

ENGL 5220  
Wednesday 4:00 – 6:20  
Brown 3031  
CRN 14452

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office hours: Tues. 10:00 – 11:30  
Wed. 1:00 – 2:30  
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## The Western

We all know the images: the lone cowboy riding off into the sunset, the deadly shootout at high noon, the adoring schoolmarm clutching a book in her hands, Indians on horseback lined up on a nearby ridge, magnificent desert and mountain vistas, and so on. And yet, by virtue of their very familiarity and attractiveness, these images often succeed in obscuring the deeply significant and at times controversial cultural work that they perform. This special topics course will take up the question of what “The Western” is and what it does. We will trace the genre’s historical development, develop a thorough understanding of its various articulations in both fiction and film, and critically examine its continuing role in the shaping of American culture. We will examine closely the work of such literary artists as Owen Wister, Zane Grey, Louis L’Amour, Jack London, Frank Norris, Dorothy M. Johnson, Willa Cather, Sam Shepard, Cormac McCarthy, and Annie Proulx, as well as films by Howard Hawks, Clint Eastwood, and others. We will also explore the significance of Western imagery and stories in children’s literature, music, visual art, and the contemporary news media. The historian Richard Slotkin has famously called ours a “Gunfighter Nation,” and quite a few commentators have recently called this the age of “cowboy diplomacy.” In this course, we will find out why the genre conventions associated with these labels have become as powerful as they are.

### TEXTS:

The following texts are available at the WMU Bookstore:

*The Virginian*, by Owen Wister  
*Rider of the Purple Sage*, by Zane Grey  
*McTeague*, by Frank Norris  
*The Call of the Wild, White Fang, and Other Stories*, by Jack London  
*My Ántonia*, by Willa Cather  
*Hondo*, by Louis L’Amour  
*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, by Dorothy M. Johnson  
*Seven Plays*, by Sam Shepard  
*Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy  
*West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, by Jane Tompkins

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

<b>Preparedness and Active Participation:</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Analytical short papers, 2-3 pages each:</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>In-class Presentation:</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Annotated Bibliography (for final project):</b>	<b>15%</b>

### Final Research Paper:

35%

- ✓ With respect to preparedness and participation, this course will be conducted seminar-style, which means that everyone is expected to contribute significantly to discussion and analysis. Also, I'd will begin each session with a brief discussion of any interesting, compelling, or just plain cool instances of the genre West in action from our contemporary media. Although these opening notes will not be graded, I expect everyone to bring a handful to class as the semester progresses – I will be counting.
- ✓ An analytical short paper of 2-3 pages in length will be written for each assigned text, and the subject of the analysis will be how the text at hand deals with one of the salient features of the genre. For example, one text may yield an examination of how landscape is described and handled, another may prompt a paper on the civilization/wilderness conflict. The choice of specific genre features will, from week to week, be entirely up to you. Think of these as response papers with a specific interpretive focus, namely the various genre features that define the Western.
- ✓ The in-class presentation is to be a group project focused on the interpretive presentation of a movie western not being screened in class. You will be assigned to work in pairs and, in the latter half of the semester, will on your assigned day present to the class an interpretive introduction to the film's engagement with the themes, tropes, and forms under consideration in the class overall.
- ✓ The final research project comprises the following components: 1) annotated bibliography of secondary source research, with a minimum of 6 print sources for UG projects and a minimum of 10 print sources for G projects; 2) 3-page project proposal; and 3) a final thesis-oriented, interpretive research paper, min. 10pp in length for UG students and min. 20pp in length for G students. The topic is entirely open, as long as it pertains to the genre Western in some fashion; the films upon which in-class presentations are based are available topics, as well.

### SCHEDULE OF WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:

Week 1	1/11	Introductions John Cawelti, "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature" ( <u>handout</u> )
Week 2	1/18	Owen Wister, <i>The Virginian</i> Jane Tompkins, "Death" ( <i>West of Everything</i> 23-45) Melody Graulich, "What If Wister Were a Woman?" ( <i>Reading The Virginian in the New West</i> , eds. Graulich and Tatum, 198-213; <u>on reserve</u> )
Week 3	1/25	Zane Grey, <i>Riders of the Purple Sage</i> Jane Tompkins, "Zane Grey" ( <i>West of Everything</i> 157-77)
Week 4	2/1	Frank Norris, <i>McTeague</i> Tompkins, "Women and the Language of Men" ( <i>West of Everything</i> 47-67)

Week 5	2/8	Jack London, "The Call of the Wild" (in <i>The Call of the Wild</i> , 1-88)
Week 6	2/15	Willa Cather, <i>My Ántonia</i> William Handley, "Unwedded West: Cather's divides" ( <i>Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West</i> 125-58; <u>on reserve</u> )
Week 7	2/22	screening: <i>Red River</i> (dir: Howard Hawks, 1948) readings: Garry Wills, "John Wayne's Body" ( <u>handout</u> ) Tompkins, "Landscape" ( <i>West of Everything</i> 69-87) Tompkins, "Cattle" ( <i>West of Everything</i> 111-123)
<b>SEMESTER BREAK</b>		
Week 8	3/8	Louis L'Amour, <i>Hondo</i> Forrest G. Robinson, "Theoretical Postscript" ( <i>Having it Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics</i> 111-43; <u>on reserve</u> )
Week 9	3/15	Dorothy Johnson, <i>The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance</i>
Week 10	3/22	Sam Shepard, "True West" (in <i>Seven Plays</i> , 1-59) John Frank, <i>The Toughest Cowboy</i> Chris Van Allsburg, <i>Bad Day at Riverbend</i> ( <u>on reserve</u> ) ✓ <b>DUE: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>
Week 11	3/29	Cormac McCarthy, <i>Blood Meridian</i>
Week 12	4/5	screening: <i>Unforgiven</i> (dir: Clint Eastwood, 1992) readings: Leighton Grist, "Unforgiven" ( <u>handout</u> )
Week 13	4/12	discussion of film(s) ✓ <b>DUE: PROJECT PROPOSAL (3 PAGES)</b>
Week 14	4/19	Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" ( <u>handout</u> ) David H. Murdoch, "The West of the Politicians" and "Epilogue" ( <i>The American West: The Invention of a Myth</i> 100-120; <u>on reserve</u> ) Chris Packard, from <i>Queer Cowboys</i> (TBA)
Week 15		<b>FINALS WEEK</b> – Final project due no later than <u>5:00 p.m. on Wednesday, 26 April.</u>

## THE MOVIES

In-class group presentations will be assigned from the following list of films:

*Shane* (dir: George Stevens, 1953) 2/15

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*The Searchers* (dir: John Ford, 1956) 3/8

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*Rio Bravo* (dir: Howard Hawks, 1959) 3/15

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*Once Upon A Time in the West* (dir: Sergio Leone, 1968) 3/15

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*Back to the Future III* (dir: Robert Zemeckis, 1990) 3/22

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*Tombstone* (dir: George Cosmatos, 1993) 3/29

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*Dead Man* (dir: Jim Jarmusch, 1995) 4/12

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*Lone Star* (dir: John Sayles, 1995) 4/12

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