"Over and over again I am amazed by the treasure trove that American literature is . . . work which bears and invites re-readings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, (which) implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language.”

Toni Morrison Playing in the Dark 1992

Course Description:
Welcome to our study of Early American Literature. They say that in order to understand the meaning of something you have to go back to the beginning. In ENG253, we’ll go back to the beginnings of America and explore literature through Native American stories, European exploration writings, the writings of Colonial America (1620—1776) and the Literature of the New Republic (1776—1836). Throughout our study, we’ll appreciate these works in relation to their historical and philosophical backgrounds, in relation to their authors, in relation to other literature and even in relation to other art forms. I encourage you to recognize your own important place as world citizens of the 21st century in understanding the literature of this country and its peoples.

Learning Outcomes: When you successfully complete ENG253, you should be able to:
- Read, write, and talk critically and insightfully about American Literature.
- Recognize literature’s place in American culture and history.
- Demonstrate how American Literature enhances our contemporary selves/cultural awareness and creativity.
- Write and speak confidently about your own and others’ ideas regarding American Literature.

Succeeding in this class will require that you have college-level writing and reading skills (write at the WR121 level). If you have not yet taken WR121 (or aren’t taking it this term), please see me.
Discussion/Participation (40 points) Class discussions – in which we all participate – go a long way toward extending and deepening meaning, understanding, and pleasure. I’ll provide the focus, concepts, and context as together we will explore and construct this American tradition. Plan to prepare well before class and to participate in readings, activities, and discussions during class. Question and examine what these readings mean to you. Present and participating earns full credit. Please always be present for class! You – your consistent presence and participation – contribute to the integrity of our classroom.

Weekly Writings (60 points) You’ll be gathering your responses to weekly readings and discussions as well as practicing and refining your analytic and interpretative writing skills in focused (informal) writings. I’ll provide an assignment each week (and I’ll try to consistently provide a creative option). These writings, which are designed for you to reflect on and synthesize what you are learning, will lead you toward your Formal Essay and provide you with your own writing as foundation. (Full credit: turned in on time, represents clear understanding and critical thinking, well developed. Partial credit: not turned in on time, or does not represent a clear understanding or clear critical thinking, or is not well developed. Format: one full page, word-processed, single-spaced.)

Formal Essay (80 points) A formal essay focused on the American literary tradition that grows out of your own weekly writings and discussions.

Group Project / Presentation (20 points) Here’s your opportunity to focus on and share with us (in any creative ways that you choose) what is most interesting to you as we explore the American literary tradition. Collaborative projects give you the opportunity to step outside of the standard academic assignments (individual written, academic performance). You’re invited to get together with some of your colleagues, bring your own interests and talents, and create a presentation that (in any creative way) enhances our understanding of your subject. Plan to have as much fun in the preparation as we all will in the presentation.

Tentative Calendar

Week One: September 29 & Oct 1: “The Literature of the New World”: Overview and Native American Narratives
Week Two: October 6 & 8: Christopher Columbus, De Vaca, Powhatan, John Smith
Week Three: October 13 & 15: “Colonial America” William Bradford and Anne Bradstreet
Week Four: October 20 & 22: “Colonial America” Witchcraft, Anne Hutchinson and Mary Rowlandson
Week Five: October 27 & 29: Benjamin Franklin and Phyllis Wheatley
Week Seven: Nov 10 & 12: Oloudah Equiano and Slavery
Week Eight: Nov 17 & 19: Washington Irving and Noah Webster
Week Nine: Nov 24 – 26 Thanksgiving and Presentations
Week Ten: Dec 1 - 3: Presentations