

Average Americans

Instructor	Erik Fredner fredner@stanford.edu
Class meeting	Tue. & Thur. 4:30-6:20 pm Lane History Corner (Building 200), Room 230
Office hours	Tue & Thur. 3:00-4:15 pm Margaret Jacks (Building 460), Room 314

Description

Perennially invoked by politicians and pundits, declared “divine” by Walt Whitman, the “average American” has been one of the United States’ most important fictional characters for well over a century. But do averages tell us anything about the individuals from whom they are derived? And who benefits when we use the “average American” as a way of saying who represents the U.S.? The logic of the average resonates with American self-concepts of democracy, equality, and scientific rationalism, yet the same data can be used to suppress difference and dissent. How does the novel propagate and problematize this idea of the representative individual? In this class, we explore these tensions between the individual and the social by reading two novels—Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*—in conversation with two literary critical approaches: Marxist literary theory and the digital humanities methods associated with Stanford’s Literary Lab. The course includes an introduction to the programming language R for text analysis. As we move between close and distant scales of reading, we will ask how numbers and texts attempt to represent American personhood. (No prior experience with statistics, programming, Marxist theory, or the digital humanities is required.)

Texts

Contact me if you need financial assistance to buy course materials.

<i>Babbitt</i>	ISBN 978-0199567690
<i>Native Son</i>	ISBN 978-0060929800

All other texts will be provided to you digitally.

Goals

Students will be able to:

Develop a research project through a process of presentation, revision, and writing.

Describe distant reading and apply several of its conceptual and methodological interventions to their own research.

Describe historical, social, and aesthetic concepts associated with Marxist thought.

Apply central ideas and methods of Marxist thought to literary critical work.

Consider intersections of class and race in American literary history.

Discuss the relay between power and the statistical imagination.

Calendar

We meet for two 110 minute class sessions per week. Read the following for each class:

- Jan. 09 “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing” (Marx)
- Jan. 11 *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Eagleton)
- Jan. 16 “Operationalizing” (Moretti)
 “The Novel as Data” (Algee-Hewitt et al.)
- Jan. 18 *Representation* (Hall, selections)
 In class: Introduction to R.
- Jan. 23 *Babbitt* (Lewis, 1-85, through Ch. VII)
- Jan. 25 *Babbitt* (86-147, through Ch. XIII)
 Theory of the Leisure Class (Veblen, selections)
- Jan. 30 Assignment one lab
- Feb. 01 *Babbitt* (148-242, through Ch. XXIV)
 The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Weber, selections)
- Feb. 06 Assignment one presentation. Assignment one due.
- Feb. 08 *Babbitt* (243-329, through end)
 Marxism and Literature (Williams, selections)
- Feb. 13 Assignment two lab

- Feb. 15 *Native Son* (Wright, 1-94, through Book One)
- Feb. 20 *Native Son* (95-184, about halfway through Book Two)
The Signifying Monkey (Gates, selections)
- Feb. 22 Assignment two presentation. Assignment two due.
- Feb. 27 *Native Son* (185-270, through Book Two)
Racecraft (Fields and Fields, selections)
- Mar. 01 *Native Son* (273-340, about halfway through Book Three)
“I Tried to be a Communist” (Wright)
“How Bigger Was Born” (Wright, 431-463 in *Native Son*)
- Mar. 06 Assignment three lab
- Mar. 08 *Native Son* (340-430, through Book Three)
“Everybody’s Protest Novel” (Baldwin)
“FEAR.” (Lamar)
- Mar. 13 Working lab
- Mar. 15 Assignment three presentation
- Mar. 23 Assignment three due

Assignments

Collaboration is a distinctive feature of digital humanities research. In that spirit, students will present their work in class **before and after** each assignment comes due. During the first meeting (referred to as a “lab”), students share their initial ideas, arguments, and evidence, then receive questions and feedback from the group. This is as much about the quality of the ideas you bring to the room as it is your ability to help others develop their own. During the second meeting (referred to as a “presentation”), students present their work in a more formal setting. We discuss matters relating to evidence, argumentation, and writing.

This structure mimics the work of the Literary Lab, where lab members develop, present, and discuss their work with collaborators and guests, often presenting the same project many times as it develops.

ASSIGNMENT ONE: Select an excerpt from *Babbitt* and explore its relation to one of the themes the novel engages (700 words, not including the text of the excerpt). Then, reflect on the representativeness of the passage in relation to the novel or theme. Describe the concept of representativeness used in the analysis (300 words).

ASSIGNMENT TWO: Select any concept within the realm of this course. Then, explicate it by (1) describing its ideal type and (2) identifying a manifestation of the concept in either novel on the syllabus, noting the ways in which its appearance accords with or breaks from its ideal type (700 words).

Then, students will discuss whether their concept could be operationalized, and, if so, venture how it might be done (300 words). Assignment two may be revised and integrated into the final paper.

ASSIGNMENT THREE: Students will make use of a concept from this class (preferably but not necessarily the one from assignment two) in order to study a novel and/or a corpus of novels from the postbellum period in a research paper. Students will read distantly using a corpus of American fiction in order to provide at least one piece of evidence for their argument.

The distant reading component of this paper can be major or minor. A paper with a major distant reading component might operationalize a concept and analyze the results of the experiment. A paper with a minor distant reading component might use one graph as evidence in their argument (4,000 words). Neither is favored over the other.

If a student’s project requires a more complex study than the time of the quarter allows, students can supplement the distant reading component of the final paper with a study design proposal. (1,000 additional words, including question, hypothesis, description of corpus and method, and the relationship between the question and the argument of the final paper.)

AT SOME POINT DURING THE QUARTER: Students attend one meeting of the Literary Lab. Students will be provided with the schedule of events near the start of the quarter. (If a student’s academic schedule prevents them from attending, accommodations will be made.)

Course Policies

Grading

Attendance	10%
Labs & presentations	20%
Assignment one	10%
Assignment two	10%
Assignment three	50%

A+	97.0-100
A	93.0-96.9
A-	90.0-92.9
B+	87.0-89.9
B	83.0-86.9
B-	80.0-82.9
C+	77.0-79.9
C	73.0-76.9
C-	70.0-72.9
D+	67.0-69.9
D	60.0-66.9
F	00.0-59.9

Assignments one and two are due before midnight on assignment presentation days.

Assignment three is due before midnight on March 23.

Presentations cannot be made up. (But they can be exempted with prior approval.)

Submitting work late without prior approval carries a -10% per day penalty.

Other

I plan to meet with everyone individually at least once during the quarter.

If you want to discuss work in progress, send me your text at least three days before we meet.

If you know you will be absent on certain day(s) of the quarter, let me know ASAP.

If you do not have a laptop that you can bring to class, let me know ASAP.

Other Information & Resources

WISE

Although each WISE (Writing Intensive Seminar in English) is unique, all WISE classes share fundamental learning goals that fulfill both the WIM (Writing in the Major) requirement for English majors and the university's Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry (AII) Way. In all WISE classes, students will explore and analyze literary texts (and in some cases other cultural objects), along with critical or theoretical pieces selected to support students' investigations of primary readings and to offer models of inquiry and writing in the field of literary study. Students will also advance their own analytical, research, and writing skills through a structured series of assignments that includes: at least one assignment developing close reading skills; at least one assignment engaging critical or theoretical writings; and a final essay, developed in stages, that investigates primary texts, and that draws in relevant critical or historical sources, to produce a synthesized, original argument.

Honor Code

The Honor Code is the university's statement on academic integrity, written by students in 1921. It articulates university expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work. The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

- 1) that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
- 2) that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
- 3) The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
- 4) While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

The fundamental standard is also a key part of fostering a discussion environment built on trust and creativity:

- 1) Students are expected to respect and uphold the rights and dignity of others regardless of race, color, national or ethnic origin, sex, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socio-economic status.
- 2) Students are expected to uphold the integrity of the university as a community of scholars in which free speech is available to all and intellectual honesty is demanded of all.

Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. OAE can be reached at 563 Salvatierra Walk; 650-723-1066; and/or <http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oea>

Hume Center for Speaking and Writing

<https://sites.stanford.edu/undergrad/tutoring-support/hume-center>

Office of Sexual Assault & Relationship Abuse Education & Response (SARA)

<https://sara.stanford.edu>

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

<https://vaden.stanford.edu/caps-and-wellness/counseling-and-psychological-services-caps>

The Bridge Peer Counseling

<https://haas.stanford.edu/students/cardinal-commitment/bridge>

English for Foreign Students

<https://language.stanford.edu/programs/efs/languages/english-foreign-students>

Academic Skills Coaching

<http://learningconnection.stanford.edu/academic-skills-coaching>

Undergraduate Advising

<https://undergrad.stanford.edu/advising>

Community Center Resources

<https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/community-center-resources>