

“Be Your Self”

American Fictions of Initiation and Self-Empowerment

Room and time: Seminar Room (Attems-gasse 25, Top Floor, SR 34.D2), Wednesday, 11:45-13:15

First session: March 8, 2017 · **Course number:** 512.253

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt · **Office hours:** Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. (Room DG-0036) · **Email:** stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Description: Since the early years of the U.S. American republic, the idea of ‘selfhood’ has been a dominant element in the nation’s cultural imaginary. Beginning with Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1793) and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalist essay “Self-Reliance” (1841), American writers and intellectuals have, time and again, dealt with questions of self-formation and self-education. The most visible results of this search for cultural identity are the quintessential concepts of the ‘American Dream’ and the ‘Self-Made Man.’ Not coincidentally, the emergence of American ‘*Bildungsliteratur*’ in the late 18th and early 19th century went hand in hand with the nation’s coming of age. The adolescent characters in Charles B. Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799/1800) and Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801), for example, are portrayed as apprentices of the American ideas of independence and liberty. The course will discuss texts from various periods of American literary history, examining how the trope of initiation is connected to narratives of nation-building. Further examples will include Maria Susanna Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854), Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* (1867), Ernest Hemingway’s “Indian Camp” (1925), J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), James Baldwin’s “The Outing” (1965), and Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). Our main goal is to explore the aesthetic strategies employed in these texts and discuss the function of these works within their cultural context.

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, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block. The experts will upload their questions for the discussion forum 6 days in advance!

Materials: All texts will be made available on Moodle.

Aims: The course will familiarize participants with the key features (composition, background, effect) of U.S. American *Bildungsliteratur*.

Assessment: **A.)** regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!) and active in-class participation, as well as **nine (!)** substantial entries in the discussion forum (1/3); **B.)** presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions (1/3); **C.)** research proposal (2 pages) and final paper (10 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

Deadline for Final Papers (including declaration of honesty): Friday, July 14, 2017. *There is no (!) extension of this deadline.* Please indicate on a **post-it** attached to your final paper if you would like to get detailed feedback!

Syllabus

08 March	Introduction – The Self in American Literature and Culture Basic texts (strongly recommended): David Mikics, “Bildungsroman (Definition)” (2007). [Moodle] M.H. Gottfried & D.H. Miles, “Defining Bildungsroman as a Genre” (1976). [Moodle] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841). [Moodle]
15 March	Self-Modeling, Temperance, and the Construction of American Identity Main text (reading required): Benjamin Franklin, excerpts from his <i>Autobiography</i> (1790 [1784]). [Moodle] Keywords: Autobiography; <i>Bildungsideal</i> ; Enlightenment; Order; Revolution; Self-Fashioning; Self-Made Man; Temperance.
22 March	The Early American Bildungsroman – Adventure, Urbanity, Self-Formation Main text (reading required): Charles Brockden Brown, excerpts from <i>Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793</i> (1799/1800). [Moodle] Keywords: Adventure; City vs. Countryside; Happiness; Memoir; Protestant Work Ethic; <i>Sturm und Drang</i> ; Yellow Fever.
29 March	The Christian Bildungsroman – Religious Faith, Temptation, and Redemption Main text (reading required): Maria S. Cummins, excerpts from <i>The Lamplighter</i> (1854). [Moodle] Keywords: Christian Charity; Chastity; <i>Erbauungsliteratur</i> ; Female Bildungsroman; Sentimental Fiction; <i>Wide Wide World</i> (novel).

- 05 April From Dishwasher to Millionaire – The Emergence of the American Dream
Main text (reading required):
Horatio Alger, excerpts from *Ragged Dick, or, Street Life in New York* (1867). [Moodle]
Keywords:
American Dream; Class Assimilation; Dime Novels; Ragged Dick; Upward Mobility; Young Adult Fiction.
- 26 April Education, Success, and Failure – The Fragility of the ‘Self-Made Man’
Main text (reading required):
Jack London, excerpts from *Martin Eden* (1909). [Moodle]
Additional text (optional):
Henry Adams, excerpts from *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918 [1907]). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Anarchism; Autodidacticism; Disillusionment; Education; Failure; *Künstlerroman*; Naturalism; Politics; Socialism.
- 03 May Independent Study Unit- Research Proposal
Stay at home and create a 2-page research proposal for a potential final paper to be handed in on May 10.
- 10 May The Jewish Immigrant Experience – *Bildungsliteratur* around the Turn of the Century
Main text (reading required):
Anzia Yezierska, “Children of Loneliness” (1923). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Bread Givers (novel); Female *Bildungsliteratur*; Immigration; Jewish Life; Lower East Side; Poverty.
- 17 May Growing Up Absurd – Alienation and Disentanglement in the Lost Generation
Main texts (reading required):
Sherwood Anderson, “I Want to Know Why” (1921 [1919]). [Moodle]
Ernest Hemingway, “Indian Camp” (1925). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Alienation; Father Figure; Lost Generation; Maturation; Mentorship; Modernism; Painful Experiences; Trauma.
- 24 May Rebellion and Non-Conformism – The New Lost Generation
Main text (reading required):
J.D. Salinger, excerpts from *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Adolescence; Juvenile Delinquency; New Lost Generation; Rebellion.
- 31 May Queer Initiations – Visibility, Difference and Othering in the Literature of Maturation
Main text (reading required):
James Baldwin, “The Outing” (1965). [Moodle]
Keywords:
African American Literature; Difference; James Baldwin; *Invisible Man* (novel); Queerness; Postmodernism; Visibility.
- 07 June Transformed Selves – The Fall from Innocence in Young Adult Fiction
Main text (reading required):
Stephen King, “The Body” (1982). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Adventure Drama; Death; Dysfunctional Homes; 1st Person Narration; Rites of Passage; Trauma; Youth.
- 14 June ‘Thinking Big’: The Myth of the ‘Self-Made Man’ in the Era of Donald Trump
Main text (reading required):
Donald Trump, with Tony Schwartz, excerpts from *The Art of the Deal* (1989). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Donald Trump; Entrepreneurship; Manhattan; Real-Estate Business; Wall Street.
- 21 June Self-Fashioning and Otherness in Native American Writing
Main text (reading required):
Sherman Alexie, excerpts from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Double Consciousness; Irony; Louise Erdrich; Native American Renaissance; Otherness; S. Alexie; Self-Reflection.
- 28 June Coming of Age in Dystopian Fiction – The Bildungsroman as Fantastic Literature
Main text (reading required):
Suzanne Collins, excerpts from *The Hunger Games* (2008). [Moodle]
Keywords:
Dystopian Fiction; Greek mythology (Theseus/Minotaur); Heroism; Katniss Figure; Rebellion; Tributes.

FINAL PAPER DUE ON JULY 14

Don't forget to check out books from the Department Library and use them!