

ENLT 521.1 F09
The Literary West and Historical Consciousness
Professor Nancy Cook
University of Montana
M 6-9

The Literary West and Historical Consciousness

Course goals:

In this seminar we will look at various ways in which writers have imagined history and authenticity as they seek to represent the American West. We will focus on literary texts that represent the inland west (primarily). We will look at “the West” as an imagined construct as well as a set of geographical locations, with particular attention to the ways in which location figures as gendered, temporal, multicultural, classed, urban, rural, national, historical, geographical, and psychological. I suspect that sometimes the concepts will seem closely related, but as the course develops we will be able to analyze points of intersection and divergence. We will look at both dominating and dissenting voices from the mid-nineteenth century forward, with an emphasis on the late 20th and early 21st centuries. We will become familiar with the language, themes, and problems of “history” and “authenticity” as they pertain to literary representations of the American West. We will attend to issues of scale—time (the immediate to multi-generational effects of human activity) and geography (the local to global effects of human inhabitation). We will address questions such as: What makes a western text feel authentic? What’s the point of asking such a question? Is there a pervasive sense of the past in western writing? How is a sense of the past racialized? Gendered? Classed? Are there strategies common to what we call “western writing,” or does western sub-regional writing differ too greatly for any generalizations? Does western writing differ significantly from American literature outside the region? In posing these questions, we will be working through critical discourses about place, as we will consider the pleasures and dangers of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work. How are a discipline’s underlying assumptions and values compromised or adapted when used in a different discipline? What theoretical approaches work well for the reading of literature within Western history? We’ll interrogate assumptions, apparent consequences, and we’ll worry at least one hypothesis: western writing registers as “western” both because of its treatment of geography **and** its treatment of history.

I expect diligent attendance, a commitment to spirited discussion, intensive and extensive reading, and a professional goal and outcome for each of you. You may expect to write regularly, to give presentations in class, and to develop a project that will demonstrate your engagement with the texts we read. Writers may include, but are not limited to: Anaya, Austin, Cather, DeVoto, Freeman, Galvin, McCarthy, McNickle, McPhee, Ondaatje, Parkman, Stegner, Vernon, Welch, and Wister (it depends upon what’s in print).

Some of you may be new to graduate school, or some of you may have been in classes that represent a wide range of policies and expectations. So, here's the deal:

I expect regular, prompt and prepared attendance. It better be a MAJOR crisis that moves you to miss a class. You have ONE "get out of jail free" card. This means that if your life is in turmoil, you have a deadline for another class, or something is wreaking havoc, you may come to class unprepared and participate in any aspect of the conversation without fear of dark looks or recrimination. You may NOT use this card when we are discussing ANGLE OF REPOSE. This is a keystone text and everyone needs to have read it by class time. If you have some kind of crisis (out of town guests, broken neck) contact me as soon as you are aware of the problem, via email.

Graduate courses tend to lead toward one final major project. Almost all of them work this way. You will have feedback from me on informal work, written and oral, but you will not receive a battalion of grades before semester's end. This is the way graduate school in English works. If you are concerned about your progress, talk to me.

I expect courtesy in the classroom. Listen to your classmates and try not to interrupt them. Ask questions when you don't understand something. This is not about "muddling through." NO cell phones, pagers, active Internet connections, no full-course dining, no excessive entrance and departure from class (we'll have a break).

In addition to the reading, everyone will write at least 250 words/week on the texts, and be prepared to read from it and hand it in. Occasionally (once or twice), instead of 250 words, you'll try your hand at 500 or more and be prepared to share with class.

Each week, one student will present a little contextual research, either on the author or the historical milieu within the text. You will present your findings to the class in 15-20 minutes and be prepared to electronically send your presentation and bibliography to the class.

Final project: your final written project may be adapted to your track within the English Department, with the seminar paper as the norm, but not the sole option. Your final project should be substantive, polished, demonstrate that you have thought carefully about the course, and it should have an audience (actual or potential) beyond the class.

In posing these questions, we will be working through critical discourses about place, as we will consider the pleasures and dangers of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work. How are a discipline's underlying assumptions and values compromised or adapted when used in a different discipline? What theoretical approaches work well for the reading of literature within place studies?

Presentation Guidelines

Each seminar student will need to prepare ONE short presentations on either important contextual material about a literary text or about historical events and interpretations relevant to a literary text. Please check reserves, for some books you need may be on reserve. Sharing books, borrowing (I have a few second copies) or interlibrary loan may work for you.

For your presentation:

Your concise presentation should include the following:

1. For discussion of an outside work of history: A summary of the text, including an indication of its discipline, approach, and thesis in **NO MORE THAN 250 WORDS**. You will need to distribute a copy to each member of the class.
2. An analysis of reviews of the book. How did other reviewers and academics regard this book? Was it reviewed in journals for its own discipline exclusively, or was it reviewed elsewhere? If a literary work, where was it reviewed? Make sure that you plan ahead. Order reviews from ILL if we don't have the journal or you can't get it on-line. Your presentation will be marked down if you didn't look at reviews simply because UM doesn't have the journal.
3. What kind of methodology does this text represent? How is the author positioned in the field? Who are intellectual friends? Enemies? Is this book responding to another text or claims made by others?
4. How does the author use the concepts of the West and/or history? How does the author justify this use? Why does the book cover the topics/places/periods that it does?
5. 5. What other texts does it engage? Any literary or artistic works? What are the principles of inclusion/exclusion?
6. Suggest how this text might be useful for the reading and/or production of literary texts. What are some obstacles to using ideas from this text? Try a sample reading from this perspective for the literary work of the day (just a thumbnail will suffice).

Please prepare your remarks so that you can present richly in a short amount of time. You will have a maximum of 30 minutes, and a presentation of 20 minutes is preferred.

While you will not be given a letter grade for these presentations (unless you request one), they will be evaluated and will be included in the calculation of your final grade. Please fulfill your obligation to the class completely and with rigor.