

**AI 321 American Writers and Technology  
Summer Quarter, 2004**

Loop; Monday, 6:00-9:00 pm; 6/14 – 8/23  
BA 99 Competencies: A-1-C, A-1-E, A-3-D, A-5, S-3-A.

Faculty: David Simpson received his PhD in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and has served on the faculty in English and humanities at Columbia and Northwestern. His academic interests include classical and Renaissance literature, media studies, American culture, professional communication, and intellectual history. A former member of the Chicago Board Options Exchange, he has served as a consultant in business writing and technical stock-market analysis and has written articles and reviews on topics ranging from jazz and cinema to slang and cyber-culture. He has served on the visiting faculty at SNL since 1990.

**Course Description.**

A course on the impact of new technologies on American literature, art, and cultural history. Students will review and discuss popular current attitudes toward Nature, mechanization, and industrial and electronic technology—especially as those attitudes are embodied or foreshadowed in classic works of American literature. Our contemporary attitudes, it will be suggested, are largely the product of an interplay or dialogue between two rival cultural traditions: a "Utopian" or "classical" tradition, which is generally favorable to technology (and which is reflected in our enthusiasm for inventions, our pride in U.S. engineering achievements, and our admiration for machine power), and an "Arcadian" or "romantic" tradition, which is largely antagonistic to technology (and which is illustrated by our affection for natural beauty and wildlife, for folkways and handicrafts, and our concern for the environment). It appears that these two conflicting traditions are also responsible for the emergence and continuing popularity of two well-known American stereotypes--the idle loafer and nature lover (as exemplified by Rip Van Winkle, Huck Finn, or Henry David Thoreau) and the enterprising hustler, super-salesman, gadget-maker, or inventor (a type celebrated from Ben Franklin to Henry Ford).

**Competence Statements:**

A-1-C Can analyze artistic works or texts in terms of form, content, and style.  
A-1-E Can interpret the work of writers or artists within an historical or social context.  
A-3-D Can assess the assumptions and implications of a significant thinker's ideas about work or leisure.  
A-5 Can define and analyze the creative process.  
S-3-A Can understand different perspectives on the relationship between technology and society, and describe the scientific principles underlying technological innovations.

**Criteria for demonstrating competence:**

A-1-E: Students will write a 6-8 page essay discussing the career, artistic achievement, and social or historical significance of a prominent American author, composer, artist, or film-maker. Note: This assignment is due on Aug 9.

A-1-C: Students will complete a take-home examination (part essay, part objective) testing their ability to define and apply important aesthetic and critical concepts (e.g., genre, neo-classicism) and literary terms. (For a partial list of terms and sample applications, see the Glossary.) Note: The exam is due on 8/16 .

S-3-A: Students may pursue either of two options:

- Option 1: a 6-8 page essay discussing the origin and development and the social, economic, environmental, or cultural consequences of a new invention or technology. (Note: the selected topic could be anything from a new drug or weapon to a household appliance or piece of farm machinery. The paper should include some explanation of the scientific principles involved in the design or operation of the invention.)
- Option 2: a take-home exam requiring students to explain the origin, development, underlying principles, and cultural impact of a choice of important inventions or technological breakthroughs. Due date 8/16:.

A-3-D: Students have two options:

- Option 1: a 6-8 page essay analyzing the views on leisure and recreation or work and personal enterprise of an important American philosopher, artist, social critic, business person, or civic leader. (Sample figures: Henry Thoreau, John Dewey, Eugene Debs, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Walt Disney, Henry Ford.)
- Option 2: a take-home exam testing the student's knowledge of various theories of work and leisure as they relate to, reflect, or derive from American culture. Due date 8/9.

A-5: Students have two options for satisfying this competency.

- Option 1: a 6-8 page paper analyzing the creative process as illustrated in the work of a significant American writer, artist, entertainer, composer, film-maker, scientist, or inventor.
- Option 2: a take-home exam requiring students to compare, illustrate, and apply some key theories relating to creativity and the creative process. Due date:8/16.

### **Course Objectives:**

After completing the course, students will be able to

- Identify significant developments in the history of technology from the industrial revolution to the present.
- Identify a selection of major figures and recurrent themes in American art and literature.
- Apply a theory of creativity to explain or analyze the work of an individual artist, scientist, or inventor.
- Analyze and compare typical American attitudes toward work and leisure

### **Required Texts:**

Emerson, "Nature" and Selected Writings

Thoreau, *Walden*.

Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*.

### **Recommended:**

Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*.

Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*.

**Format:** Informal lecture/discussion with the possibility (depending on class-size) of occasional student-led presentations.

**Evaluation Methods:** Exam questions will be evaluated for succinctness, clarity and accuracy. Essays will be evaluated primarily on content. However, to receive a grade of "A," student essays must exhibit superior organization and style. (For style and format guidelines, please go to <http://www.depaul.edu/~dsimpson/style.htm>.)

### **DePaul Policy on Academic Integrity:**

Note: All students enrolled in the course are responsible for knowing and upholding the university's policy on academic integrity as outlined in the DePaul Student Handbook.

## **Schedule of Class Meetings**

Week 1 (June 14). **Technology, Culture, and the Idea of Progress.**

Readings: No assigned readings; supplementary material will be distributed in class.

Discussion: Is worldwide economic and social progress a myth, a temporary trend, or an inevitable historical process?

Week 2 (June 21). **Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Transcendentalism.**

Readings: Emerson, "Nature," "The Transcendentalist." Bryant, "Sonnet: To an American Painter," "Monument Mountain," "The Prairies."

Discussion: Are "Transcendentalist" values still operative in American culture today?

Week 3 (June 28). **Nature, Romanticism, and American Landscape Painting.**

Readings: Whitman, "Starting from Paumonauk."

Discussion: Has technology made America ugly?

Week 4 (July 5). **Fourth of July Holiday. No class.**

Week 5 (July 12). **Machines as Symbols, Cultural Icons, and Objects of Art.**

Assignments: All exams distributed. (Due. Aug 9, 16.)

Readings: Thoreau, "Sounds" (*Walden*, Chapter 4). Whitman, "To a Locomotive in Winter."

Discussion: Can trains, tractors, and bombs be beautiful? That is, can industrial designs be considered fine art?

Week 6. (July 19). **Nostalgia, Technological Change, and the Acceleration of History.**

Readings: Thoreau, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (*Walden*, Chapter 2). Whitman, "Song of the Exposition."

Discussion: Has today's hi-tech society become too complicated and fast-paced? Has it made less advanced societies seem more attractive than they actually are?

Week 7 (July 26). **Nature, Technology, and Leisure. Art, Science, and Creativity.**

Readings: No new reading assignments. Review of Whitman, "Song of the Exposition."

Discussion: Discussion and class activity will focus on the impact of technology on contemporary ideas about work and leisure. Students and instructor will also compare and evaluate some prominent theories of creativity.

Week 8 (August 2). **Prometheus, Daedalus, Faust, et. al.: Images of the Scientist/Inventor in Myth, Literature, and Popular Culture.**

Readings: Whitman, "Song of Occupations."

Discussion: Are mad scientists, crazy inventors, and nerdy engineers still the dominant images of technical professionals in American popular culture? If so, why? and to what effect? Is creativity an odd or rare ability, or a quality common and natural to most people?

Week 9 (August 9). **One World?: Technology, Democracy, State Power, and World Peace.**

Readings: Whitman, "Song of the Broad-Axe."

Discussion: Does technology in most cases lead to peace and prosperity or to oppression and war? Is advanced technology inherently democratic – placing power in the hands of more and more people? Or is it essentially totalitarian – concentrating power in the hands of scientific-corporate structures and ruling elites? Recommended videos: *1984*; *Until the End of the World*; *2001: A Space Odyssey*; *Forbidden Planet*.

Week 10 (August 16). **Beyond the Millennium: The Role of Science-Fiction in a Technological Society.**

Assignments: **All assignments due.**

Discussion: Progress or Apocalypse? – On the evidence of recent sci-fi films, novels, and TV programs, is the future going to be better or worse?

Week 11 (August 23). **Summary and Review.** Last class meeting.

Readings: Whitman, "So Long."

Discussion: What are some of the important technical and environmental issues that Americans must face in coming years? Can art, poetry, and imaginative fiction help us meet the challenge?