

AMERICAN LITERARY REGIONALISM

“That’s the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image.”

-William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

“The little town behind them had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie, and the stern frozen country received them into its bosom. The homesteads were few and far apart, here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow. But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes... the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.”

-Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

This course will examine the phenomenon of regionalism in American literature. How might a regionalist sensibility manifest itself in narrative? In what ways might varying geographies – of New England, the South, the West – be depicted, and in what ways do their respective literatures differ from one another? What exactly is “local color,” and how is it presented – and preserved – textually? We will primarily study texts from the height of the regionalist movement; but we will also consider whether regionalism can be considered a contemporary (or continuous) literary phenomenon.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Stories*

Robert Frost, *North of Boston*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Collected Stories*

Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*

Annie Proulx, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*

Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard*

Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*

I. NEW ENGLAND

Monday, July 3 Class introduction, and discussion of regionalism and its implications. Read before the first class: Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Minister’s Black Veil,” “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” “The Prophetic Pictures,” “The Birthmark,” “Young Goodman Brown”

Wednesday, July 5 Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Friday, July 7 Robert Frost, *North of Boston*, selected poems (“Mending Wall,” “Home Burial,” “After Apple-Picking,” “The Wood-Pile,” “The Pasture,” “The Mountain,” “Blueberries”).

Monday, July 10 Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*

II. SOUTHERN CLIMES

Wednesday, July 12 Mark Twain, *Puddn’head Wilson*

Friday, July 14 Charles Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,” “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” “Dave’s Neckliss,” “The Dumb Witness”

Monday, July 17 William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

Wednesday, July 19 William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

Friday, July 21 No Class – Essay due via email *by 5:00 p.m.*

Monday, July 24 Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard*, selected poems (“Theories of Time and Space,” “The Southern Crescent,” “Genus Narcissus,” “Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971,” “What is Evidence,” “Southern Pastoral,” “Miscegenation,” “Southern History,” “Blond,” “Incident”)

III. WESTWARD HO

Wednesday, July 26 Zitkala-Sa, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “School-Days of an Indian Girl,” “Why I Am A Pagan”

Friday, July 28 Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*

Monday, July 31 Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

Wednesday, August 2 Annie Proulx, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, selected stories (“Half-Skinned Steer,” “The Mud Below,” “Job History,” “Brokeback Mountain”)

Friday, August 4 Final Exam, in class

IN-CLASS EXPECTATIONS

- *Attendance.* Summer session is compact, and each class meeting counts. More than 1 unexcused absence will lower your participation grade by a letter; 3 absences will result in a failing grade for the course.
- *Punctuality.* We will begin each class meeting on time.
- *Preparation.* Read the texts carefully and thoughtfully. They’re wonderful, and they’re why we’re here.

- *Participation.* During our class meetings, I want to hear you articulate what and how you're thinking about these texts and the issues they raise, and to engage with one another about these issues. (That was probably the most important sentence on the entire syllabus.) I will occasionally charge you with in-class assignments and exercises, as a group or individually. Participation will comprise fifteen percent of your final grade.

CLASS PRESENTATIONS

Each student will be responsible for one research-based, in-class presentation of approximately 15 minutes. This assignment will comprise twenty percent of your final grade. Possible topics of presentation include (but are in no way limited to):

- aspects of the author's biography that you believe will inform/enrich our reading of the text
- the text's history and/or critical reception (Was it embraced? panned? Who was reading it, and where was it most popular? What is its contemporary critical reputation? What kinds of critical debates has it generated?)
- a cultural reference that would have been contemporary to the text – for instance, what other authors, politicians, musicians were popular when it was published? Can you make a claim for their resonance with the text, or with the life of the author?
- the actual geography of the places the text depicts: what they looked like then, what they look like now
- social, political, or economic issues that would have been pertinent to the readership of the text (transcendentalism, Reconstruction, first-wave feminism, etc.).

Please contact me *at least* 24 hours before your presentation to give me an idea of what angle you will take. Signups will take place on the first day of class.

READING RESPONSES

Over the course of the summer session, you must submit *five* reading responses (1-2 pages each) via email. Your reading responses may be analytical (what you think something means, how you think something works), contextual (how you think something relates to a broader theme), or evaluative (why you think something is or isn't beautiful or true); they may raise questions, express confusion, or wage readerly war; but they must be focused on specific elements of the text, and much engage directly with form (diction, imagery, etc.). Your reading responses over the course of the semester will comprise fifteen percent of your final grade.

GRADING SCALE

- 20% - Class presentation
- 30% - Final exam
- 20% - Essay, 5-7 pages
- 15% - 1-2 page reading responses (5 total)
- 15% - Class participation (including in-class exercises)