

English 258: American Popular Culture: The American West
Section 01: CRN 83276. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 12:30-01:20, Brooks Hall G25

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Office Hours:
MWFs 11:30-12:20
and by appointment.



Course Description:

Literary scholars have long distinguished between high art, art that stands out for its own sake, art that exudes genius without needing to pander to the demands of the literary marketplace, and low art, texts that can be either too political, too sensational, or too emotional, art that panders to the masses. In a dichotomy, think Ernest Hemingway as the true artist versus Michael Bay as the director who makes formulaic, billion dollar earning Transformers movies riddled with explosions. The long tradition of the American Western in our culture has long been associated with the latter category, resulting in dime novels and a long tradition of mass-produced “B” films and television shows.

In this particular variant of American Popular Culture, I have chosen the American West as a theme. By the West, I am referring to a popular American motif that stretches back to Columbus—the idea that traveling West into unforeseen frontiers will hopefully cleanse society of its previous wrongs and allow a rebirth of a new person or more largely, America. To this end, we verge on studying utopian studies, just from a particular context. Most of the critical focus will be spent on “Westerns”—the popular entertainment genre. We will spend most of our time with 2 forms of text: novel & film.

We will begin our examination of the West with texts deemed as “classical” Westerns and construct what the genre entails together. As the course proceeds, we will investigate

Postmodern Westerns and see how these revisionist texts either reaffirm, deny, or otherwise deconstruct previous ideas about the Western experience. In doing so, we will practice interpreting popular texts through various critical lenses. This is not a course just about “English” in and of itself but rather we will look at the West through multiple critical perspectives, including but not limited to: History, Philosophy, Political Science, Economics, Psychology, Religion, Ecology, and various identity studies including those of gender and race.

As a class on American Popular Culture, this course will survey the genre from a big picture view. We will study texts as varied as the popular *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* to the difficult novel *Blood Meridian*. We will look at films both popular with their initial audiences and shunned by them. With both literature and film, we will look at popular texts from a large variety of periods, including the present moment, with an eye toward reading them as literature and learning about American identity on our way.

Texts

1. Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.
2. Vardis Fisher, *Mountain Man*.
3. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: or, the Evening Redness of the West*.
4. John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*.
5. Various Films, more details below.
6. Additional Readings on eCampus

The schedule is subject to change, with reasonable additions or subtractions announced ahead of time. Also please note that we will be reading several works in electronic form that I will post to eCampus—be attentive as to when these readings happen and feel free to bring those readings to class in any way you see fit, whether by printing them or by bringing them in with laptops or tablets. Unless we have to cancel a class, I expect to adhere rigorously to this schedule (alas, we have little choice), by which I mean that we will at least begin the discussion of each work you are to read on the date specified.

A Note on the Reading: please note that the nightly reading load varies. With novels, I might ask you to read 60-100 pages for a class sitting, depending on the difficulty of the prose. I will often either give a quiz or a short writing assignment to test that the reading has been done. With that said, questions I will give will be oriented more toward broad themes rather than miniscule details. I encourage you to read the longer pieces ahead of time and try to stay on course rather than get behind on the material. **Dictum sapienti sat est!—a word to the wise is sufficient!**

A Note on the Films: Two of the main media sources we will cover will be literature and film. **You will be responsible for viewing the film before the time a film is scheduled for class.** The films will be available for streaming via WVU's eReserves; you will log on with your MIX account. The link to eReserves is as follows:

<https://reserves.lib.wvu.edu/>

Beyond that, if you would prefer to watch the films on a TV screen, a Netflix DVD subscription plan is fairly cheap for two films out at a time to keep up with the pace (and some of these films may be available via Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Hulu streaming at any given time, and almost all are available to rent via Amazon.) I plan to also offer optional film nights after class meetings where we may cover one or two films as well to give everyone a chance to see them on a fairly big screen.

Assignments:

LITERARY ANALYSIS FINAL PROJECT: rather than an exam, I will ask for a final project this semester. It takes two parts: the first will be an abstract where you propose, in one to two pages, the argument you plan to make and the evidence you plan to use to support the argument, along with an annotated bibliography of at least five scholarly sources about your topic.

The second part will be the paper itself, where you will make a unique argument about some aspect of the text or texts you choose through a unique critical perspective. We will work on sharpening our literary analysis skills all throughout the course. At any time, I encourage everyone to run an idea by me if one strikes.

MIDTERM CLOSE READING PAPER: At midterm, I will ask you to take a short passage from either a literary text or a film and perform an intensive close reading of the passage and its relationship to the larger whole. An important note: I will allow you to revise this paper for a better grade once you receive it back the first time. More details later!

SHORT WRITINGS/QUIZZES: We will often begin periods by taking a quiz to test for reading knowledge. If you have read attentively, you will have no trouble with these quizzes. Unless otherwise announced, these are closed-book assignments. If you miss a quiz, you may not make it up (except for college-sponsored activity absences), but I will drop two of these when I calculate grades. Failure to get some sort of credit on at least 60 % of these assignments will result in failure of the course.

TWITTER: I have created a Twitter account for our class, called @YeagerWVU. Feel free to create a separate, "school safe" Twitter account for this purpose. For each reading, you will tweet some commentary about what you've read—in 140 characters or less. Feel free to be creative: you can tweet discussion questions, something funny, create memes, or engage in debate with one another: the possibilities are endless and open. Feel free to tweet to the class during discussion as well to make our class an interactive experience (especially if you're shy and feel hesitant about raising your hand.)

To tweet, write your message @YeagerWVU. Write your tweet, and once you are satisfied with it, use the hashtag #ENGL258 if you can fit it. So, you'd write your tweet @YeagerWVU and end it with hashtag #ENGL258. I will count only two tweets per class meeting to make sure everyone stays engaged all throughout the semester, but more than two a day are welcome for overall participation if not the overall tweet count. Tweets will be graded as follows: 30+ Tweets=A, 24-27 Tweets=B, 21-23 Tweets=C, 18-20 Tweets=D, Less than 18 Tweets=F.

Grades: Grades will be calculated as follows: Midterm Close Reading, 15%; Final Paper, 30%; Proposal and Annotated Bibliography for Final Project, 10%; Quizzes, 20%; Participation 15%; and Twitter Participation 10%. I anticipate that 90-100 will be an A; 80-89.9 a B; 70-79.9 a C; 60-60.9 a D, and beyond that all is darkness.

Course Policies:

Academic Dishonesty/Plagiarism: Plagiarism is described in the student handbook. I have a particular set of skills, skills that make me a nightmare for plagiarists. I have a strict Zero Tolerance policy for plagiarists, no matter how low the stakes of any particular assignment. If you plagiarize accidentally, it might be forgiven once. If you plagiarize purposefully, I will not hesitate to file sanctions up to an unforgivable F for the course. The same can be said about any other sort of cheating, including on quizzes.

Attendance: You have three free absences to use for whatever reason. Any absence following the third will result in a one half letter grade penalty from your final grade. Nine or more absences will result in automatic failure of the course. If you have to be gone from class for any reason, whether a university or a personal reason, for an extended amount of time (more than one day), please keep me informed as I will evaluate any of these extenuating circumstances on a case by case basis.

E-Mail: my e-mail is listed. It's not necessary to e-mail me if you miss class, as I will drop the two lowest grades in case you miss a quiz. If you have questions relating to anything not on the syllabus, feel free.

Office Hours: I will be in my office for one hour before class each day. If you're having difficulty with the readings or would like to come by and chat about anything, feel free. My office is in Colson G3,; Colson is directly across the street from the library.

Participation: Except for a few brief points in which I lecture to establish historical context, this will be a discussion class in which my role will be to facilitate conversation. This class will not be a lecture class where I will give a Powerpoint or give direct notes for you to memorize for a test; rather, I hope that we will all learn something by reading the text and discussing it as a collective class. I want everyone to think about the material, not regurgitate it. Thus, the success or failure of the class largely depends on everyone reading and participating. For this reason, participation will figure importantly in your grade.

Social Justice: be adults. I will have a Zero Tolerance Policy for disparaging, hurtful remarks on race, gender, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, or appearance.

Students with Disabilities: If you have a documented learning disability, a serious hearing or vision problem, or any other special need that might affect your performance and participation in class, please inform me. Also, please be aware of the support services available to you through the Office of Accessibility Services in Suite 250 at 1085 VanVoorhis Rd (beside Applebee's and across from the Mountaineer Station transportation center). The phone number is 304-293-6700, and email is

access2@mail.wvu.edu. Access the website at <http://accessibilityservices.wvu.edu/>.

Technology: I encourage you to bring readings on laptops or tablets, especially on eCampus reading days. Taking notes on them is fine, but know that I frequently walk around the room and can tell if you're listening to the conversation or not. I encourage you to use our class Twitter to make our classroom interactive, especially if you're shy to raise your hand, to help your participation grade. I am not even banning cell phones for this class, so long as you're using them for classroom purposes. If your device is becoming distracting because you are using them for lamentable ends, I reserve the right to tell you to put it away and then dock participation.

University Counseling Services: The Carruth Center provides resources to help manage stress, improve relationships, make healthy lifestyle choices, and face new challenges and transitions. The Center is in the newly constructed Health and Education Building, 390 Birch Street, located on the Evansdale campus adjacent to the Student Recreation Center. Its website is <http://well.wvu.edu/ccpps>, and its phone number (answered 24 hours) is 304-293-4431.

Schedule of Readings for each Class:

*Subject to Change According to Progress

W Aug 17: Introductions, Syllabus, Icebreakers

F Aug 19: A Brief Introduction to Literary Studies for the Uninitiated

Part 1: The Classic Western

M August 22: Read: Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, Chs. 1-10

W August 24: Read: *To a God Unknown Part 2*, Chs. 11-18

F August 26: Read: *To a God Unknown Part 3*, Chs. 19-26

M August 29: Read: Corrigan: Introduction to Film Terminology (**eCampus**)

W August 31: Discuss film: *Shane* (1953)

F September 2: Discuss film: *High Noon* (1952)

M September 5: NO CLASS: LABOR DAY

W September 7: Discuss film: *The Searchers* (1956)

F September 9: Discuss film: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)

M September 12: Read: Vardis Fisher, *Mountain Man*, Chs. 1-10

W September 14: Read: *Mountain Man*, Chs. 11-20

F September 16: Read: *Mountain Man*, Chs. 21-26

M September 19: Read: *Mountain Man*, Chs. 27-35

W September 21: Lecture: Midterm Paper Discussion

Part 2: The Spaghetti (Italian) Westerns of Sergio Leone

F September 23: Discuss film: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Day 1*

M September 26: Discuss film: Watch: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Day 2*

W September 28: Discuss film: *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Day 1

F September 30: Discuss film: *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Day 2

M October 3: NO CLASS: Conferences in Office for Midterm Papers

Part 3: Re-Examining the West/Western Pastiches:

W October 5: Read: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, Chs. 1-7

F October 7: Read: *Blood Meridian*, Chs. 8-11

S October 8: Submit Midterm Paper by 5 PM on eCampus.

M October 10: Read: *Blood Meridian*, Chs. 12-15

W October 12: Read: *Blood Meridian*, Chs. 16-19

F October 14: Read: *Blood Meridian*, Chs. 20-Epilogue

M October 17: Discuss film: Blazing Saddles (1972)

W October 19: Discuss film: *Unforgiven* (1992)

F October 21: Lecture: Research Paper:

M October 24: In Class Workshop: Using and Finding Library Resources (Meet in Library TBD)

W October 26: In Class Workshop: Citing Sources Correctly in MLA style (Meet in Library TBD: Bring an internet connected device!)

F October 28: Discuss film: John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981)

M October 31: Discuss film: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974)

W Nov 2: Discuss film: John Carpenter's *They Live* (1987)

Part 4: Preserving the West

F November 4: Read: Abbey: *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Prologue-Ch. 6

M November 7: Read: Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Ch. 7-14

W November 9: Read: Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Chs. 15-21

F November 11: Read: Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Chs. 22-26

M November 14: Read: Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Chs. 27-Epilogue

W November 16: Discuss film: *The Big Lebowski* (1992)

F November 18: NO CLASS: Submit Proposal/Annotated Bibliography to eCampus!!

Part 5: 21st Century Westerns:

M November 28: Discuss film: *There Will Be Blood* (2007)

W November 30: Read short story: Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" (eCampus)

F December 2: Discuss film: *The Revenant* (2015)

M December 5: Discuss film: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)

R December 8: Submit Final Paper via eCampus