

CES 287 American Heroes: Myths of the American West
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Office Hours: R230 M/W 9:30-10:20am or by Appt.

Texts: *Realizing Westward: American Character and Cowboy Mythology*,
By Stephen P. Cook

Films: 1. *Stagecoach* 7. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*
2. *The Shootist* 8. *The Wild Bunch*
3. *Shane* 9. *Thelma and Louise*
4. *High Noon* 10. *High Plains Drifter*
5. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* 11. *Unforgiven*
6. *The Searchers* 12. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*

You must purchase *Realizing Westward: American Character and Cowboy Mythology* and read it each week, as per the Tentative Schedule. Being able to find significant, meaningful moments in the text is essential to the learning process. Not having kept up with the readings in your text will reduce your chance for success. I will also post weblinks to other required readings throughout the term.

All the films are available at major video rental stores (or now showing in cinemas, as in the case of *Brokeback Mountain*). You can also subscribe to Netflix or join Blockbuster Video; these provide reliable, and affordable options. Consequently, all these films are widely available and I will expect you to have viewed the entire film (and written your critical response to it) by the dates given in the Film Schedule Hand-out. I will also try to put videos on reserve for you in the Media Center L217, but don't rely on screening them there if you can help it. Remember that the sooner you view a film, the more time you give yourself to write a good critical response to it. Also, viewing the films more than once will help you remember them during the Mid-Term and Final Exams. You will also be required to write about several films in your 5-page Paper, due at the end of the term.

Sketch of the Course: This course will examine the dominant myths and counter-myths of the American West. We will first look at the power of myth, and its ability to provide meaning and significance. Being meaning-making creatures, our society in the United States, like all human societies, strives to articulate myths that appeal broadly in order to bring the individuals of that society together. There are both positive and negative aspects to this sometimes-conscious endeavor. We make identities, choose directions in our lives that we identify with. Often, these directions take the form of dreams we want to fulfill. In other respects, our identities shape us, and our very dreams may be shaped by those identities. In this course we will look at ideas and myths of the American West, and how they continue to be influential in our lives today. The themes that reveal themselves through ideas and myths of the west will be our focal point throughout the quarter.

The Western as a Genre: It is imperative to realize that The Western genre was always looking back in time. Historically, The Western film emerged from stories and novels about “The Wild West,” even as the era was unfolding. These texts helped mythologize America’s sense of its own expanding territory, and the people who participated in the immense historical process of conquest and settlement. In some respects, the Pioneers themselves have been portrayed as heroic, enduring the challenges of the American wilderness, the conflicts with Native American Indians, and the profound difficulties of settling and developing open country. But far and away the most iconic heroic type has been the Cowboy Hero. The Western focuses on and develops the image of this Hero, and we will examine how this image came to be, and how it has changed, and, most of all, perhaps, how the image of the Cowboy Hero represents and expresses something profound and enduring about American culture.

Progress of the Course: We will begin with an introduction to the critical analysis of texts: we must be able to recognize the tools that authors deploy in order to tell meaningful stories. By giving ourselves the skills to recognize the parts of a story, we necessarily enhance our ability to comment intelligently upon it. Beginning with the nuts-and-bolts of textual analysis, we will proceed to ask what type or genre of story is being told: from adventure stories to love stories, from myths of destiny to myths of belief, the ability to name what type or types of story are being told enables us to better understand it. Obviously, this requires some degree of historical comparison. While most of the “texts” we’ll examine throughout this course are from the twentieth century, many if not most of them depend on historical contexts that clarify their overall meaning. An example of this would be the references to ideas of “open spaces” in William Kittredge’s essay “Drinking and Driving.” Awareness of historical contexts is essential to effective textual analysis, and we will make a concerted effort throughout to improve our capabilities in this regard. This progression from the nuts-and-bolts details of a text, to the larger and broader ideas and historical contexts, is often a model of effective critical writing on the influential texts of a given culture. Another way of stating this is to say that essays of effective critical analysis often move through the “layers” of a text, from the simple nuts-and-bolts at the “surface,” to the “depths” of less obvious and often more complicated ideas. By the end of the quarter, we will have dramatically improved our skills in this type of analytical writing, remembering that the most elusive myths are our own.

What the Student Will Learn: In order to interpret what I’m calling American Myths and clarify our American Identities, the student will need tools, as well as objects to use those tools on. The tools we will be developing have their origin in the analysis of language. In other words, we will be “reading” critically, even when our “text” happens to be in a largely visual medium, such as a movie. As for the “objects” of our study, we will be dividing our attention between literary analysis of non-fiction prose, or essays, and motion pictures, what we routinely call “films”. Because these “objects” of “cultural production” take great amounts of time and energy to create, we will necessarily take a considerable amount of time to examine them thoroughly. Because we are sensitive creatures we can often jump to conclusions too quickly; to be able to interpret movies and novels and short stories effectively, we need first to suspend our judgment until we have

gone through these objects carefully. Another way of saying the same thing is to stress the need for sympathetic attention: give the “author” her or his due, and attempt to understand things from that perspective.

The Tools:

- 1) Reading and Viewing Appreciatively: Observing what the text does
 - a) metaphor
 - b) symbol
 - c) setting
 - d) character
 - e) theme
 - f) plot
 - g) point of view
 - h) style
- 2) Reading Critically: Asking why the author does something
 - a) Why is this metaphor deployed at this moment?
 - b) Why is this character symbolized this way?
 - c) What if the plot went another way?
 - d) Why is the author using this particular point of view?
 - e) What is significant about this particular reference?
 - f) Can we imagine this theme handled differently?
 - g) What does this interpretation say about the text?

Requirements: There will be weekly quizzes, an ongoing Discussion Board assignment, two exams and one paper and a series of one-page response papers on the texts. The exams include a one-hour mid-term and a one-hour final, both having a combination of multiple-choice, short answer and essay questions. The examinations are graded on a three hundred-point scale, with 100 points for multiple-choice questions, 100 points for short answer and 100 more for essay questions. The paper a 5-page paper (double spaced) on several texts we cover throughout the term. These assignments will be forthcoming.

The response papers will be graded for the basics of English writing skills, for the degree of engagement with the “text,” and for a balance between appreciation of the text and insightful critique of it. There will also be occasional in-class quizzes on the “text” of the week; missing these small-point quizzes can be the difference between an “A” and a “B” grade. All papers are due at the beginning of class and no later. No late papers will be accepted.

Grades and Privacy: Because of the FERPA regulations on privacy, I will only share grades directly with students. This means I will hand your work back to you directly, and by posting your final grade at the official BCC website at the end of the term. This applies to Running Start students too; as students at the college they are accorded the same status as other students, even if they are under 18 years of age.

Grading Scale:

Mid-Term Exam: 300 points

Final Exam: 300 points

Response Papers: 100 points

5-Page Paper: 200 points

Quizzes and Class Participation: 100 points

A = 950-1000

B = 830-869

C = 690-759

D- = 550-599

A- = 900-949

B- = 800-829

C- = 650-689

F = 0-499

B+ = 870-899

C+ = 760-799

D+ = 600-649

What is Expected of the Student in the Response Papers: You must write the response papers for each “text.” These short essays are both your practice in critical analysis, as well as your opportunity to articulate your own interpretation of that text. Writing about a topic is a way of engaging with it, and without thorough engagement our analyses tend to be limited or worse. When we write about another “text” we increase our own skills while we broaden and deepen our understanding and appreciation for the work of other minds. The responses must be in proper English or your grade will suffer; reading sloppy writing is wearying at best, and misleading at worst. If you do not write clearly then no one will understand what you really meant to say. Do your utmost to write to the best of your ability. I will provide a handout of guidelines to writing effective response papers.

“Attendance,” “Netiquette,” and Class Behavior: Regular “attendance” is critical to achieving success in this class. We will be relying on regular participation in order to improve the skills necessary for effective textual analysis. As noted above, we will also be having quizzes each week throughout the quarter; and missing these could be the difference in your grade. There will also be the Discussion Board Assignment that requires you to present your findings or to answer questions about a given text; full participation will enhance your individual learning.

I will require you to use appropriate “Netiquette,” meaning formal and polite language at all times. You must respect yourself, your fellow students, Bellevue College as an institution, and me, the professor, by using appropriately formal language at all times during this course.

While the matter of attendance often appears to be balanced between threats to a students’ grade and encouragements as to student performance, I lean heavily towards the latter. The student is ultimately responsible for the depth of her or his own learning, and active participation is the key to achieving that learning. The ability to discuss texts cogently, particularly with other people who have different interpretations of the same texts, is a profound opportunity that absence from class prevents. I use the BCC arts and humanities guidelines to attendance and participation (see www.bcc.ctc.edu/artshum for this policy):

Writing: Please do your utmost to write effectively. The Writing Lab is available on campus if you have any cause to believe that you need help with your writing. Remember that conversation with parents, peers, or workmates is very different from writing. In conversation we can correct what we are saying: “Wait, I really meant....”

When we are writing, our own written text has to say everything for us, and all the elements of writing are necessary to achieve this. In other words, if your document is not punctuated correctly, your meaning may be lost or misconstrued completely. The college offers The Writing Lab, as well as developmental English courses, in order to prepare the students for the sort of critical and analytical writing required for this course. Because the overwhelming majority of requirements for this course require effective writing, if you don't have these skills already, please consider another course.

Last Points: This course is designed to be both fun and informative. It is also a very challenging course, not one that should be considered an "easy grade." It is demanding in terms of workload, penetrating in terms of its analysis into personal and American identity, but rewards the diligent, hard-working student. In other words, I expect you to work hard in order to develop the skills of effective textual analysis; I also believe that this skill-development will provide great pleasure. The ability to effectively analyze the "texts" of our own culture, and that of other cultures, enables us to appreciate the skill and imagination creative work requires. This ability also deepens our understanding of ourselves and of the world we live in; lacking this ability, we tend to act without self-knowledge, dominated by the myths we unknowingly hold.