

# ENG 335U: TOPICS IN FILM AND LITERATURE – WINTER 2016

Instructor: Prof. Josh Epstein

## TOPIC: MELODRAMA, RACE, AND AUTHENTICITY

The melodrama—a genre of emotional extremes, sweeping gestures, and irrational climaxes—has saturated contemporary popular culture; in so doing, it has found itself intervening into questions of race, nation, and culture. This course will examine melodramatic films and novels that tackle the political, cultural, and emotional complexities of race. Melodramas, often called "weepies" or "tear-jerkers," have an exaggerated emotional intensity that makes them both powerfully gripping and grotesquely unrealistic. That is, sentiment can be both deceiving as a way of understanding our past, and useful as a catalyst for social change. Thus, even as we remain suspicious of the melodrama's exaggerated artificiality, we will see how the genre sheds both light and heat on various issues of race and nation: "passing" and belonging, inequality and difference, authenticity and performance. We will also look at texts whose representations of race satirize, repurpose, or work against the grain of melodramatic tropes and clichés.

This course satisfies the Popular Culture cluster requirement, one purpose of which is "to gain control of, rather than being controlled by, the texts of popular culture." This course, therefore, aims to help students develop critical responses to forms of expression that manipulate our raw emotional reflexes.

**Course Student Learning Objectives (SLO).** ENG 335U aims to help students:

1. Develop effective strategies for analyzing cinematic and literary texts, as artworks and as documents of their cultural and historical contexts;
2. Interpret how literary and cinematic **genre and form construct meaning**, while developing a critical vocabulary for studying film and literature;
3. Understand the conventions, traditions, and histories of literary/cinematic melodrama, and recognize how these conventions shape other popular media;
4. Examine how artifacts of popular culture reflect historical and contemporary understandings of race, nation, gender, class, and other cultural constructs;
5. Improve written and oral communication, and develop an effective writing process.

**Quick Notes on Email:** You are invited to email me anytime. The following is meant not to discourage you from asking questions, but to keep emails manageable and productive:

1. **Check your PSU email daily. This is a course requirement.**
2. Read the syllabus or assignment sheet before emailing about an assignment or policy.
3. If you miss class, *contact a classmate* to track down notes, assignments, etc.
4. Email is not an appropriate forum for discussing grades, seeking feedback on drafts, or negotiating special requests. I am happy to have these discussions in person.
5. **Treat emails as professional correspondence.** Use a salutation ("Hi Josh" is adequate), a closing ("Sincerely, [Rick]"), and complete sentences; say "please"/"thank you"; etc.

**Note for Auditors:** The number of auditors will be capped at four. N.B. the word "auditor" means "listener." Auditors are welcome to contribute (or not) to the discussion, but I do ask that they first **yield the floor to enrolled students.**

## REQUIRED MATERIALS:

### Books for Purchase: Please purchase HARD COPIES.

- Gocsik, *Writing About Movies*, 3rd ed. (ISBN 978-0-393-92165-6)
- Fannie Hurst, *The Imitation of Life* (ISBN 978-0-8223-3324-1)
- Nella Larsen, *Passing* (ISBN 978-0-679-76675-9)
- Vikas Swarup, *Q&A* (ISBN 978-0-7432-6748-9)

**Required Films:** The links below refer to Amazon Instant Video except when indicated otherwise. The cost is generally \$2-\$3 per film. (The URLs below are case-sensitive.)

- D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). <http://bit.ly/GriffithBirth>
- Oscar Micheaux, *Within Our Gates* (1920). [free] Linked to D2L.
- Victor Fleming, *Gone with the Wind* (1939). <http://bit.ly/gwtw-amz>
- John Stahl, *The Imitation of Life* (1934). <http://bit.ly/Imitation1934>
- Douglas Sirk, *The Imitation of Life* (1959). <http://bit.ly/Imitation1959>
- John Cassavetes, *Shadows* (1959). [free] <http://bit.ly/pdx-shadows>
- Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). <http://bit.ly/SlumdogM>
- Prakash Mehra, *Zanjeer* (to be screened in class).

## COURSEWORK:

**Quizzes (15 points; SLO 1):** Expect a quiz or in-class writing for most reading or viewing assignments. Quizzes will be closed-book. I may (*may*) allow you to use your reading or viewing notes: not the book itself, not printed SparkNotes (etc.), no phones (etc.). Your two lowest/missed quizzes will be dropped. *I do not give make-up quizzes for absent or tardy students*; that's what the two drops are for. If you find yourself wanting to drop more than two, you may have a larger problem of preparation or attendance in need of remedy. Each quiz will be graded on a 4-point scale (4 = A, 3 = B, 2 = C, 1 = D, 0 = F). Your average, after the two drops, will be converted as follows:

4.0 = 15/15	3.1-3.4 = 13/15	1.7-2.0 = 11/15	0.5-0.6 = 9/15
3.9 = 14.5/15	2.7-3.0 = 12.5/15	1.5-1.6 = 10.5/15	0.4 = 7/15
3.7-3.8 = 14/15	2.5-2.6 = 12/15	1.1-1.4 = 10/15	0.3 = 5/15
3.5-3.6 = 13.5/15	2.1-2.4 = 11.5/15	0.7-1.0 = 9.5/15	0-0.2 = 0/15

**Melodrama Today Presentation (15 points; all SLO):** Individually or in groups, you will give a 15-20-minute presentation on an artifact of popular culture—of any written, visual, digital, or other medium—that bears an interesting relationship to melodramatic conventions or ways of thinking. Why is your artifact melodramatic, and how might that change our thinking about it? *The best presentations will go beyond merely saying "this is melodramatic," and will make a compelling argument about its uses of melodrama.*

**Distribute a handout** to the class including images, details, or an outline to help us follow your analysis. PowerPoints (etc.) are ok, but not a substitute for persuasive *ideas*. Please limit A/V clips to 3-4 minutes max; focus on your *analysis*.

**Participation (10 points; all SLO):** Come to class *having done the reading*, prepared with *ideas, questions, and examples*, and ready to *talk, write, and collaborate*. Participation will be graded A (excellent; 10/10), C (satisfactory; 7.5/10), F (failing; 5/10), or zero.

To participate, you have to be here. If you miss 3-4 classes, your final participation grade will be *at best a C, likely lower*. Upon your fifth absence, your final participation grade will be a zero. *I don't distinguish between excused and unexcused absences*. As in the workforce, you're here or you're not. In-class work, including quizzes, cannot be made up if missed. **Late arrival (5+ minutes) will count as an absence, as will early departure.**

If you do not have the readings with you or if you are texting (etc.) during class, you will be marked absent and will receive a zero on any in-class work for that day.

**NOTE-TAKING:** To be prepared for class, you need to **take notes on each viewing or reading assignment**, and **bring your notes with you to class**:

- Before each class, identify at least 2-3 scenes you'd like to discuss, and at least 2-3 arguments, ideas, or questions to work with. Seek out connections to other readings, films, or issues from class discussion.
- Theme/Narrative/Ideology: What themes does the film/text address? How does the text create suspense, anger, irony, etc.? How does it treat race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.?
- Form/Style: Observe not just *what* the text says, but *how* it is constructed. How do novelists use style, voice, imagery, and figures of speech (metaphor, symbolism, etc.)? How is the camera positioned? What's the acting like? The music? Lighting/color? Are transitions between shots smooth or abrupt? How are sets arranged in front of the camera? Etc.

**Written Essays:** You will write two papers, one of which you will revise and resubmit. All essays must be typed, double-spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman, 1" margins on all sides, in MLA format ([bit.ly/sample-mla](http://bit.ly/sample-mla)). Papers that fail to meet these guidelines will be returned unread, to be resubmitted (late penalties applying) once the problem is corrected. Grading rubrics for all papers are attached at the back of the syllabus.

**Paper 1 (15 points; SLO 1, 2):** In response to prompts provided in advance, this paper (1200-1500 words) will develop an *argument* about a specific film/text. The paper must state its thesis at the outset; defend its claims with textual evidence; organize its claims with well-developed paragraphs, topic sentences, and transitions; and express ideas in elegant written English. Feel free to visit office hours, or the Writing Center, if you'd like advice. No research is required for this essay; if you do use outside sources, you must cite them fully. See the Academic Misconduct Policy (p. 4) and the grading rubric (p.7).

You will then revise and resubmit the paper after reviewing my comments. Both the first version and the revision must be full, polished essays that satisfy the requirements.

**Paper 1 Revision (25 points; SLO 5):** You will resubmit this essay after working on its arguments, ideas, organization, and written expression. I will give feedback on the first version of the paper, but I can't mark *everything* working well/poorly in a given essay. Your job is to rethink the paper *as a whole*. Do not resubmit the essay unchanged, even if you get an A on the original. Mostly, I will read and grade this

revision as if it were its own essay; however, I will also consider your attention to the *process* of revision. *Attach a 300-word memo explaining your revision process.*

**Paper 2 (20 points; all SLO):** For this paper (1700-2000 words, plus MLA Works Cited), you will expand your thinking about melodrama to a film or book from outside of class. You can use this film/book to develop a comparison with one of our course texts, or you can examine it in the context of outside research. Alas, time will not permit us to revise/resubmit this essay as we did with Paper 1, but we will workshop the papers in class. See rubric, p.9.

### **POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND RESOURCES:**

**48-Hour Rules on Essays:** (1) I am happy to discuss essay drafts *at least 48 hours before the deadline*. (2) I am happy to discuss graded work *at least 48 hours after returning it*. Bring the paper with you, with a written revision plan/set of questions to discuss.

**Cell phones in class:** Uhm, no. If your cell phone comes out during class, you are absent.

**Late Work:** Late work will be penalized 5% per day, including weekends. *Computer crashes, work schedules, etc. don't exempt late work from its normal penalties.*

**Attendance:** See "Participation," p.2. Again, late arrival/early departure = absent.

**Civility:** I do not permit personal attacks or hate speech on any basis, including race or ethnicity, sex or gender, sexual/affectional orientation, age, religion, class, or disability.

**Students with Disabilities:** If you have a disability or condition requiring accommodation, please contact the Disability Resource Center ([www.drc.pdx.edu](http://www.drc.pdx.edu)) as soon as possible.

**Writing Center:** Use it. Cramer Hall 188; [www.writingcenter.pdx.edu](http://www.writingcenter.pdx.edu); 503.725.3570.

**Academic Misconduct:** I am doggedly serious about academic misconduct, including but not limited to plagiarism, cheating, forgery, and multiple submission (submitting the same work for credit in multiple classes). *Any incident of academic misconduct—no matter how "accidental" or "minor"—will result in a grade of zero and a report to the Dean of Students.* Review the Student Code of Conduct (<http://bit.ly/PSUcode>), which *applies to all work for 335U*, and contact me *before submitting the assignment* if you're unsure about what you're doing. Uncertainty about the rules is not an excuse for violating them.

\*\*\* **Avoiding Plagiarism:** *You must acknowledge the use of anyone else's words or ideas, whether paraphrased or quoted.* When paraphrasing someone's ideas, cite the source; when borrowing someone's language, even a short "catchy" phrase, put it in "quotation marks" and cite the page number. For further information, consult Purdue OWL ([bit.ly/PurdueOWL\\_MLA](http://bit.ly/PurdueOWL_MLA)), the Writing Center ([bit.ly/PSUWritingPlag](http://bit.ly/PSUWritingPlag)), or your instructor. Again, *it is your responsibility to comply with the rules.*

**ASSESSMENT:**

**Your grade is based on the *quality of coursework submitted*.** I do not grade on effort or extracurricular matters; I don't negotiate individual grades; I don't give extra credit. Do your best work and you'll get your best grade. If you'd like to discuss strategies for improving your work, I will be happy to speak with you in person (not over email).

**Grading Standards** (<http://www.pdx.edu/registration/grading-system#/?section=grades>):

A = Excellent      B = Good      C = Satisfactory      D = Inferior      F = Failing

Therefore a C is not a "bad grade"—it reflects *satisfactory* college-level work. Grades of A are reserved for genuinely outstanding, sophisticated, engaging, and polished work.

**The Digits:** There are 100 total points possible in this course. Every assignment is graded on a point basis and rounded to the nearest half-point (e.g. 20/20, 19.5/20, 19/20, 18.5/20, etc.). Your final earned point total will be assigned a grade as follows:

	87.5-89 = B+	77.5-79 = C+	67.5-69 = D+	0-59 = F
93-100 = A	83-87 = B	73-77 = C	63-67 = D	
89.5-92.5 = A-	79.5-82.5 = B-	69.5-72.5 = C-	59.5-62.5 = D-	

I stick to these numbers without exception. No extra credit.

**"Covering My Behind" Details:**

- If you are taking the class P/NP, you must earn a C- or better to pass.
- I do not give Incompletes except in *extreme* documented emergencies, and only if the student has completed a substantial majority of the coursework at a C level or better.

## SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

***Readings and viewings are due before class on the days indicated.***

Readings from D2L should be printed off. **Bring assigned readings to class with you each day.**

### **Week One: Melodrama and the Uncle Tom Figure**

- Mon., Jan. 4 Intros. What is melodrama? How do we analyze film and literature?  
Wed., Jan. 6 On D2L: excerpts from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (D2L). (Have this read *before class* on 1/6.)

### **Week Two: Melodrama's Violent Distortions: *Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates***

- Mon., Jan. 11 Watch *Birth of a Nation* before class; read NAACP responses to *Birth of a Nation* (D2L);  
*Writing About Movies*, pp.22-26, 33-51. Optional: documentary on *Birth of a Nation*: [search.alexanderstreet.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/work/2066539](http://search.alexanderstreet.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/work/2066539)  
Wed., Jan. 13 Watch *Within Our Gates*; excerpts from Linda Williams (D2L); *Writing* 51-62.

### **Week Three: Passing**

- Mon., Jan. 18 **No Class. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**  
Wed., Jan. 20 Read *Passing* (TBA). **Melodrama Today Pres.**

### **Week Four: Imitating Life: Race, Commerce, and the "New Woman"**

- Mon., Jan. 25 Finish *Passing*. **Melodrama Today Pres.**  
Wed., Jan. 27 Read *Imitation of Life* (pages TBA).

### **Week Five: Once a Pancake...**

- Mon., Feb. 1 *Imitation of Life* (finish). **Melodrama Today Pres.**  
Wed., Feb. 3 Watch *Imitation*, 1934 version; read Langston Hughes, *Limitations of Life* (on D2L);  
*Writing About Movies*, 89-98. **Melodrama Today Pres.**

### **Week Six: "Cotton, Slaves, and Arrogance": *Gone with the Wind***

- Mon., Feb. 8 Watch *Gone With the Wind* before class.  
Wed., Feb. 10 *GWTW*, cont. In class: REQUIRED Peer-review of paper 1.  
Fri., Feb. 12 **Paper 1 due by 11:59 p.m. via D2L Dropbox, along with "Writer's Memo"**

### **Week Seven: Melodrama's Aftermath**

- Mon., Feb. 15 Before class, watch *Imitation*, 1959 version. Read "What is Revision?" handout (D2L).  
Wed., Feb. 17 Before class, watch Cassavetes, *Shadows*; read *Writing About Movies*, 123-125, 131-132.  
**Melodrama Today Pres.**

### **Week Eight: *Zanjeer* and *Shadows***

- Mon., Feb. 22 Screen *Zanjeer* during class; reading TBA.  
Wed., Feb. 24 Finish and discuss *Zanjeer*; reading TBA.  
Fri., Feb. 26 **Paper 1 revision due by 11:59 p.m., along with "Writer's Memo"**

### **Week Nine: Melodramas of Coincidence**

- Mon., Feb. 29 Read Q&A, through p.102; *Writing About Movies*, TBA. **Melodrama Today Pres.**  
Wed., Mar. 2 Finish Q&A. **Melodrama Today Pres.**

### **Week Ten: Escapism or Criticism? *Slumdog Millionaire***

- Mon., Mar. 7 Watch *Slumdog Millionaire* before class. **Melodrama Today Pres.**  
Wed., Mar. 9 Wrap-ups and final paper peer-review.

**PAPER 2 DUE BY 11:59 P.M., WED., MARCH 16, VIA D2L DROPBOX.** No extensions or late work accepted.