

# Against All Odds

Nonconformists, Outcasts, and Underdogs in U.S. American Literature

**Room and time:** Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor), Wednesday, 11:45 a.m. - 1:15 p.m.

**First session:** March 13, 2019

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**Course number:** 512.225

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · **Email:** [stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at](mailto:stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at)

**Office Hours:** Thursday, 4:00-6:00 p.m. (Heinrichstr. 18, 1<sup>st</sup> floor) · <https://moodle.uni-graz.at/course/view.php?id=24980>

**Description:** Since the colonial beginnings of America, non-conformists have been simultaneously vilified and grotesquely worshipped. The typical outcast is designed as a villain (in the case of Billy the Kid and Al Capone), but often assumes the role of a widely admired hero or heroine (as in the case of Davy Crockett and Calamity Jane). U.S. society has always been proud of its history of rugged individualism and resistance to the despised mainstream. U.S. literature plays an especially crucial role in this ambiguous aesthetic construction of the underdog. Readers throughout the centuries have learned to revere (and even emulate) outsider figures such as Rip Van Winkle, Dorcasina Sheldon, and Holden Caulfield. This course examines the immense fascination that seems to emanate from such nonconformist characters. Which compositional techniques are employed to tell these stories? How do these narratives operate against the backdrop of the historical timeframes in which they were created?

**Teaching and Learning Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by experts who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a fact file on a handout).

**Materials:** All relevant texts are available on Moodle.

**Aims:** The course is meant as a genealogy of outsider figures in American literature from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until today. It is a chief aim of this course to situate outcast or underdog characters within the aesthetic context of American cultural identity.

**Assessment:** *Regular attendance* (no more than two absences!), *active in-class participation*; *presentation* as part of an *expert session* (plus 3-page handout and online questions); *seven (!) entries in the discussion forum*; 2-page *research proposal*, and *final paper* of ca. 10 pages. You need to receive at least a 'D-' ('4-') in all four sections in order to pass this class.

**Deadline for Final Papers** (including declaration of honesty): Wednesday, July 10, 2019. You need to upload a digital version of your paper on Moodle and hand in a printed version. There is no (!) extension of this deadline. Please indicate on a *post-it* attached to the paper if you would like detailed feedback!

## Syllabus

- 13 March**      **Born Losers – Nonconformism in U.S. American Literature**  
Basic texts:  
    Scott A. Sandage, "Prologue" to *Born Losers: A History of Failure* (2005).  
    Hind Berji, "America Loves an Underdog" (2015).
- 20 March**      **Secret Heroes – Washington Irving and the American Outcast**  
Main text (required):  
    Washington Irving, "The Little Man in Black" (1807)  
Companion text (optional):  
    Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle" (1819).  
Keywords: Outsider; Psychology; Revolution; Society.
- 27 March**      **'Mrs. Satan' – Victoria Woodhull and the History of Female Rebellion**  
Main text (required):  
    Mary Gabriel, excerpts from *Notorious Victoria* (1998).  
Companion texts (optional):  
    Tabitha Tenney, excerpts from *Female Quixotism* (1801).  
Keywords: Adventures; Female Outcasts; Feminism; Madness; Quixotism; Women's Rights.
- 03 April**      **Guest Lecture – Detroit as Outcast City**  
    Lina Tegtmeyer (The Tourism Studies Working Group, University of California, Berkeley):  
    "America's Outcast City: Detroit Between Tourism, Rebellion, and Survival"

- 10 April**      **Indigenous Resistance Writing from William Apess to Sherman Alexie**  
 Main text (required):  
 William Apess, "An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man" (1833).  
 Companion texts (optional):  
 William Apess, excerpts from *Son of the Forest* (1831).  
 Sherman Alexie, excerpts from *Indian Killer* (1996).  
 Keywords: 'Columbus Day' Protests; Performativity; 'Red Nationalist Roguetude'; Resistance Writing.
- 8 May**      **Black Lives Matter – W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and the African American Civil Rights Movement**  
 Main text (required):  
 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).  
 Companion text (optional):  
 James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" (1955).  
 Keywords: Double Consciousness; Systemic Racism; 'Talented Tenth'; 'The Veil'.
- 15 May**      **Angry Young Men – Holden Caulfield, the Beats, and American Counterculture**  
 Main text (required):  
 J.D. Salinger, excerpts from *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).  
 Companion texts (optional):  
 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957).  
 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," from *Leaves of Grass* (1855).  
 Keywords: Anti-Hero; Beat Generation; Counterculture; Juvenile Rebellion; Young Adult Fiction.
- 22 May**      **Cruel Females – Valerie Solanas and the Demolition of Patriarchy**  
 Main text (required):  
 Valerie Solanas, excerpts from *SCUM Manifesto* (1967).  
 Additional text (optional):  
 Avital Ronell, "Deviant Payback: The Aims of Valerie Solanas" (2015), 1-33.  
 Keywords: Andy Warhol; 'End of Man'; Militancy; Patriarchy; Radical Feminism; Speech Acts.
- 29 May**      **Independent Study Unit**  
 Stay at home and fill out 2-page research proposal (to be handed in on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June).
- 5 June**      **Rebel Yell – Charles Bukowski and the Aesthetics of Pulp**  
 Main text (required):  
 Charles Bukowski, "I Shot a Man in Reno" (1974).  
 Companion text (optional):  
 Dan Jurgens & Norm Rapmund, *Superman – The Doomsday Wars* (1999).  
 Keywords: Atheism; Alcohol; Badass; Cynicism; Fight against the System; Superheroes; Violence.
- 12 June**      **HipHop and Gangsta Rap – Eminem as the Archetypal 'Bad Boy'**  
 Main text (required):  
 Eminem, "Lose Yourself" (2002) & "Eminem Annotates Lyrics" (2015).  
 Companion text (optional):  
 Eminem, "White America" & "Without Me" from *The Eminem Show* (2002).  
 Keywords: 'Blacking Up'; Boundary Crossing; Detroit; Elvis Effect; Gangsta Rap; HipHop; 'White Negritude'.
- 19 June**      **In Between – Queer Rebels and the Challenge of the Binary**  
 Main text (required):  
 Becky Albertalli, *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015).  
 Companion texts (optional):  
 Jeffrey Eugenides, excerpts from *Middlesex* (2002).  
 Keywords: (Non-)Binary; Gender Roles; Heteronormativity; 'Homo Agenda'; LGBTQI.
- 26 June**      **Liminal Selves: Rachel Doležal and Transracial Identity**  
 Main text (required):  
 Rachel Doležal, from *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World* (2017).  
 Additional texts (optional):  
 John Howard Griffin, excerpts from *Black Like Me* (1960).  
 Adolph Reed, Jr., "From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much" (2015).  
 Keywords: Boundaries; Ethnicity/Race; Identity; Liminality; Passing; Transracial.

**DUE DATE  
RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

**FINAL PAPER  
DUE DATE: July 10, 2019**