English 365: Formula Westerns in Historical Contexts

Spring 1993
Lectures: L. Mitchell
Seminars: L. Bollinger, W. Hughes, E. Lukens, L. Mitchell

This course explores the emergence and evolution of the formula western—the most enduring and popular form of American fiction. Scholars generally agree that the cowboy western has altered little since its debut, and that the "classics" offer simple variations of a fixed generic structure. We will test that premise by examining the formal structure as well as the historical context of celebrated westerns (both novelistic and cinematic). In denying that a set of narrative "functions" distinguish the western, we will question why such different texts set in a characteristic locale have seemed to resolve ideological issues unrelated to the West—of industrialism, imperialism, adolescence, feminism, and racism, among others.

Assigned Texts:

Clark, Walter Van Tilburg, The Ox-Bow Incident (Signet)
Cooper, James Fenimore, The Last of the Mohicans (Penguin)
Doctorow, E.L., Welcome to Hard Times (Random House)
Grey, Zane, Riders of the Purple Sage (Pocket Books)
Harte, Bret, The Outcasts of Poker Flat (Signet)
L'Amour, Louis, Hondo (Signet)
LeMay, Alan, The Searchers (Jove)
Mark Twain, Roughing It (Penguin)
Wister, Owen, The Virginian (Signet)
Xeroxed Reader (available at Pequod, 6 Nassau St. 921-7888)

Requirements: Two papers (6-7 pp.); final examination; and active seminar participation.

1. Feb. 2, Introduction: Turner, the West, and the Western
   Frederick Jackson Turner, "Significance of the Frontier" (1893)
   * M, Feb. 8, McC 46: George Stevens, Shane (1952)

2. Feb. 9, The Horse Opera Triumphant
   Louis L'Amour, Hondo (1953)

3. Feb. 16, Beginnings: Landscape and a Code
   James Fenimore Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans (1827)
   Umberto Eco, "Narrative Structures in Fleming" (1979)

4. Feb. 23, The West: Sublime or Ridiculous?
   Mark Twain, Roughing It (1877) to Chap. 62
5. Mar. 2, **Characters of Sentimentality**

Bret Harte, *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* (1870)

* M, Mar. 8, McC 66: George Marshall, *Destry Rides Again* (1940)

6. Mar. 9, **Creating the Formula**

Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902)


7. Mar. 23, **Undoing the Formula**

Stephen Crane, "Western Stories" (31-143)

8. Mar. 30, **Sex and Space**

Zane Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912)


9. Apr. 6, **Justice and the Rule of Law**

Walter Van Tilburg Clark, *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940)
Robert Sklar, "Empire to the West: Red River" (1978)

* M, Apr. 19, McC 46: Fred Zinnemann, *High Noon* (1952)

10. Apr. 13, **The Racial Other**

Alan LeMay, *The Searchers* (1953)


11. Apr. 20, **Growing Up**


12. Apr. 27, **The Anti-Western**

Other Literary Westerns:

Karl May, *Winnetou* (1896)
- Andy Adams, *The Log of a Cowboy* (1903)
- Clarence Mulford, *Bar 20* (1907)
- *Hopalong Cassidy* (1910)
- Eugene Manlove Rhodes, *Bransford in Arcadia* (1914)
- "Paso Por Aqui"
- Emerson Hough, *North of 36* (1923)
- Max Brand [Frederick Faust], *Destry Rides Again* (1930)
- Edna Ferber, *Cimarron* (1930)
- Ernest Haycox, *Bugles in the Afternoon* (1945)
- A.B. Guthrie, *The Big Sky*
- Charles O. Locke, *Road to Socorro*
- Edward Abbey, *The Brave Cowboy* (1956)
- Paul I. Wellman, *Jubal Troop*
- Tom Lea, *The Wonderful Country*
- Frederick Manfred, *Riders of Judgment* (1957)
- Charles Portis, *True Grit*
  - *Lonesome Dove* (1985)
- Elmore Leonard, *Valdez is Coming*

Other Cinematic Westerns:

- Edwin S. Porter, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)
- William S. Hart, *Hell's Hinges* (1915)
- Victor Fleming, *The Virginian* (1929)
- John Ford, *The Iron Horse* (1924)
  - *My Darling Clementine* (1946)
  - *Fort Apache* (1948)
  - *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949)
  - *The Searchers* (1956)
  - *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960)
- Raoul Walsh, *In Old Arizona* (1929)
  - *The Big Trail* (1930)
- Cecil B. de Mille, *Union Pacific* (1937)
- William Wyler, *The Westerner* (1940)
- William Wellman, *The Oxbow Incident* (1941)
  - *King Vidor, Duel in the Sun* (1945)
- Howard Hawkes, *Red River* (1948)
- Arthur Penn, *The Left-Handed Gun* (1948)
- Anthony Mann, *The Man from Laramie* (1955)
- David Miller, *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962)
Sam Peckinpah, *Ride the High Country* (1962)
Elliott Silverstein, *Cat Ballou* (1964)
Sergio Leone, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1967)
Martin Ritt, *Hombre* (1967)
Tom Kries, *Will Penny* (1968)
Mel Brooks, *Blazing Saddles*
*Arthur Penn, Little Big Man* (1970)
Robert Altman, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971)
"Young Guns" (1988)

Secondary Texts:

Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West* (1987)
Douglas Branch, *The Cowboy and His Interpreters* (1926)
  *Adventure, Mystery, Romance* (1976)
James K. Folsom (ed.), *The Western* (1979)
Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*
Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (1974)
Daryl Jones, *The Dime Novel Western* (1978)