

# English 490 Special Topics

Spring 2011  
Section 00  
TR 1:30-2:45 p.m.  
Carr 105

Prof. Jeremy Wells  
jwells@allegheny.edu  
Office: Oddfellows 235  
Office hours: MW 12-2 p.m., TR 3-4 p.m. or by appt.  
Office phone: x4322

## Topic: Plantation Fictions

*Way down upon de Swanee ribber,  
Far, far away,  
Dere's wha my heart is turning ebber,  
Dere's wha de old folks stay.*

*All up and down de whole creation  
Sady I roam,  
Still longing for de old plantation  
And for de old folks at home.*

These song lyrics, written as if they are being sung by a black person wanting to return to a plantation in Florida, were created by a white man from Pittsburgh. Stephen Foster, some of whose songs (“Oh, Susanna!” “Camptown Races,” etc.) you’ve perhaps been singing since you were a child, was best loved during his own time for such compositions as “Old Folks at Home” (1851), “My Old Kentucky Home” (1850), and “Massa’s in the Cold, Cold Ground” (1852): songs in which slaves or former slaves express a nostalgic “longing for de old plantation,” for “old massa,” and for the days spent “down in the cornfield,” “in the field where the sugar-canes grow,” and in the groves where “de orange treee am blooming.” Any notion that plantation labor may have been unpleasant or slavery itself undesirable went unmentioned.

What Foster’s plantation melodies evince is a fact at the heart of this course, namely that the plantation—an institution associated with the agrarian economies of the southern states—has long been the object of a *national* desire, a romantic fixation and fascination that goes far beyond the boundaries of the “Old South.” Foster’s songs show that this fascination extended to western PA, at least during the middle 19th century. (We’ll look at additional phenomena that suggest that the desire persists even until today.) Our primary focuses, though, will be to ponder, first, why a national desire toward the plantation came about in the first place and, second, how the impulse to romanticize the plantation has generated a literature of critical response, examples of which (Douglass’s *Narrative*, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*) are often cited as among the most significant texts any U.S. writer has ever produced. In short, we’ll be reading a number of important texts and wondering along the way why the plantation has so long been central to literary efforts to define and redefine America.

**Required Texts** All texts (except for those uploaded to Sakai) are available at the Campus Center bookstore. If you do not already own copies of the texts ordered for this course, buy the editions listed below. If you happen already to own a different edition of a text and do not wish to purchase another, check with me to make sure your edition is acceptable.

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Signet Classics)  
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Norton)  
Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Harvard)

Kate Chopin, *At Fault* (Penguin)  
William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (Vintage International)  
Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Beacon)  
Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (Vintage)

## Course schedule Tentative and subject to change

- Thu. 1/20 Introduction and Course Overview
- Tue. 1/25 Simms, "The Snake of the Cabin"; Poe, "The Gold-Bug" (Sakai)
- Thu. 1/27 Grayson, from *The Hireling and the Slave*; Whitman, from *Song of Myself*
- Tue. 2/1 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (3-128)
- Thu. 2/3 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (cont.); Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (preface- ch. 4)
- Tue. 2/8 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (chs.5-13)
- Thu. 2/10 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (chs. 14-28)
- Tue. 2/15 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (chs. 276-388)
- Thu. 2/17 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (cont.); Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (preface-ch. 15)
- Tue. 2/22 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (chs. 16-29)
- Thu. 2/24 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (chs.30-41)
- Tue. 3/1 Harris, from *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* (Sakai)
- Thu. 3/3 Thomas Nelson Page, "Marse Chan" and "Uncle Gabe's White Folks" (Sakai)
- Tue. 3/8 Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine" and "The Passing of Grandison" (Sakai)
- Thu. 3/10 Douglass, from *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Sakai)
- Tue. 3/15 Chopin, *At Fault* (part I: pp. 5-69)
- Thu. 3/17 Chopin, *At Fault* (part II: pp. 73-170)
- Fri. 3/18 **Paper #1 due by noon in Oddfellows 205**
- Tue. 3/22-Thu. 3/24 **Spring Break**
- Tue. 3/29 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (chs. 1-3)  
(Note: at some point during this week or next we will schedule a time when we can watch together the film version of *Gone with the Wind*. Margaret Mitchell's novel was published in 1936, the same year as *Absalom, Absalom!*.)
- Thu. 3/31 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (chs. 4-5)
- Tue. 4/5 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (chs. 6-7)
- Thu. 4/7 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (ch. 8)
- Tue. 4/12 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (ch. 9)
- Thu. 4/14 Butler, *Kindred* (pp. 9-51)
- Tue. 4/19 Butler, *Kindred* (pp. 52-188)
- Thu. 4/21 Butler, *Kindred* (pp. 189-264)
- Tue. 4/26 Morrison, *A Mercy* (pp. 3-78)
- Thu. 4/28 Morrison, *A Mercy* (pp. 79-136)
- Tue. 5/3 Morrison, *A Mercy* (pp. 137-196)
- Mon. 5/10 Paper #2 due by noon in Oddfellows 205**

## Course policies and procedures

**Contacting me** In addition to my regular office, I am available for appointments; you will need to e-mail or talk to me before or after class to arrange one. I tend to do most of my e-mailing in the morning and early afternoon. I cannot be counted upon to check e-mail during the evening, though, so if you're wanting to correspond about an upcoming paper, do not wait until the evening before it's due to contact me.

**Readings** You should complete the assigned reading before each class and be ready to discuss it. Longer readings are divided into sections, and you are responsible only for those pages assigned for that day.

To borrow a line from a great teacher of mine, you should also think of reading as a contact sport. Active reading requires writing, so be sure to mark your text, noting specific passages, questions, etc. you would like to discuss in class.

**Attendance and participation** The success of the course depends on the enthusiastic participation of each and every member. I thus expect you to arrive to every class having completed the assigned reading and prepared yourself to contribute to class discussion. Come with responses to the questions I may have posed during the class before. Come also with questions and comments of your own—and, more generally, with a willingness to involve yourself in the give-and-take of that day's discussion. I do a fair amount of preparation to ensure productive discussions, but my favorite classes are inevitably those that assume lives of their own (which is to say, those in which students take the lead and work collaboratively to address the issues they find most compelling).

You may wish to e-mail or meet with me before or after class if there are specific issues you would like to discuss. I consider these forms of participation, too, though they cannot entirely substitute for active in-class participation.

Your participation grade (20% of your final grade) will reflect how well you make these contributions. The student who does not miss class and comes always prepared, always willing to contribute insights of his or her own, and always willing to respond thoughtfully to the questions and comments of others will receive a grade in the "A" range. The student who does not miss class but contributes less frequently will receive a "B." The student who misses class routinely (four or five unexcused absences) will receive a "C," as will the student who shows up but participates infrequently and/or unpreparedly. The student who receives a "D" participation grade likely has six unexcused absences. The student who has seven or more unexcused absences simply fails the course.

Excused absences generally involve family emergencies or illness. In the case of illness, you are required to provide a doctor's note. Should you miss class for any reason, you are responsible for knowing what went on, including any changes to the syllabus or revisions to assignments.

**Papers** You will write two papers for this course. One will be a short paper (~5 pp.) focused on a single text. The other will be a longer paper (~10 pp.) involving research. One must be turned in by Fri., 3/18, the other by Mon., 5/9. I leave it up to you to determine which one you wish to write for each date. We will discuss the parameters of each assignment in greater detail in an upcoming class.

**Research Report and Presentation** Each of you will read one work of criticism related somehow to the idea of the plantation and its significance in American literature and culture. You will then prepare for me and your classmates a 1-page, single-spaced synopsis of the work and lead a 15-minute class discussion, half of which should be devoted to a presentation of the work you've read, half of which should be devoted to Q&A. We will sign up for presentations and discuss details of this assignment in week 2.

**Exams** There will be no midterm or final exam for this course.

**Plagiarism** Article III, section 3 of the Allegheny College Honor Code defines plagiarism as "using the ideas or words of another without citing the sources from which the ideas or words are taken." We will devote a portion of an upcoming class to discussing plagiarism and how to avoid it. Know now simply that I take it very seriously, that it will result in an "F" for the course, and that I will refer any instance of it to the Honor Committee.

**Grading** Your grade for the course will be computed as follows.

Participation.....	20%
Research Report and Presentation .....	20%
Shorter paper.....	20%
Longer paper.....	40%

