

English 20

Stephen Cook

Section 25 TTH 10:30 – 11:45 Alpine Hall 147

Course Code: 80459

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Course Description: English 20 picks up where English 1A leaves off and emphasizes college-level reading, writing, analysis, and research. I have organized this particular version of 20 around a theme, and I am asking you to read the class text thoroughly, come to class so that we can discuss the material, and write thoughtful essays revised to some degree.

Some students have questioned whether this class is a “real” writing class or even an English class. I am always stunned by this question, and I can’t seem to get used to it. Now, what I teach and how I teach it are certainly not traditional, but my English 20 classes most definitely involve writing. What you write stems from what you read and from the movies we watch and explicate, but if you feel as one student did that she was not learning to write “a proper essay,” you will have to define what the term means to you so that I can help you out. I’ve been writing and teaching writing for many years, and I don’t have a clue as to what she meant. (She didn’t tell me directly but buried the criticism in her class final. Please don’t wait that long if you feel dissatisfied.)

I offer help and advice to any student who asks me to read a draft, but the reality is that because so many papers are last-minute efforts, any kind of commentary or editing advice I can offer is drastically limited. As for teaching grammar, I prefer to teach it to those individuals whose papers show a need for help, not blanket the class with explanations of dangling participles or the correct use of gerunds.

Structure is another matter – I do not teach formulas, and I will never make the deal many students desire: You (the teacher) tell me (the student) what to say and how to say it, and in return, I (the student) will receive at least a “B.” Of course, I will help you to understand the ideas and will always answer to the best of my ability any questions about how to build an argument, but your essay is not my essay, and since you’re free to make your own interpretations, clearly you must create a thesis you believe in and support it. I can only offer advice and feedback.

Class Text: *Realizing Westward: American Character and Cowboy Mythology*. Third Edition. Stephen P. Cook

Classroom Policies:

All papers lose five points for every calendar day they are late. Any paper shorter than the required length cannot get a passing grade.

I allow no make-ups for in-class responses (unless you can **prove** to me that you had an emergency).

Habitual tardiness is grounds for dropping a student.

I deduct 10 points for every absence after four.

Finally, I do not wish to police your use of laptops and cell phones, but I will. Sometimes, after a few warnings to a student who persists, I say nothing, knowing instead that the student's work will reflect his/her inattention. Some students text or use laptops right into failing the course. You decide on what is the wisest course of action.

Special Accommodations: If you have a diagnosed disability or some other issue that requires special accommodations, please let me know and show me the appropriate paperwork.

Course Requirements:

Five responses to reading (100 points)
Two out-of-class essays (100 points apiece)
In-class essay (100 points)
400 points total

Scoring Rubric

A: 400-369
A-: 368-360
B+: 359-352
B: 351-329
B-: 328-320
C+: 319-312
C: 311-289
C-: 288-280
D+: 279-272
D: 271-249
D-: 248-240
F: 239-0

Looking Closely at American Culture by Examining Cowboy Mythology

I know, I know. Many of you think I'm crazy or some old guy trying to stay in touch with the Westerns of his youth. **Wrong!** Well, maybe not entirely, but I have studied and written extensively about what I will show you this semester, the central premise of which is that Westerns and the Detective, Superhero, and Action movie genres it gave birth to represent America's version of Campbell's concept of the Monomyth. Careful reflection on this representation – Cowboy Mythology – will offer much insight into American character as well as how this country functions domestically and abroad. For example, our country is currently engaged in a vociferous debate over the role of government in our lives. This

argument is nothing new; it has been a part of our national experience from the start. Some Americans want an involved governmental role critics have called the “welfare state” or the “nanny state”; other Americans want a very limited role for government. Most of us are somewhere in between, but traditionally, many Americans have shown antipathy toward government, and this intellectual and emotional stance is reflected by our principal folk-hero who is self-sufficient, mobile, and self-governing, thereby inculcating in us these very values. Do you see how a country’s mythology is not to be taken literally and yet may be seen as true?

So yes, this class involves instruction in writing, but what you are writing about is more important than what you did on your summer vacation or something banal like that. Instead, I am asking you to consider the culture in which you live and how it will affect your lives in this century, and I know of no better way to examine ideas than to put them on paper. Finally, in past classes, students have been able to use the conventions and experience gained in their majors to address the ideas underpinning this class. Please feel free to do the same this semester.

Class Schedule

8/30-- Class Introduction / WAC and this English class / The Rhetorical Square / The basics of essay writing

9/1 -- Come to class having read the Introduction to *Realizing Westward*, “The Seedbed,” and “What is an American?”

9/6 – Come to class having read “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” / Assign Response #1 / Watch excerpt from *The West* by Ken Burns

9/8 -- Come to class having read “Introduction to *Looking Far West: The Search for the American West in History, Myth, and Literature.*” / Give hand-outs to students.

Note: What I am trying to show you in the first two weeks is first, the key elements of rhetoric and the basic structure of an argumentative essay, which models loosely the way an attorney would present a case. Second, I want you to see how history and myth influence one another as well as focus on two views of the frontier in American history and the people who lived there. The archetypes of the Frontiersman and the Farmer are presented by Turner and Crevecoeur respectively, and these models still exist in current society in the forms of communitarian and individualist. Much of current political discourse in America involves a tension between the rights of the individual and the needs of community. No better example exists than the on-going debate between President Obama and members of Congress who identify with Tea Party principles.

9/13-- Come to class having read the hand-outs “The Solace of Open Spaces” and “Being Inaccessible.” Response #1 due / Hand out Response #2

9/15 – Come to class having read “Open Space and American Culture” (in text)

9/20-- *Into the Wild*

9/22 -- *Into the Wild*

9/27-- *Into the Wild* / Response #2 due

9/29 --Hand out Writing Assignment #1

Note: The underlying purpose of the last two weeks is to show you how American Heroic Mythology put at its center the Frontiersman, who represents individualism and self-reliance, who reveals what Turner calls “the American intellect.” I also want to show you the profound effect open space has had on American culture, with its promise of mobility and transformation. Open space is also the stage upon which our heroes and heroines *represent* the aforementioned values. Further, we see a remarkable constancy in the Frontiersman figure, which ultimately morphs into the Cowboy (more on that later). James Fenimore Cooper’s Hawkeye has become Michael Mann’s Hawkeye 166 years later, and even Chris McCandless of *Into the Wild*, while not a violent hero, carries on the frontier ethos, steeped in a highly mobile form of individualism distant from family, community, the blandishments of friends, and laws

10/4 – Response #3 – You will begin in class and finish at home.

10/6 -- Come to class having read “The Cowboy as Symbol of the American Middle Class.”

10/11– Come to class having read “American Heroic Mythology.”

10/13 – Come to class having read “The Altruistic Hero.” / Response #3 due

10/18 –*Tombstone*

10/20 -- *Tombstone*

10/25 – Workshop WA1 / Come to class having read “Individualism.”

10/27 – Watch excerpt from *The Matrix*

11/1 -- Response #4: In-class, teacher-led, done in groups / you will tie “Individualism” to *Tombstone*

11/3 – WA1 due / Response #4: Same as above / you will tie “The Altruistic Hero” to *The Matrix*

11/8– *The Departed*

11/10 – *The Departed*

Note: In the last five weeks, my goal has been to set up a series of response papers in which you tie ideas presented in the readings to visual representations of those concepts in movies. The prose generated is intended to serve as drafts for the longer papers you will write this semester. Also, we become acquainted with the Cowboy and the Cowboy-Figure as seen in superheroes and detectives. Finally, we see in American Heroic Mythology this country’s version of Campbell’s monomyth and how Cowboy Mythology has come historically to represent middle-class values.

11/15 – Finish *The Departed*

11/17 -- Response #5: In-class, teacher-led, done in groups

11/22 -- Come to class having read “The Reel West” and pp. 73-81 of “The Western.”

11/24 -- No class

11/29 – WA2 due / Come to class having read “West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns,” “Gunsmoke and Mirrors,” and “The Post-Western Western.”

12/1 – Come to class having read “Variations on a Theme by Crevecoeur.”

12/6 – In-class essay

12/8 – In-class essay / Return WA2

Note: It's the end of the semester, and I have attempted to show you from day one how the Western has not only been a way to encourage altruism and sacrifice in American Culture but has also been a way for writers and filmmakers to comment on politics and current events. I have further attempted to make the argument that the Western is not dead, only that it has changed into the Post-Western Western. An extension of that argument is that new heroic models must emerge: figures from the backwaters of American experience, people of color, women, and those who serve the community in peaceful, non-violent ways. I have designed Writing Assignment #2 as a means for you to explore the traditional Western or its various permutations. WA2 also allowed you to explore the way in which our hero is sometimes a Jesus-figure/messiah or to speculate on the existence of a biological basis for altruism. The in-class essay, your last writing experience, presents a choice: you may try your hand at designing a new sort of American heroic-figure, or you may identify the key values advanced by Cowboy Mythology and evaluate them

Note: Email me for scores on in-class essay.