” “Of nearness to her sundered Things,” “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” “Apparently with no surprise.”
- Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

Secondary:

- Branka Arsić, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (2016), “Introduction: On Affirmative Reading,” “Swamps, Leaves, Galls,” “Thinking with the Body 2: Sitting.”

Week 12: Desire

Primary:

- Emily Dickinson, “Wild nights- Wild nights!” “I have been hungry, all the Years -” “Dare you see a Soul at the ‘White Heat’?”
- Walt Whitman, *Calamus*.

Secondary:

- Michael Robertson, Ch. 4 “John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde: Whitman and Same-Sex Passion” in *Worshiping Walt: Whitman’s Disciples* (2008).
- David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (1995), “Sex is the Root of It All’: Eroticism and Gender.”

Week 13: Paper Conferences

READING WEEK

Final Paper Due