

SYLLABUS
Twentieth Century African American Women Writers
School for New Learning
Fall 2003

... Black women writers have given us the most complex images of black women in all of American literature. They have made black women central to their narratives; with their stories they have critiqued the racist and sexist practices of the dominant culture. They have revised American literature.

--Mary Helen Washington, Black Eyed Susans & Midnight Birds

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Class Location & Times: O'Hare Campus , Tuesdays, 6:30-9:30

Learning Experience:

Despite the endlessly fascinating and wonderful output of African American women's literature, we will be focusing primarily on two writers this quarter: Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler. I could have called this class "The World in Crisis," since the work of Lorde and Butler look, in different ways, at the social problems and possibilities of our current world. Lorde, a poet and essayist was one of the most important writers and activists of the 70s and 80s until her death in 1992. Her work brings together a finely honed poetic craft and political sensibility as she draws on her experiences as a Black woman, lesbian, activist, and as she draws also from her Caribbean and African roots. Octavia Butler, author of many science fiction novels and a collection of short stories, is a pioneer in the field. In the work we will be reading, Butler takes a departure from science fiction and writes critical dystopian fiction, creating multi-cultural communities and asking readers to consider what a radically different world might be like.

We will look at the backgrounds of these writers, as well as a brief overview of African American women's writing in general, attempting to understand the historical, social, and political forces that shaped Lorde's and Butler's writing, as well as to connect the literature to our own lives and experience. In addition, we will look at just how the literature does what it does.

The class will be a mix of discussion, lecture and possibly a film or two. It is essential that you read the assigned work before each class. The quality of our time together will depend on the thoroughness and thoughtfulness of your reading. Please read the guidelines for preparing for class discussion (attached to this syllabus).

Required texts: (Available at the O'Hare bookstore or you may want to order online from Amazon.com or another source—you can probably find them used for a pretty good price, but do try to get the editions I'll be using.)

- Butler, Octavia. Parable of the Sower. (Warner Books, reprint edition, Feb. 1998)
- ---. Parable of the Talents. (Warner Books, Jan. 2000)
- Lorde, Audre. Collected Poems (W.W. Norton, Feb. 2000)

And be sure to use the library website: < <http://www.lib.depaul.edu/> > (we'll meet with a librarian early in the quarter).

Competencies Offered and Outcomes:

- A1C: Can analyze artistic or textual works in terms of form, content, and style.**
1. Can use the vocabulary of criticism appropriate to poetry and fiction and apply it to one or more of the texts read this quarter.
 2. Can examine one or more texts of literature (Lorde and/or Butler) with a focus on the use of form, content, and style as a means of communicating ideas and creating art.
- A1D: Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.**
1. Chooses particular literary works to consider in articulating an understanding of how Butler and/or Lorde view such issues as love, friendship, spirituality, freedom, oppression, work, child raising, families, marriage, sexual orientation, etc. and how those views are expressed in a particular poem/poems or story.
 2. Analyzes how the life and history of a particular writer can inform her work and her view of the human experience.
- A5: Can define and analyze a creative process.**
1. Can define the concept of creativity, especially as it relates to the work of Lorde and/or Butler.
 2. Can identify, analyze, and describe the components of a creative process.
 3. Can explain how engaging in a creative process affects one's perception of the world.
- H4: Can analyze power relations among racial, social, cultural, or economic groups in the United States.**
1. Can describe the unequal power relations between at least two racial, social, cultural, or economic groups in the U.S., drawing from Lorde's or Butler's representations of those unequal power relations.
 2. Can discuss the historical, sociological, or economic dynamics under which these groups came to be in conflict.

Some Goals I Have for You:

- An appreciation for the broad scope of African American women's writing in the 20th and 21st centuries from which to draw in future learning activities (inside and beyond school)
- The ability to make connection between a literary text (its themes, plot, characters, setting) and one's own life
- Increased vocabulary and strengthened writing and critical thinking abilities
- Increased facility in classroom discussion (listening and speaking)

Assignments:

1. **Two 5-page papers (1 per competence).** You will write two papers in this course, each one addressing a specific competence and incorporating a topic from the literature. I will help you choose and refine your topics. Each paper will be 5 double-spaced (10 or 12 font) full pages. I will also provide you with full instructions for the paper as we get ready to embark on the first assignment. If you are not satisfied with the grade of your first paper, you have the option of revising it and handing it in at the end of the quarter for a new grade.
2. **Discussion Questions and/or Reading Reflections.** Every week you will have reading assignments and I will collect from you at least one discussion question per poem or 4 questions per novel assignment **or** I'll ask for a reflective paragraph. I'll let you know a week ahead of time. These will need to be typed and should reflect (1) that you have read the work carefully and (2) that you have thought about it and have something to discuss or ask about. If the work is not typed, you may not hand it in. It may not be handed in late.
3. **One Community Event & 3-page Review.** In Chicago, there are community events in which African American women writers' work is featured. I would like you to visit at least one this quarter and write

a 3-page review of the event, including date, location, and name of event. In October, Chicago State hosts a wonderful Black Writers' Conference and brings in terrific writers, many of whom are women. Check out the Guild Complex's schedule, various readings (Women and Children First Bookstore has a monthly newsletter also the Chicago Tribune and Sun Times both have book reviews that feature readings around the area.) You could also go to live theatre where the playwright is a Black woman. No movies, please. I would encourage you to bring in notices of events that you know about and perhaps groups of you could go together.

Class participation (including attendance): 20%

Discussion questions: 10%

Paper #1: 25%

Paper #2: 25%

Community Event Report: 20%

Schedule:

Note: As a way of increasing facility with language, I would like you to read with a dictionary nearby, looking up words that you're not sure about. Bring those new words to class each week and we'll spend the early moments of class listing and discussing them. (See "On Preparing for Class Discussion" at the end of this syllabus.)

(Reading assignments T.B.A. at Session 1 of class)

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| <u>Week 1</u> | Introductions (who are we as a class? what might it mean to be a learning community?) Course and syllabus overview. Brief overview of African American women writers in 20 th century. Brief introduction to the art of reading poetry. Beginning discussion of Lorde's poetry. |
| <u>Week 2</u> | More on reading poetry: form, content, style. Discussion of Audre Lorde's aesthetic roots and development. Biographical information. Discussion of poetry. |
| <u>Week 3</u> | The urgency of poetry. Lorde's vision of the world in crisis. Film ("A Litany for Survival"). |
| <u>Week 4</u> | More on Lorde's poetry. Visiting writer and discussion of creative process. Discussion of first assignment. Lorde's style. In-class writing exercise. |
| <u>Week 5</u> | <u>Parable of the Sower</u> . Introduction to Octavia Butler. Critical dystopian fiction and <u>Parable of the Sower</u> . Earthseed philosophy. Characters and plot in the novel. |

PAPER #1 DUE WEEK 6

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| <u>Week 6</u> | Characters and plot in <u>Sower</u> . Contemporary connections. Novelistic form. Violence/pacifism and survival in the novel. |
| <u>Week 7</u> | More on <u>Sower</u> . Butler's diagnosis of social ills. Does she have a cure? |
| <u>Week 8</u> | <u>Talents</u> . Novelistic form and style differences between <u>Talents</u> and <u>Sower</u> . Chronology and plot review. State sponsored religion and tactics of terror. Discussion of final paper assignment. |

REVIEW OF COMMUNITY EVENT DUE WEEK 9

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| <u>Week 9</u> | <u>Talents</u> . Social control as a means for curing the social problems. |
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Week 10

Talents wrap-up discussion. Summation of the three writers' visions of world in crisis and possible solutions.

Final Paper Due (and revised first paper, if you choose)

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ON PREPARING FOR AND PARTICIPATING IN CLASS DISCUSSION

Because good discussions of literature cannot happen without good preparation, I am providing you with some guidelines for reading and class preparation.

1. Always read with a pen, highlighter, or pencil in hand, and a dictionary nearby.
 - ✓ If you own the book, circle words you don't know; look up the definitions, write them down, and bring them to class. We'll compile a list of new words at the beginning of each class.
 - ✓ Don't even think that one reading of a poem will give you its meaning and unlock its richness. When reading poetry read the poem through at least once without attending too much to meaning. Get the sound of it, the feel of it. Read it out loud. Read it again.
 - ✓ You will need to read the poem at least twice before you can begin to make sense of it.
 - ✓ On the third reading, look at the title; see how it relates to the rest of the poem.
 - ✓ Look for links throughout the poem as to meaning.
 - ✓ Ask yourself what is going on in the poem; what is happening here?
 - ✓ Highlight or underline sections that seem particularly interesting to you--or troubling--or that you don't understand.
 - ✓ Write your observations and questions on a sheet of paper or in the margins of the book (if it is yours).
 - ✓ Note page numbers of passages you particularly want to discuss (put these on your list of discussion questions).
2. As a way to help us make experiential connections with the literature, please come to class prepared to discuss your "aha" experience(s) in the reading. Since everyone won't get to discuss their "aha's", you might want to jot it down on your discussion question sheet you'll be handing in.
3. Keep in mind that when discussing literature it is important to
 - ✓ point out the page and particular lines or passage to which you are referring
 - ✓ read it aloud once everyone has found it This way everyone has the benefit of following your line of questioning or interpretation and can make a strong contribution to the discussion you have sparked.