

**San José State University
Humanities and the Arts/Department of English
English 255: Books that Changed America, Fall 2013**

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Office Hours: Tues: 3-3:45; Thurs: 10:30-11:30 and by appointment

Class Days/Time: Thursday: 7:00-9:45

Classroom: Health 405

Course Description:

A couple of months before Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Harriet Beecher Stowe visited the White House; Lincoln purportedly greeted her by saying, “Is this the little woman who made this great war?” He was referring to the impact of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* nationwide. *The Jungle* resulted in significant legislation regarding food safety. *The Grapes of Wrath* helped improve migrant housing and wages. *Silent Spring* made millions aware of the impact of pesticides. And *On the Road*, arguably, defined a generation of restless youth.

This course will consider the reasons why these novels and nonfiction had such a profound impact on American social history, why they remain seminal texts in American literary history. It will consider how each author connected with an audience, and why that audience remains.

This will be a hybrid course, focused on reading carefully and writing passionately. After consideration of each book in its historical and cultural context (modeled by David Reynolds *Mightier Than the Sword*), students will write about the contemporary relevance and importance of the issues

brought out in each text--broadly race, food, class fissures, the environment, generational shifts (although certainly each book treats other issues as well). Student writing for this course will be generated by the social issues considered in each text—and that writing will consist of creative and incisive responses to these issues, why they remain relevant. The range of writing options is broad. Students may choose to write essays, historical fiction, editorials, scholarly commentaries, short memoirs, travel pieces. Reynold's book on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is scholarly and wide-ranging; that may be a model for some students' work; others might choose to write a contemporary article about race; a memoir; a reflective essay.

Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

The goals of this course are to read carefully and thoughtfully; to respond in writing with thoughtful, specific and creative prose; and to discuss the importance of the literature of social protest.

The Student Learning Objectives [SLO] of the Department of English and Comparative Literature: Students will demonstrate the ability to

1. read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;
2. show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American and World Literature;
3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
5. articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Required Texts/Readings

Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe Dover
Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Fight for America,
David Reynolds 978-0393342352
The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck. Penguin Classics

The Jungle, Upton Sinclair. Norton Critical 978-0393977790
Silent Spring, Rachael Carson Houghton Mifflin 978-0618249060
On the Road, Jack Kerouac

Schedule (Note, in each class, the SLOs are 1, 2, 5)

August 22: Introduction: each student will introduce him/herself with a 3 minute power point, brought to class on a flash drive. Mention at least one social issue that matters to you.

August 29: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ½. 2-page reading response.

September 5: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, complete; 2-page reading response.

September 12: *Mightier than the Sword* (selections); writing workshop (race)

September 19: *The Jungle*; writing workshop (revisions)

September 26: *The Jungle*; writing workshop (food)

October 3: *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1-11; writing workshop (revisions)

October 10: *The Grapes of Wrath*, 12-20; writing workshop (homelessness, migration, class)

October 17: *The Grapes of Wrath*, complete; selections from *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*; writing workshop (revisions)

October 24: *Silent Spring*, 1-9; writing workshop (revisions)

October 31: *Silent Spring*, complete; writing workshop (environment)

November 7: selections from Aldo Leopold; writing workshop (revisions)

November 14: *On the Road*; writing workshop (revisions)

November 21: *On the Road*; writing workshop (youth)

December 5: writing workshop (revisions)

Final exam: reading of best piece.

Classroom Protocol

I expect students to come to class on time, to refrain from texting or using computers (unless books are downloaded), to actively engage in discussion, to listen politely and attentively to their peers.

Assignments and Grading Policy

I. Creative responses: 70%

Students will write 3-5 pages for each class, either an original piece or a revision. Workshops/revision workshops and topics to consider are indicated on the syllabus. Some weeks, students will prepare a response to the topic in parentheses, choosing the form their response will take. Other weeks, students will revise work from the week before. At the end of the semester, you will revise and expand one of your short works into a 10-page piece.

The central challenge of writing about social issues is to choose the form your writing will take—how best to communicate about social issues that matter to you? Nonfiction? Journalism? Research? Fiction? In another course a creative response might be film or photography (and in this course, you might consider integrating other genres into your prose). The point is to communicate forcefully what you feel about the books you read, the issues they raise. Do these issues still matter? Why? How to you? How to others? How can we communicate their importance?

I will set up an online wiki for you to share work with other students; you will post your original responses/revisions by Wednesday at noon. Your group will read your work before class. I will explain the process more fully on August 29.

For your final work of the semester, you will expand on one of your pieces and turn in a 10-page creative response.

In grading your pieces, I consider the following in assigning grades:

A and A-: A superior piece of writing. The topic focused, the language sharp, and the writing free of grammatical errors. The piece has originality and style, is elegant, thoughtful and persuasive. If research is included, it is relevant and clearly cited.

B+ and B: A good piece of writing, solid and clear. But it may lack the innovation and sharpness of the top category. The point is clear but could be supported with additional details. There may be minor spelling, typographic, and/or grammatical errors. But it is interesting enough to hold a reader's attention. If research is included, it is mostly solid and the paper draws from the research.

B- and C+: This response may be too broad or unsupported. Examples may be general rather than specific. There may be grammatical errors. The central idea may not be fresh. The writing may be wordy and vague. If research is included, scholarship might not be relevant, fresh or focused on the topic and hand. Citations may be infrequent, general.

C and below: These essays are unfocused, without a sharp thesis. Examples are general or the essay lacks examples. Research is not thorough. There may be serious grammatical errors. If research is included, sources may be general, unfocused, not cited properly.

II. Participation in groups/2 readings of your work. 15%. I will read your responses to your peers' work and observe group dynamics. (SLO 1, 2, 5)

III. Class discussion, 15%: (SLO 1,2,5)

At the heart of any good graduate seminar is discussion, both in-class and, of course, outside class. As a full participant, you should come to class with texts read and questions formulated. Please respectfully consider all viewpoints and ask thoughtful questions about your peers' responses. All of this will enter into a participation grade. More specifically, I gauge your participation grade as follows:

6-7 points: Someone who has been a reliable and constant positive force in class, who has not missed classes, who poses questions about the reading, who responds thoughtfully to other students' comments. Oral presentations are lucid, to the point, well-rehearsed.

5-6 points: Someone who has been a reliable and constant positive force in class but may have missed one or two classes. Oral presentations are clear, mostly to the point, perhaps a little rough.

3-4 points: A mostly positive force in class but sometimes unprepared. Someone who has missed a few classes. Oral presentations are serviceable, might be more focused, might need more practice.

1-2 points: Someone who has not contributed because of poor attendance and poor participation and poor preparedness. Oral presentations not fully rehearsed, unclear.

Reading groups: At the beginning of the semester I will split you into 4 reading groups. The purpose of these groups is to discuss class reading outside scheduled class times as often as possible; the only assignment for these groups is due on April 8, at which time each group will report on one required meeting where the topic of discussion was *Tender is the Night*.

University Policies

Dropping and Adding

Students are responsible for understanding the policies and procedures about add/drop, grade forgiveness, etc. Refer to the current semester's [Catalog Policies](http://info.sjsu.edu/static/catalog/policies.html) section at <http://info.sjsu.edu/static/catalog/policies.html>. Add/drop deadlines can be found on the [current academic calendar](http://www.sjsu.edu/academic_programs/calendars/academic_calendar/) web page located at http://www.sjsu.edu/academic_programs/calendars/academic_calendar/.

The [Late Drop Policy](http://www.sjsu.edu/aars/policies/latedrops/policy/) is available at

<http://www.sjsu.edu/aars/policies/latedrops/policy/>. Students should be aware of the current deadlines and penalties for dropping classes.

Information about the latest changes and news is available at the [Advising Hub](http://www.sjsu.edu/advising/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/advising/>.

Academic integrity

Your commitment as a student to learning is evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University. The [University's Academic Integrity policy](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/S07-2.htm), located at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/S07-2.htm>, requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The

[Student Conduct and Ethical Development website](http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/) is available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

Instances of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Cheating on exams or plagiarism (presenting the work of another as your own, or the use of another person's ideas without giving proper credit) will result in a failing grade and sanctions by the University. For this class, all assignments are to be completed by the individual student unless otherwise specified. If you would like to include your assignment or any material you have submitted, or plan to submit for another class, please note that SJSU's Academic Policy S07-2 requires approval of instructors.

Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need to make special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 requires that students with disabilities requesting accommodations must register with the [Disability Resource Center](http://www.drc.sjsu.edu/) (DRC) at <http://www.drc.sjsu.edu/> to establish a record of their disability.