

THE AMERICAN BESTSELLER

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Office Hours: MTh 11-12, RAB 017

American Studies 261:01
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M/Th 12:35-1:55, RAB 208

WE WILL READ: (texts available at Rutgers Bookstore and elsewhere)



The Virginian, Owen Wister (1902) (Dover Thrift Edition)
The Sheik, Edith Maude Hull (1919) (Hard Press Edition)
Strange Fruit, Lillian Smith (1944) (Harvest Book Edition)
Shane, Jack Schaefer (1949) (Mass Market Paperback Edition)
Speaker for the Dead, Orson Scott Card (1986) (Tor Books Edition)
Paradise, Toni Morrison (1998) (Plume Edition)

WE WILL WATCH:



To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)
The Godfather (1972)

Read This to Understand the Course

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Justice—a bedrock concept in America’s understanding of itself. What does it mean? Historians, jurists, politicians, philosophers, activists, and others have offered important answers to that question, answers that fill textbooks and generate high rhetoric.

Consider just a few: an early source of western law defines justice as “the art of the good and the equitable,” the “will to render to every man his due” (Justinian, *Digest* 1.1.1.1 (533 A.D.)). Since then, justice has also been defined as social contract, as equality, as fairness, as conformity with the laws of nature, the laws of God, or the laws of men.

While keeping some of these abstractions in mind, this course will focus instead on what justice has meant in American culture, the concrete meanings given to justice as portrayed by what everyday Americans *read*—the best-sellers.

“I believe in America.” This is the opening line of *The Godfather*, spoken by Bonasera after his daughter has been brutally assaulted by two men. An American court slaps them on the wrist while Bonasera “[stands] in the courtroom like a fool.” “I believe in America,” he says, but “for justice we must go to Don Corleone.”

As supplement, and sometimes correction, to theoretical definitions, best selling books offer the likes of Bonasera and Don Corleone as evidence of what American justice means at particular times, in specific cases, and to uniquely situated people.

The best-seller list “present[s] us with a kind of corrective reality.” Sidestepping what those in authority believe Americans *should* read and *should* think, bestsellers show us what Americans *are actually* reading and thus are a vital source of cultural values and beliefs. Confronting the best-seller list is like “stepping on the scales.” It “tells us the truth, however unflattering, and is therefore, taken over the long haul, a pretty good way of assessing our culture and of judging how, if any, we have changed” (Michael Korda, *Making the List*, 2001).



YOUR GRADE WILL CONSIST OF:

- 60% 3 Short, 3-5 pg. Papers (100 points each/300 total)
 1 optional oral presentation (takes the place of 1 paper)
- 20% 20 Reading Quizzes (5 points each/100 total)
- 20% Final Exam (100 points)

GRADING SCALE:

A	93-100	C	70-76
B+	89-92	D	65-69
B	81-88	F	64 and below
C+	77-80		

LATE/MAKE-UP WORK: Avoid It

Papers: Late papers can be submitted within one week of the due date with a 10 point penalty. After one week, papers will be accepted for *half credit* but will *not* receive comments.

Oral Presentations: Cannot be made up except in *truly* extraordinary circumstances. If you miss your scheduled time to present, it is unlikely that a new time will be available.

Reading Quizzes: Since quizzes are used as a method of taking attendance and rewarding daily reading, they cannot be made up. If you arrive late to class and the quiz has already been collected, for reasons of fairness you will NOT be allowed to take the quiz.

Final Exam: Cannot be made up except in extraordinary circumstances.

Email:

YES—for contacting me with questions or concerns. Expect an answer within 24 hours Monday-Friday.

NO— for submitting papers and other assignments. I cannot accept electronic submissions of assignments except by pre-arrangement. Plan to have a hard copy in hand at the beginning of class on the due date.

Reading & Assignment Calendar*

*subject to change

September

- 6 First day of class
- 10 Rd: *The Virginian*, 1-117
- 13 Rd: *The Virginian*, 118-218
- 17 Rd: *The Virginian*, 219-304
- 20 Rd: *The Sheik*, 1-81
Oral Presentation: _____
- 24 Rd: *The Sheik*, 82-164
- 27 Rd: *Strange Fruit*, 1-149

October

- 1 Paper # 1 due
Rd: *Strange Fruit*, 150-264
Oral Presentation: _____
- 4 Rd: *Strange Fruit*, 264-371
- 8 Rd: *Shane*, 1-84
- 11 Rd: *Shane*, 85-151
Oral Presentation: _____
- 15 Movie: *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- 18 Paper # 2 due
Movie: *To Kill a Mockingbird*
Oral Presentation: _____
- 22 Movie: *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- 25 Movie: *The Godfather*
- 29 Movie: *The Godfather*

November

- 1 Movie: *The Godfather*
- 5 Movie: *The Godfather*
Oral Presentation: _____
- 8 NO CLASS
- 12 Paper # 3 due
Rd: *Speaker for the Dead*, 1-122
- 15 Rd: *Speaker for the Dead*, 123-246
Oral Presentation: _____
- 19 Rd: *Speaker for the Dead*, 247-382
- 20 NO CLASS—reading day
Rd: *Paradise*, 1-80
- 26 Rd: *Paradise*, 81-182
- 29 Rd: *Paradise*, 183-266
Oral Presentation: _____

December

- 3 Rd: *Paradise*, 266-318
- 6 Rd: TBA
Oral Presentation: _____
- 10 Paper # 4 due
Rd: TBA
Oral Presentation: _____
- 20 Final Exam

A brief overview of work for the course:

Short Papers

There will be four paper topics (TBA), but you are only required to write on three (or two, if you should elect to do an oral presentation in lieu of one paper).

Papers must be 3-5 pages (no shorter—no longer), double-spaced, typed, and otherwise in conformity with MLA guidelines, including MLA rules for citing sources. A successful paper has a clear thesis and a convincing argument that demonstrates careful reading of the texts and the ability to effectively integrate textual evidence. Grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other “mechanics” do play a role in the paper’s grade.

Oral Presentation (optional—takes the place of a paper)

The oral presentation requires you to apply concepts from the course to an outside source. You’ll present visual or performance art, plays, comic strips, other books, movies, television programs, news, current events, etc. to illustrate, expand, or challenge a concept presented in class.

For example, when we study the book *Shane*, we’ll discuss the role of the “hired gun” who acts outside the law but is, ironically, a necessary tool of law and order on the frontier. A presentation on this topic might compare the hired gun in *Shane* to Jack Bauer from the TV show *24* (a source you will consider on your own). You might bring in a clip from *24* to compare with a scene from *Shane* in order to demonstrate your conclusions.

Presentations are 10-15 minutes (no shorter, no longer) and must use some kind of visual aid—a movie/tv clip, a picture, a news clipping, Power Point, poster, etc. A successful presentation is creative and interesting, shows off how well you understand the concept(s) you discuss, and demonstrates effort to engage your classmates.

Reading Quizzes

Daily quizzes take attendance and test whether you have completed the assigned reading. Every quiz asks 3 questions, each worth 1 point. You earn 2 points just for being there, for a total of 5 per day. Quiz questions can be answered easily by anyone who has read the text with even a moderate amount of care.

Final Exam

The Final has three parts—multiple choice, short answer, and essay. The multiple choice and short answer sections test reading comprehension and concepts discussed in class. The essay requires you to construct a thesis in response to a broad question and support it using the texts and films studied during the course. You will write your essay during the final exam period, but the essay question will be distributed on the last day of class.