

Drs. Jeffrey Scraba and John David Miles
Spring 2018
Patterson 317
W 1 – 4 pm

English 7/8391: The American Novel
The Genesis and Evolution of the American Western

Catalog Course Description:

Intensive study of American novels.

Extended Course Description:

When Horace Greeley implored American youths to “Go West, young man, go West and grow with the country,” he gave voice to the Westward-looking concept of Manifest Destiny, the nineteenth-century idea that saw both the meaning of the past and the promise of the future in the land beyond the United States’ western frontier. Though never an official governmental policy, the inchoate and yet all-pervasive ideas of Manifest Destiny were reflected in the genre of the Western: the body of literature focused on American individual resourcefulness in the face of an emptied landscape that coalesced in first the fiction and later the film of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, before undergoing numerous revisions and permutations over the last one hundred years. This class will trace the Western’s genesis and evolution from its colonial roots to its most recent twenty-first century revisions, and will be attentive throughout as to how the genre both reflects and influences ideas about nation, race, and gender. We will also attend closely to the emergence and codification of genre: we will explore how a new type of literary work comes into existence by adapting older forms, and we will consider how the implicit rules of this new genre become established. Ultimately this class hopes to provide a transhistorical understanding of both the place of the Western in American literature and relationship to American culture more broadly.

Students will be asked to read deeply in a number of primary and secondary sources in preparation for energetic classroom discussions. Progress will be evaluated both on the basis of class participation, oral presentations, and written assignments, with the bulk of the semester grade determined by the production of a polished, article-length essay of original scholarship.

Course Objectives:

At the conclusion of this course the successful student should be able to:

- Understand the Western as a coherent genre that developed as a response to specific social and cultural forces.
- Discuss how the Western both produces and is in tension with ideas about nation, gender, and race.
- Contextualize the Western alongside larger artistic trends and movements.
- Speak articulately about secondary criticism about the genre.
- Compose a persuasive, highly polished critical essay that demonstrates an understanding of the Western as a genre as well as the field’s secondary criticism.