

Course Syllabus: MENG 6510: Eminent Writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Course Overview

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the central figure in the American Literary Renaissance of the middle nineteenth century. Numerous writers, American and worldwide, then and since, have felt his influence, and many of his ideas have become mainstays of the American vocabulary. For instance, Emerson popularized the term “self-reliance,” and much of what is best and most enduring in American intellectual history has affinities with ideas in his essays, poems, journals, and other writings.

Emerson’s main interest, throughout his life, was in processes: natural and physical processes, creative processes, and spiritual; how to read, how to write, how to think and grow, and above all, how to live. In Emerson’s view nothing is static, least of all his own writings. A course in Emerson cannot properly be limited to Emerson as a “subject,” because for Emerson the “subject” was always living people, e.g, you and me, who are tasked with the challenge of creating their own lives out of a living past.

Accordingly, we will treat Emerson’s works less as ends in themselves than as means to our own intellectual growth and creativity. To live the Emersonian life is to live your own life; to study Emerson is to do your own work.

Required Course Texts and Supplies

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Poems*. Ed. Harold Bloom, Paul Kane, and Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1996. The most complete one-volume selection of Emerson’s canonical writings.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Heart of Emerson’s Journals*. Ed. Bliss Perry. New York: Dover, 1995. A good affordable selection from Emerson’s journals, in which he collected ideas for his books, essays, poems, and lectures.
- Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995. Still the best biography of Emerson.
- Schwiebert, John. *MENG 6510 Supplemental Text*, WSU Printing Service. Includes supplemental background on Emerson’s life and work.
- A computer and/or a looseleaf notebook with filler paper for a course reading notebook
- One or more pocket-sized notepads for recording on-the-spot notes (see chapter 1 of the Supplemental Text).

Other primary and secondary texts (for reference; not required for purchase)

Bosco, Ronald A. and Joel Myerson, eds. *Emerson in His Own Time: A Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. Provides insights into Emerson's character, writings, and ideas in the words of people who knew him.

Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003. A critical study by a leading contemporary scholar of Emerson and Transcendentalism, the movement with which he is most closely associated.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature: A Facsimile of the First Edition*. Boston: Beacon, 1985. A facsimile of Emerson's first (1836) book, ornately decorated with floral designs and small enough to fit in a large-sized pocket.

---. *Representative Men*. Ed. Pamela Schirmeister. New York: Marsilio, 1995. Emerson's great work on heroism, in which he argues that the function of heroes is not to dominate people but to give people back to themselves. Although the complete text of *Representative Men* is included in our required course text (*Essays & Poems*), Schirmeister's editorial introduction provides useful contextual background.

---. *Selected Journals*. 2 vols. Ed. Lawrence Rosenwald. New York: Library of America, 2010. Longer (and also more expensive) than *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, this is the best available edition of Emerson's journals, short of the complete *Journals*.

Myerson, Joel, ed. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Oxford, 2000. A collection of biographical and critical essays focused chiefly on placing Emerson "in his time."

Porte, Joel. *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. Studies Emerson in tandem with his most famous intellectual friend and sometime antagonist.

Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process*. Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2009. The best introduction to Emerson's practices of reading and writing and the philosophy behind them.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Describe Emerson's practices of reading and writing and apply them, as appropriate, in your own life and work;
2. Identify and describe the major stages in Emerson's literary development and his significance within the larger American literary tradition;
3. Identify and describe Emerson's continuing impact on American and global literature and culture.

Statement of Learning Outcomes. The MENG program is dedicated to helping students master the following learning outcomes. This particular class focuses on learning outcomes (L.O.'s) #1, #2, and #4.

“Learning outcome #1: Gather, analyze, and communicate information and insights creatively and critically.

“Learning outcome #2: Cultivate skills in close reading, critical thinking, creative expression, and persuasive writing.

“Learning outcome #3: Understand and apply various theoretical perspectives and discipline-specific terminology to interpretations of texts and/or analysis of data.

“Learning outcome #4: Acknowledge and articulate the significance of key text(s) in specific genres, periods, cultures, styles, or theoretical perspectives.

“Learning outcome #5: Demonstrate knowledge of current scholarship and practices.

“Learning outcome #6: Employ discipline-specific conventions and protocols for written or multimodal presentations.

I will evaluate your success in learning outcomes 1, 2, and 4 by reading and responding to weekly papers and your final course project (see below).

Course requirements and workload expectations. Your final grade will be based on four factors: attendance and participation, a course notebook, an in-class oral presentation, and a final course portfolio. You should expect to do between three and four hours of work outside of class for each hour in class.

1. Attendance and participation. We will function in a workshop environment—writing, meeting in small groups, and discussing as a class. Therefore, attendance in class is crucial. Three hours of unexcused absences will lower your final grade by one half letter; six will lower it by a full letter, and every additional three hours of unexcused absence will lower your final grade by an additional half letter. If you miss a class, I will expect you to come to the next class meeting prepared and must count you as absent if you are not.

2. A course notebook. The course notebook is explained in detail in Part I of the Supplemental Text. Use your notebook to:

- Respond to assigned or unassigned readings;
- Do in-class writings such as quick-writes and notes on discussions and lectures;
- Plan ideas for papers and essays;
- Do any other kinds of writings that are discussed in the Supplemental Text.

Every week I will collect a word-processed version of your best or favorite notebook entry for the week. This entry should be at least 600 words long, revised,

and word-processed. I will read this entry carefully and return it to you at the next class meeting with written comments.

3. An in-class oral presentation. Your class presentation should be between 15 and 20 minutes long and should incorporate:

- a) Material from at least one primary source
- b) Material from at least two secondary sources (biographical or critical works)

The following is a suggested, but non-exhaustive, list of topics. If you want to do a topic that isn't on the list, please discuss it with me first.

- Emerson's mentors: his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson; his formal and other teachers
- Emerson's schooling and self-education
- Emerson's ideas on education
- Emerson's reading
- Literary influences on Emerson (e.g., Montaigne, Bacon, Goethe)
- Non-literary influences on Emerson: Puritanism, oratory and sermons, the language of the market, nature, experience etc. (you may want to choose one and focus on it)
- Emerson and popular culture
- Emerson and slavery
- Emerson's reading and writing practices; his notebooks and journals
- Emerson and England (his travels there, opinions of England, intellectual influences such as William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle)
- Emerson as nature writer
- Emerson's career as a public speaker
- Emerson's popular reception—positive and negative appraisals by his contemporaries and/or later critics
- Emerson's transformation from New England intellectual to national icon.
- Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, their friendship and differences
- Emerson's relationships with other contemporaries (Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, —choose one)
- Emerson's international influence

4. A final portfolio of your best writings from the semester

The portfolio should include three items, word-processed and formatted according to MLA guidelines:

- 1) A 1,500+ word selection of highlights from your course notebook. Attach a word-processed introduction in which you describe the contents of your selection, discuss the experience you had with notebook-writing, and reflect on

ways that the experience affected or enhanced your understanding and appreciation of Emerson.

2) An expanded reflection (200+ words) on one favorite passage (one sentence or longer) from any of Emerson's writings. Do not use secondary sources for this piece; it should emphatically represent a direct interaction between you and Emerson.

3) A course project of approximately 1,500–2,000 words. I invite and encourage creative projects (such as poetry, fiction, or a reflective essay that is somehow inspired by the readings), as well as more traditional projects, such as an analytical essay. If you wish, you may use one of the topics listed above as possibilities for oral presentations as the topic of your course project.

If you do a creative project, include a 500–700 word introduction in which you discuss the origins and evolution of your project and how the experience of writing the project enhanced your understanding of the particular topic. Your introduction should include documented (MLA-style) references to at least three primary and secondary sources. In effect, your introduction will be a brief research essay in which you interpret or otherwise comment on your creative text.

Evaluation of the Portfolios and Final Grading

Your final grade for the course will be determined holistically, on the basis of your participation and attendance, course notebook, oral presentation, and final portfolio.

Students with Disabilities

Students requiring accommodations or services due to a disability must contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) in room 181 of the Student Service Center. SSD can arrange to provide course materials (including this syllabus) in alternative formats if necessary.

Arts and Humanities Plagiarism Guidelines

Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, falsification, accessing unauthorized course or test information, using unauthorized resources or breaches of copyright law and will not be tolerated in this class. The penalty for academic dishonesty in this course is a grade of failure in that assignment.

Tentative Course Schedule. Please note that this schedule is subject to change. The course texts are abbreviated as follows:

E & P = Emerson, *Essays & Poems*

Journals = *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*

Richardson = *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*

ST = MENG 6510 Supplemental Text

The Supplemental Text provides background information relevant to several of the readings and, in some cases, activities for writing. Therefore, each week I recommend reading the chapters in the Supplemental Text first, before reading the Emerson texts.

Appendix A in the Supplemental Text provides “Topics for Writing and Discussion” for several of the assigned readings. You are not *required* to address these topics if you have alternative or preferred topics of your own for writing. Whatever you choose to write about during a given week, you should do enough writing each week to be able to produce the “favorite” or “best” notebook writing of 600+ words described in the segment on “A course notebook” above (page 3).

Week 1. Introduction

- ST, Preface and Part I (“Reading to Write”)

Week 2. Young Emerson and *Nature* (1836)

Readings:

- ST, Parts I (review) and II (“Commonplace Books”)
- Richardson, pp. 3–127
- Journals, pp. 1–103

Week 3. *Nature* (1836)

Readings:

- ST, Part IV (“Reading to Live”)
- Richardson, pp. 131–241
- ST, chapter 23 (“Notes on *Nature*”)
- *Nature* (E & P, pp. 7–49)
- Journals, pp. 104–49

Week 4. Teacher and Rebel

Readings:

- ST, Part III (“Amplifying Your Notes; Philosophy of Composition”)
- Richardson, pp. 245–92
- ST, chapter 24 (“The American Scholar”: Emerson on Education)
- “The American Scholar” (E & P, pp. 53–71) and “The Divinity School Address” (E & P, pp. 75–92)
- Journals, pp. 150–99

Week 5. Essays: First Series

Readings:

- ST, Part V (“Topics and Concerns of Everyday Life”) – skim

- Richardson, pp. 295–360
- ST, chapter 25 (Notes on “Self-Reliance”)
- “Self-Reliance” (E & P, pp. 259–82)
- “Compensaion” (E & P, pp. 283–302)
- “The Over-Soul” (E & P, pp. 383–400)
- “Circles” (E & P, pp. 401–14)
- Journals, pp. 200–49

Week 6. Essays: Second Series

Readings:

- Richardson, pp. 363–409
- ST, chapter 26 (Notes on “The Poet”)
- “The Poet” (E & P, pp. 445–68)
- “Experience” (E & P, pp. 469–92)
- Journals, pp. 250–99
- Library Reserve: Mary Kupiec Cayton, “The Making of an American Prophet: Emerson, His Audiences, and the Rise of the Culture Industry in Nineteenth-Century America”

Additional: Oral Presentations

Week 7. Later Writings

Readings:

- Richardson, pp. 410–503
- “The Uses of Great Men” (E & P 615–32)
- “Thoreau” (E & P, pp. 1009–27)
- “Quotation and Originality” (E & P, pp. 1028–42)
- “Society and Solitude” (E & P, pp. 1043–49)

Additional: Oral Presentations

Week 8. Poetry; Emerson’s Continuing Influence

- Richardson, pp. 504–end
- Poems (E & P, pp. 1053 ff.; specific poems TBA)
- Journals, pp. 300–end
- William James, “Address at the Centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson, May 25, 1903” (e-reserve)

Additional: Oral Presentations

Final course project due