

University of Nevada, Reno
Spring 2000

English 475/675—Literature of the American West
MW 2:30-3:45, EJCH 205

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“Myths of the West”

Course Description

This course on the literature of the American West will be organized into three parts called “The Myth of the West,” “The Myth of the Myth,” and “New Myths of the West.” We’ll begin by considering books and films that proclaim the glorious promise of the American West as rich soil for hardy pioneers. That phase of uncritical celebration of a virgin West has come under serious attack by minority groups, environmentalists, and new Western historians who focus on the injustices and exploitation inherent in the myth. In the second portion of the course, we’ll read some recent essay collections by white ranch kids and fiction by contemporary Native Americans who deeply question the Western culture into which they were born, thereby exposing the “myth” of the Myth. In the wake of a troubled regional history, contemporary Western writers are struggling to reimagine the West and to dream of new myths about being at home and getting along in the West. The course will close with a note of optimism as we witness the fruits of this imaginative effort to forge a new peace in this contested place we call the West.

Required Texts

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*
Blew, Mary Clearman. *Bone Deep in Landscape*
Cather, Willa. *O Pioneers!*
Kingsolver, Barbara, *Animal Dreams*
Kittredge, William. *Who Owns the West?*
Robinson, Marilynne, *Housekeeping*
Schaefer, Jack. *Shane*
Welch, James. *Winter in the Blood*

Requirements

- Attend regularly and contribute actively to class discussions.
- Come to class prepared to discuss the assigned reading. Mark the text as you read.
- Submit a one-page journal entry each time we meet.
- Write three formal papers (4-6 pages, typed), one of which is a personal/creative piece.
- Present one of your papers to the class.
- Help lead class discussion twice during the semester.

Grading

- 35% Journals (For each entry, 3 = good, 2 = acceptable, 1 = weak; 1 point is deducted for late journal entries. Two journal entries may be missed with no penalty.)
- 15% Participation (Includes effectiveness of leading class discussion twice @ 3 points possible each time. Presentation of a paper is required and receives 3 points. Contributions to class discussions over the semester receive 6 points for an excellent job, 4 points for a good job, and 2 points for a satisfactory job.)
- 50% Formal Papers (three papers, whose grades are averaged; late papers receive a reduced grade)

Attendance: Perfect attendance will raise your course grade by a half-grade (“B” would become “B+”). 1-3 absences has no effect on your grade. 4 or more absences lowers your grade, the greater the number of absences the lower the grade.

Disabilities

Please tell me if you have special needs due to a documented physical or learning disability. We will make arrangements to accommodate your needs.

Journal Entries

Keeping a reading journal benefits you and enhances our class in many ways. Writing about what you read helps you to become a more attentive and interactive reader, transforming reading from a passive pursuit to an active one. Keeping a journal provides you with a record of what you’ve read and what you thought about each book; writing about the reading helps you remember it better. Journal writing gives you an opportunity to write informally about the texts, generating ideas that you can later develop into a formal essay. Journal entries enrich class discussion because each of us will come to class having formulated some specific ideas and questions about the reading; we will use these journal entries in a variety of ways in class. Journal entries help me keep my finger on the “pulse” of the class by knowing what even the quietest student is thinking. When I know what you’re thinking, I can create a class that responds to your interests.

Instructions: Each time we meet you should submit a one-page, typed journal entry on the reading assignment or film to be discussed that day in class. These may be single-spaced or double spaced, and, occasionally—when you’re in a pinch—they may be hand-written. What should you write in your journal? You’ll soon develop your own style and rhythm for these entries. You might want to begin by simply reacting to what you read. Did you like it? Why? Did you have problems with it? Why? I don’t want you to summarize the reading, but, rather, respond to it, discuss it, analyze it, think about it. Perhaps you’d like to raise some discussion questions in your journal, and then take a stab at answering them yourself. Perhaps you’d like to focus your discussion by analyzing a single paragraph of text. You are encouraged to think of your entries as parts of a continuing discussion; thus, try to connect the book we’re reading to past books we’ve read and discussions we’ve had. Ideally, you’ll find yourself noticing recurring themes, preoccupations, and images across the works. Use your journal entries to start thinking about the significance of these emerging patterns. Finally, you might find it useful to use your journal entries as a way to generate and work up ideas for the formal essays. Occasionally, I will provide specific instructions for a particular journal entry.

Leading Class Discussion

I have found that class discussions are much more interesting and productive if students are given an opportunity to help direct the conversation. Here are a few tips on what you might do. As a discussion leader, your job will be to direct the class's attention to issues brought up by the pages we have read for that day (or by the film we'll be discussing). You could begin by simply reading or summarizing your journal entry for the class. Or, you might identify a particular passage in the book that you feel is important or puzzling in some way and use that passage to launch the discussion. Another tactic is to raise one or two tough questions for us to think about. (Ex. Why is there such a preoccupation with urinating in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*?) You might jot down the page numbers of some passages that will help us to answer the question. Yet another approach is to focus on a particular character or image or incident and help us to ponder the meaning or significance of that element. As we progress into the semester there will be increasing opportunities for you to compare a person, scene, theme, technique, or passage in the book with something from one of the books we've already read. Help the class to compare and contrast works and to make meaningful connections among them. Help us to hear how the works "talk" to one another. Always let your own interest and sense of importance be your guide. And don't feel that you have to have all the answers—you're not lecturing, you're inspiring us to converse and learn.

Formal Papers

You'll be writing three formal papers this semester, each of which should be 4-6 pages in length, typed, double-spaced. On the syllabus there are four paper due dates listed. You may choose which three you will write. Two of your papers this semester will be critical discussions of the readings in response to questions handed out in class a week before the paper is due. You may also propose your own writing topic to me and get it approved before you write the paper. One of your papers this semester should be a personal or creative one: your own memoir, story, or personal essay set in or about the American West. After all, you, too, are a western writer. You, too, have stories to tell.

Revisions: You will receive a grade on your papers, along with suggestions for revision. If you choose to, you may revise the paper for a new grade. If you choose to revise, you must submit the original paper with my comment sheet, along with the revised paper and a cover letter explaining what changes you made. Revisions may be submitted throughout the semester, but all revisions must be turned in by May 1st, the last day of class.

Presentation of one of your papers: So often I come across excellent student papers, and wish that the rest of the class could hear the paper. In this class, we will hear one another's work on specified "conference" days. You'll sign up to read one of your papers aloud on one of the due dates. Feedback from the class can often help you to revise your paper. On the day that you present your paper, you should bring to class a handout that you distribute before you read your paper. On the handout you should specify what kind of feedback you want from your classmates. (Ex. "What did you think my main argument was?" "What did you think was the strongest aspect of the paper?" "What could use improvement?" etc.) After you read your paper, the class will fill out your handout and return it to you. If you choose to revise your paper for a new grade, you should take into consideration class feedback as well as the instructor's.

Schedule

W Jan 19 Introduction

The Myth

M Jan 24 Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"

W Jan 26 Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1-98) (through Part 2, ch. 7)

M Jan 31 *O Pioneers!* (99-end)

W Feb 2 Schaefer's *Shane* (1-55) (through ch. 6)

M Feb 7 *Shane* (56-end)

W Feb 9 *Shane*, the film: library film room 2:30-4:30; library instruction room 6:00-8:00

M Feb 14 Discuss the film; discuss the myth of the West and synthesize emerging themes

W Feb 16 **Paper #1 due**; intro to "myth of the myth" section; reading assignment TBA

M Feb 21 Holiday (Washington's Birthday observed)—no class

The Myth of the Myth

Western Essays

W Feb 23 Blew, *Bone Deep in Landscape* (1-83)

M Feb 28 *Bone Deep in Landscape* (111-end)

W Mar 1 Kittredge, *Who Owns the West?* (1-100)

M Mar 6 *Who Owns the West?* (101-end)

W Mar 8 **Paper #2 due**; introduction to Native American unit; reading assignment TBA

Native American Literature

M Mar 13 Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (1-88) (through ch. 21)

W Mar 15 *Winter in the Blood* (88-end)

March 20-March 24—Spring Break—no class

M Mar 27 Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1-109)

W Mar 29 *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (110-end)

M Apr 3 Film: *Smoke Signals*: library film room 2:30-4:00 and again at 6:30-8:00

W Apr 5 **Paper #3 due**; discuss *Smoke Signals*; synthesis of "myth of the myth" section

New Myths

M Apr 10 Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (1-93) (through ch. 9)

W Apr 12 *Animal Dreams* (94-204) (through ch. 17)

M Apr 17 *Animal Dreams* (205-end)

W Apr 19 Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1-108) (through ch. 6)

M Apr 24 *Housekeeping* (109-end)

W Apr 26 **Paper #4 due**

M May 1 Conclusion