

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
DIVISION OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

REQUEST FOR INCLUSION OF A COURSE IN THE
GENERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM:
EDUCATION FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL: English COLLEGE: Arts & Sciences

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1. Subject Code, Number, and Title: LITR 163 Introduction to Jewish-American Literature

2. Credit Hours 3

3. Course Description

This course examines the complex position of Jews in America—considering minority status, assimilation, and the cultural history of Jewish persecution—by focusing on poetry, prose and drama that reflects awareness of both an oppressive European past and a desire to move forward in the vibrant intellectual life of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

4. This course is (check one):

an existing course with no revisions (need not go through the input system)

an existing course with revisions (attach this form to Request for Course Revision form)

a new course (attach this form to Request for New Course form)

5. Check the General Education requirement this course is intended to meet. If the course is to be proposed for more than one requirement, submit a separate form for each one.

Effective Communication

Quantitative Reasoning (*QR designation*)

Writing Intensive (*WI designation*)

Perspectives on a Diverse World

Global Awareness

U.S. Diversity

Knowledge of the Disciplines

Arts

Humanities

Science

Social Science

Learning Beyond the Classroom (*LBC designation*)

6. Rationale. Provide a concise, clear, jargon-free explanation of why this is a General Education course and how it fits into this specific area of the program. (The rationale should explain to students why they are taking the course. It should address both why it is part of the General Education program and why it fits into the particular category.) This rationale should appear on the general course syllabus provided here and should be included in specific course syllabi given to students.

"Introduction to Jewish-American Literature" asks students to consider what kinds of contributions Jews have made to American life, and what kinds of struggles they have had to endure in order to make those contributions. In particular, the course asks students to consider how American Jews have represented themselves and their cultural situations in the literary genres of poetry, prose, and drama. "Introduction to Jewish-American Literature" meets the U.S. Diversity requirement of the new general education curriculum because it demonstrates how Jewish Americans have constructed themselves within a nation that has often been far from accepting of difference. It also asks students to appreciate how literature written by Jews has helped to reconstruct American attitudes about the accommodation of marginalized groups.

7. Clearly and concisely explain how this course meets each of the General Education outcomes for the requirement checked in number five (all outcomes should be addressed). To do this, (a) list the General Education outcomes for the requirement and explain how the course meets each outcome; and (b) explain, in general terms, the method(s) of evaluation to be used in the course and how these methods assess the degree to which students have met the General Education outcomes for this requirement.

Outcomes

1) Examine the complexity of their own cultural identities and how these relate to the cultural identities of others in the U.S.

a. With metaphors like “the melting-pot,” America has, from its beginnings, attempted to homogenize, to oversimplify, religious, racial, ethnic, and gender difference. Even as Americans have come to appreciate that our society is comprised of many decidedly varied identities, there remains a fantasy of some middle space into which all citizens can be subsumed. But not all fit well, for instance, into the frequently used descriptor of America as a “Christian nation.” The majority of Eastern Michigan University students

are, on the one hand, nearly oblivious to the approximately 1000 Jewish students on our campus. Overt anti-Semitism is rare on our campus—as it is rare in the United States—because most EMU students generally believe Jews to possess “American” identities, identities similar to their own. But lurking beneath America’s general tolerance of Jews resides some very strong suspicions about a group long regarded as “other.” It is by no means unusual to find EMU students who believe that their lives have been negatively impacted by Jews who, they imagine, constitute a rich and powerful group in control of America’s media, America’s finances, and America’s foreign policy. As discussions with EMU students at Campus Life’s presentation of *The Passion of the Christ* indicate, there are those who continue to believe in—and who derive at least a portion of their identities as Christians from—the “blood libel,” the notion that Jews must be blamed, in perpetuity, for the crucifixion. In “Introduction to Jewish-American Literature,” EMU students will begin to learn about Jewish life and Jewish identity in the United States; as they read literary texts about Jewish-American identity and the Jewish-American experience, students should begin to put aside mythologies relating to their own self-definitions and to the way they define others so that they may become aware of real points of connection and difference. Reading poems, plays, and fiction by and about American Jews, EMU students will be asked to consider how their cultural identities as Americans have been formed and how they have progressed, how struggles for equality have not always been equally rewarded—or at least have been differently rewarded. In this course, students will learn how, despite adversities, Jews have worked to “become American” and have translated the richness of their heritage to America.

b. Through objective examinations, guided essays, and classroom participation, students can display their understanding of Jewish-American literature. Objective examinations will test students’ knowledge about how literature by and about Jews illuminates both the cultural identities of America’s majority and those marginalized. Guided essays will require students to look at texts more deeply, to think about how literature illuminates difficult issues relating to the formation of their own identities with regard to cultural constructions of American Jewishness.

2) Explore the causes and consequences of social intolerance in the U.S.

a. In 2001, a group of Nazis visited EMU to remind our students that, in the words of the *Eastern Echo*, “Jews, non-whites, homosexuals, and feminists” are the enemies of America’s majority culture. While Nazis may lack credibility to determine the parameters of American inclusiveness, their language resonates, in somewhat muted form, through our society. Like people of color, homosexuals, and women, Jews occupy a liminal space, alternatively welcomed to America’s abundance and despised. While Jews, persons of color, homosexuals, and women are, at various times, subjected to different kinds of exclusions by America’s majority culture, by studying Jewish-American literature, students can begin to understand the nature of social intolerance in the U.S. By reading, for instance, letters to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, they can see, for instance, the way immigrant groups were pitted against each other in America’s ghettos; by reading Nathaniel West, they can begin to understand how stereotypes of Jewish power and greed have been disseminated through American society; by reading Alan

Ginsberg they can learn about how, and why, Jews, in particular, became targets during the “Red Scare” of the 1950s; by reading Phillip Roth they can begin to understand how Jews have been taught to hate themselves, and how well Jews have learned that lesson.

b. Students will be asked to reflect on cultures of intolerance through class participation and in guided essays. They will be, for instance, asked to look at texts both to determine by what means Jews have been marginalized in America, and they will be asked to consider how, in response to a culture of intolerance, Jews have managed to take pride in their difference and, sometimes simultaneously, to suffer “self-hatred.” Looking at a text like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, students can see how members of marginalized groups often learn to act out the stereotypes imposed on them by the majority. Objective examinations and guided essays will be used to test comprehension of how literature reflects the situation of Jews as they move from the ghettos of Europe to the ghettos of the United States to almost, but not quite, assimilation in America’s mainstream.

3) Examine the differences between social intolerance and institutionalized racism, ethnocentrism, and exclusion in the U.S.

a. In a number of ways, Jewish-Americans provide a remarkable test case for examining differences between social intolerance and institutionalized racism, ethnocentrism, and exclusion. Prior to the twentieth century, anti-Semitism focused on religious and cultural difference. It was a powerful ideological force, degrading Jews, displacing them, and, often enough, subjecting them to attack. In “Introduction to Jewish-American Literature” students will encounter texts like Joan Micklin Silver’s *Hester Street*, Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money*, and Clifford Odets *Awake and Sing* which describe life in the Jewish ghettos of America, where demeaning employment, horrific living conditions, and the constant threat of violence were part of everyday life. With the rise of “racial” anti-Semitism in the twentieth century, Jews became the victims of exclusion institutionalized through “science.” We will read how, following the Holocaust, Jews like H. Leyvik, Elie Wiesel, Cynthia Ozick, and Art Spiegelman sought to cope with an America that largely remained silent during Nazi Germany’s genocide, an America that still possesses many of the Jewish stereotypes that provided the foundations for that genocide.

b. Objective examinations will ask students to think about how Jewish-American literature reflects shifting forces marginalizing Jews. Classroom discussion and guided essays will ask students to examine in depth to compare how different kinds of anti-Semitism have affected Jewish life in the United States. They will be asked to take texts from different periods and asked to examine how anti-Semitism has changed and what are the results of the changes both on the majority culture and on Jews.

4) Explore how diversity has affected and continues to affect income distribution, economic mobility, political access, and the democratic process in the U.S.

a. Because Jewish-Americans have been stereotyped as having enormous control over the income, economic mobility, political access, and the democratic process of our entire nation, authors have spent considerable time attempting to dispel the myths.

“Introduction to Jewish-American Literature” will introduce students to the struggles of American Jews as they try to find a comfortable place in our nation’s social, economic, and political systems. Students in “Introduction to Jewish-American Literature” will learn about how Jews responded to life in the ghettos, to tragedies like the Triangle Shirt Factory fire; they will read about Jewish participation in labor unions and the politics of the American left—and the stigmas Jews endured for such participation. From Emma Lazarus, Irving Berlin, Clifford Odets, and Arthur Miller they will learn that financial success does not always ensure political power—or even access. From Groucho Marx, Woddy Allen, Adrienne Rich, and Marge Piercy they will learn that economic mobility does not ensure inclusion into the body politic of the majority culture.

b. Objective examinations will cover literary responses to the economic and political situation of Jews in America. Class discussions and guided papers will ask students to focus on how a writer, like Philip Roth deals with stereotypes of Jewish wealth and economic mobility; these assignments will ask students to look beyond mythologies of Jewish affluence and power to how Jews really live.

5) Develop an awareness of alternative values, views, and communication styles in the U.S.

a. The Jewish-American experience has given voice to the patriotism of Emma Lazarus and Irving Berlin, to the social satire of Nathaniel West and Phillip Roth, to the irony of Delmore Schwartz, the Marx Brothers, and Woody Allen. It has spoken with voices of anger (Muriel Rukeyser, H. Leyvik, Allen Ginsberg and Adrienne Rich) and infinite sadness (Michael Gold, Elie Wiesel, Cynthia Ozick, and Art Spiegelman). Tapping into traditions that go back millennia, Jews have transformed American intellectual, social, and political life. The course includes music and films to support literary texts, to demonstrate to students that Jewish culture is all around them, that they are constantly hearing its echoes, that it is part of them, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not.

b. Objective examinations will test students’ understanding of how Jewish-American literature presents alternative values, views, and communication styles. Classroom discussions and guided essays will ask students to consider the subtlety with which Jewish-American writers have presented Jewish tradition, and how these writers have managed to find ways to make Jewish tradition accommodative of “American culture” and “American culture” accommodative of Jewish tradition. A writing assignment might ask students to consider how American attitudes have shifted towards Jewish comedic voices, comparing for instance an episode of Carl Reiner’s *The Dick Van Dyke Show* to an episode of *Seinfeld*.

8. Attach a syllabus (1-inch margins and 10-12 pt. font). The syllabus must include the rationale from #6 above and clearly reflect the outcomes and methods of evaluation detailed in #7 above.

Syllabus attached below signature block.

Please submit all materials in electronic form.

Action of the Department/College

1. Department

Vote of department faculty: For 28 Against
0 Abstentions 0

Department Head Date

2. College

College Dean Date

Action of General Education Advisory Committee

Vote of General Education Committee: For _____ Against
Abstentions _____

Chairperson, General Education Advisory Committee
Date

Approval

Associate Vice-President for Undergraduate Studies and Curriculum Date

SAMPLE SYLLABUS
LITR 163 Introduction to Jewish-American Literature

Professor:
Office hours:
Office phone:
Email:

Course Description:

Since arriving in the United States, Jews have found themselves alternatively persecuted and assimilated. They have occupied an uneasy space between being regarded as a racial minority—a scientifically unsustainable claim which, nonetheless, is believed by a majority of Americans, including Jewish-Americans—and a religious minority. Out of this often awkward relationship with the majority culture, American Jews have fashioned a literature that simultaneously looks backward to the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe and forward towards a defining role in the intellectual life of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In "Jewish American Literature and Culture," students will read the poetry, prose, and drama of one of our nation's most vibrant minorities.

Most Americans have little notion as to how much Jewish culture permeates the fabric of our national consciousness. Since September 11, 2001, "God Bless America" has taken on new meaning for a new generation. We seem to have forgotten that it was a song of celebration authored by a Jewish immigrant, Irving Berlin, for a nation that offered him only grudging acceptance. Similarly, when Jewish-American Carl Reiner created a television show about his experiences as a comedy writer, he had to re-imagine himself as "middle American" Dick Van Dyke before network television would provide airtime. It is possible that contemporary America is more accepting of its Jewish minority. Americans speak Yiddishisms all the time, without even reflecting on their source. We laugh at and with Jerry Seinfeld and his friends. But such acceptance was won with enormous effort, and, even now in the U.S., there continues to be some nervousness about both the extent and the appropriateness of "Jewish influences."

The cultural position of American Jews has been the subject of intense discussion (and often angry controversy) among authors and scholars. This course will be no exception. You will undoubtedly hear points of view being presented that will conflict with your own, or that will simply be disturbing. You are encouraged, first of all, to consider the material being presented, and second, to formulate your own response to it. I hope this course will be a forum for a great deal of discussion and debate, and I hope that each of you will contribute to a frank, open atmosphere.

Rationale for U.S. Diversity:

"Introduction to Jewish-American Literature" asks students to consider what kinds of contributions Jews have made to American life, and what kinds of struggles they have had to endure in order to make those contributions. "Introduction to Jewish-American

Literature" meets the U.S. Diversity requirement of the new general education curriculum because it demonstrates how Jewish Americans have constructed themselves within a nation that has often been far from accepting of difference. It also asks students to appreciate how literature written by Jews has helped to reconstruct American attitudes about the accommodation of marginalized groups. Ultimately, through their examination of the Jewish-American experience, students should complexity of their own cultural identities and how these relate to the cultural complexities of others in the U.S.

Texts: Chametzky, Jules, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, Kathryn Hellerstein. *The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*
Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*
Ozick, Cynthia. *The Shawl*
Roth, Phillip. *Goodbye Columbus*
Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivors Tale. My Father Bleeds History*

Films: *A Night at the Opera*
Hester Street
Schindler's List

Course Calendar:

Weeks 1-3 Arrival in America

Readings: Sheldon Harnick, "If I Were a Rich Man"
Emma Lazarus, "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport;"
"1492;" "The New Colossus"
Abraham Cahan, "A Ghetto Wedding"
Mary Antin, "The Lie"
Letters: "From a 'Greenhorn'" (1906); "Anti-Semitism on
the Job" (1907); "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace"
(1907); "Socialist Freethinking and the Jewish Tradition"
(1908); "Staying in School" (1911); "Returning to Russia"
(1917)
Hester Street

In this portion of the course, students will consider some of the causes and consequences of social intolerance in the United States. They will analyze the immigrant experience and its aftermath, thinking about, among other things how diversity has affected and continues to affect income distribution, economic mobility and the democratic process.

Some Topics for Discussion:

Why did European Jews come to America?
What did European Jews expect to find in the United States?
What sorts of traditions did European Jews bring with them to the U.S.?
How did European Jews survive the immigrant experience?

How did some European Jewish immigrants manage to prosper in their new home?
How did the Yiddish press help Jewish immigrants?
What is “Jewish humor?”

Weeks 4-6 Assimilation and the Creation of Jewish-American Identity

Readings: Aaron Glanz, “The God of Israel;” “New York”
Michael Gold, “Fifty Cents a Night,” from *Jews Without Money*
Irving Berlin, “God Bless America”
Nathanael West, “International Jewish Bankers and Bolsheviks,” from *A Cool Million*
Clifford Odets, *Awake and Sing*
Muriel Rukeyser, “More of a Corpse than a Woman;” “To be a Jew in the twentieth century”
Delmore Schwartz, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”
Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
A Night at the Opera

This portion of the course continues to explore how issues of social intolerance and economic mobility continue to affect American Jews as they begin to shake off their status as immigrants. For the generations born in the United States, identification with the Jewish religion and culture becomes both a blessing and a curse as inroads are made towards inclusion even as the old hatreds persist.

Some Topics for Discussion:

What sorts of stereotypes are associated with Jews?
What was life like in America’s Jewish ghettos?
In what ways have Jewish-Americans embraced the notion of the American dream? In what ways have they rejected this notion?
How did America’s Jewish ghettos provide an environment for a renaissance in literature, art, music, theater, and cinema?

Examination #1

Paper #1

Weeks 7-10 Achievement and Ambivalence

Readings: H. Leyvik, “To America”
Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Gimpel the Fool”
Tillie Olsen, “Tell Me a Riddle”
Bernard Malamud, “The Magic Barrel”
Howard Nemerov, “Lot’s Wife;” “A Song of Degrees;”
“Nicodemus”

Denise Levertov, "Illustrious Ancestors;" "The Jacob's Ladder;" "Candles in Babylon"
Allen Ginsberg, "America;" "Footnote to Howl"
Phillip Levine, "Zaydee;" "The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka"
Phillip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus*

During this portion of the course students will begin to become acquainted with what might be seen as the alternative values, views, and communication styles of the American Jewish community. It is here they will begin to appreciate the discourses of irony, melancholy, and anger that might result from millennia of disenfranchisement.

Some Topics for Discussion:

Why do some Jews reject the prospect of assimilation?
Why is there in some Jewish-American writings nostalgia for the ghettos of Eastern Europe?
What is Jewish self-hatred? Why does it exist? Is it a necessary component to assimilation?
In what ways do issues of race, gender, and class figure into the writings of Jewish Americans?

EXAMINATION #2

Weeks 11-12 America and the Holocaust

Readings: H. Leyvik, "Song of the Yellow Patch"
Elie Wiesel, "Arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau" (from *Night*); "Why I Write"
Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl*
Art Spiegelman, *Maus*
Schindler's List

Some Topics for Discussion:

Why is the Holocaust so important for America's Jews?
Who is entitled to write about the Holocaust?
Why do American Jews believe that the Holocaust can happen again, and here?

During these weeks, students will learn the some of the differences between social intolerance and institutionalized racism, ethnocentrism, and exclusion. They will read about how religious anti-Semitism metastasized into the racial violence of the Holocaust, considering, in particular, how this new kind of hatred for Jews was received into American culture.

Weeks 13-15 Identity Politics

Readings: Groucho Marx, "We Were Brothers Before You"
Woody Allen, "The Scrolls"

Chaim Potok, from *My Name is Asher Lev*
Adrienne Rich, "Trying to Talk With a Man;" "Yom
Kippur, 1984"
E.L. Doctorow, "Heist"
Jerome Rotherberg, "Dibbukim (Dibbukis);" "Cokboy (Part
One)"
Marge Piercy, "Maggid;" "The Ram's Horn Sounding"
Allegra Goodman, "The Four Questions"

For this final section of the course, students will think about the very nature of American identity, their own and the identities of those around them. They will need to decide what it means to be an American, and how flexible that definition might be.

Some Topics for Discussion:

Why do so many American Jews consider the state of Israel to be important?
How have Jews changed America?
How has America changed what it means to be a Jew?
Is American central to the future of Judaism?

Examination #3

Paper #2

Assignments and Evaluation:

"Introduction to Jewish-American Literature" is a lecture/discussion class. Students will be required to attend lectures, read the books, see the films, and participate in classroom discussions. Your learning will be tested by three objective examinations and two short written essays (each approximately 3-5 pages in length). The objective examinations will cover readings, films, and materials discussed in class. Essay questions will be provided at least two weeks before papers are due and will ask you to expand on classroom discussion and to make an argument of your own about some of the material. Your grade will be computed thusly:

Objective Examinations	20% each
Essays	15% each
Classroom Participation	10%