

20th Century Literature of the American West

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Office Hours:

Course Description

“The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild;
and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the
preservation of the World.” –Thoreau, “Walking”

“This, too, has been a story of the West.” –Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner famously declared that the American frontier—i.e., the West—had closed for good. To a certain extent, Jackson’s proclamation was meant to demarcate the end of the 19th Century. But perhaps more importantly, it marks the beginning of a distinctly American literature that began, ironically, by mourning its own demise.

In this course, we will journey amongst some of the more significant signposts and detours that have marked Western U.S. literature in the 20th Century. Along the way, we will question just where, exactly, the West begins and ends (The Mississippi River? The Great Plains? The Rockies?), and think about whether or not the Turnerian “frontier thesis” continues to hold true (if it ever did). We will consider whether the broad rubric of “The West” is adequate to describe the various sub-regions within this portion of the United States, and we’ll examine the genres which seem as if they could not have happened anywhere else. Above all, we will strive to come away with a deeper understanding of this vitally American, and vitally “Wild” literary place.

Objectives and Responsibilities

Students will come away from this course with a deeper understanding of the themes, motifs, landscapes, dramas, characters, and controversies that populate the American literary West. Each student will be expected to keep up with the readings, contribute to class discussion, and to prepare brief presentations on Western-related topics. One short analytical paper, a midterm book-review style paper, and a longer, 12-25 page final research or creative paper will be required.

Grading

All students are expected to keep up with the readings, and should come to each class session well-prepared to discuss the texts. The basic grading breakdown is as follows:

Attendance & Participation: 25%

1st Two Papers: 30%

Presentations: 10%

Final Paper: 35%

Book List

Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*

Brian Evenson, *The Open Curtain*

Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady*

Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*

Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*

Course Schedule (subject to revision)

Weeks One—Three: The Meaning and Consequence of the West

Readings: Turner; Didion; Cather

Weeks Four—Six: Cowboys, Indians, and Re-envisioning the West

Readings: Alexie; McCarthy

Weeks Seven—Eight: Paranoia, the New West, and the Death of the American Dream

Readings: Dick; Thompson

Weeks Nine—Ten: The West: The Birthplace of Noir?

Readings: Hammett; Cain

Weeks Eleven—Twelve: Faith in the High Desert: Mormonism

Readings: Krakauer; Evenson

Weeks Thirteen—Fifteen: Mythic Visions

Readings: Kingston; Stegner