

ENGL 20312
American Topics: Landscapes and Cityscapes
Department of English, Culture, and Media
Nottingham Trent University

This is a second-year undergraduate module worth twenty credits for single and joint honours English literature students. It has run as an elective since 2013, and it generally attracts 90 to 115 students.

Teaching Arrangements

Students meet for one two-hour lecture/workshop and one hour-long seminar per week for twelve weeks. Half the lectures and seminars are given by the module leader, Dr Stephanie Palmer, and half by Professor Tim Youngs.

Reading Schedule for 12 weeks

Introduction

Unit 1: The Frontier

Jack Schaefer, *Shane* (1949); Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'

Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (1923); Glenda Riley, 'Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies'

Shermon Alexie, stories and poems from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992)

Unit 2: Country and City

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854); Lawrence Buell, 'Pastoral Ideology'

Stephen Crane, 'Maggie: a Girl of the Streets' (1893)

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905)

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899)

Unit 3: African American Landscapes

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977); Robert Stepto, from *From Behind the Veil*

Langston Hughes, poems

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

Key theoretical texts

As a second-year module, the module builds explicitly on critical frameworks by asking students to read critical works alongside the literature. Turner's essay (above) gives dates for the various types of frontiers and makes a provocative claim for how the frontier shaped the nation; we stress that though Turner is a historian he is not making claims of fact but arguing a case for how to write history. Riley's essay (above) demonstrates why it is important to consider representations of the frontier experience by women as well as men. Buell's essay, while challenging, introduces the idea that genres (like the pastoral, or naturalism, or the Blues) have ideologies yet are also flexible in how they are deployed by different writers or interpreted by different audiences. Stepto (above) introduces the concept of symbolic geography and outlines the distinctive symbolic geography of African Americans.

Intellectual Rationale

Following on from a first-year survey of American literature, this module focuses on the representation in American texts of the relationship between North American literature and the landscape. It is often remarked that American identity has been irrevocably shaped by the variety and the vastness of the North American continent. Yet the land is not just an inert force that determines human existence but a site upon which people have inscribed cultural and political meanings. Myths of American exceptionalism have

arisen out of the experience and ideologies of frontiering. Students should emerge from the module with a finer appreciation for the landscapes of the United States and their effects on literature. They should also emerge with an understanding of how the literal landscape feeds into a symbolic geography, and indeed, symbolic geography is a threshold concept of the module.

Urbanisation and its effects on both the psyche and the promise and precariousness of the idea of 'America' continue to fascinate. Descriptions of urban spaces reflect on the inequalities between rich and poor and the lost place of the individual in the modern world. Descriptions of rural places reflect on national character and destiny as well.

As with the department's first-year American literature module, 'race' and ethnicity are central concepts. Students are intrigued to hear about the different ethnicities of New York City in 'Maggie' and how Crane imitates Irish voices. Native and African American authors are in different positions to whites vis-à-vis the symbolic geographies of the country. Rather than try to represent every ethnicity, the module hones in on geography in African American literature, where topics like the pastoral or the primitive or urban plasticity take on particular valences. The focus on African American texts means that African American authors are not seen as just protesting against dominant trends but forming a significant counter literature.

The module puts texts from different periods in proximity with each other to demonstrate the longevity of the theme of landscape.

Assessment

The module seeks to hone students' research skills. Students are asked to do extra reading each week in addition to the set literary and critical texts. In keeping with a focus in American Studies on interdisciplinarity, they are expected to appreciate the importance of dates (like the closing of the frontier), intellectual trends (social Darwinism, the coming of the New Woman), social history (the Great Migration), and physical space on the set literary texts. E.g. where does *A Lost Lady* take place in relation to Cather's home town or the centres of literary ferment of the day? We display maps and quiz students on the basics of U.S. geography and its significance.

A formative learning journal asks them to record what they read each week, reflect on seminar discussion, and evaluate their own contribution to seminar. This encourages students to view reading and discussing what they read with their peers as a concrete, valuable activity and transferable skill.

Summative assessment is by an essay comparing at least two module texts from different weeks. Students choose from a range of titles, one of the most popular being 'Discuss the identity of the outsider in at least two of the cityscape texts.' To prepare for their third-year dissertation, they are also encouraged to design their own title.

In sum

Students have benefited from the module. It expands their sense of American literature beyond what they covered in school. It provides a good bridge from a first-year survey into specialist modules of the third year. Students interested in discussions of nature and place in this module often elect to take a third-year module on regional literatures and nuclear literatures (both types of literature reward ecological perspectives) or another module on travel literature. Many write on American topics in their dissertations. The learning journal encourages students to work on their research and writing skills throughout the year.