

**San José State University**  
**Humanities and the Arts/Department of English**  
**English 255: Books (and films) that Changed America, Fall 2016**

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**Office Hours:** T/TH: 1:30-2:45 and Tuesday by appointment,  
4:45-6:45.

**Class Days/Time:** Tuesday: 7:00-9:45

**Classroom:** FOB 104

**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. We 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 defined as 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 these social issues that are vital to each text—and will consist of creative and incisive responses to these issues. In short, essays will consider in what ways these issues remain relevant to your experience, to contemporary life. The range of writing options is broad. Students may choose to write essays, 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 Learning Outcomes**

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 Outcomes of the Department of English and Comparative Literature are that 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

## **Course Requirements and Assignments**

### **I. Creative responses: 70%**

Students will write/revise 3-5 page essays for each class on the central topic featured for each text as indicated on the syllabus; each week, these short essays will be either original pieces or revisions, depending on the week. As noted, some weeks, students will prepare a topic response. On other weeks, students will revise work from the week before. Note: for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, two, two-page reading responses are required as groundwork for later creative work.

At the end of the semester, each student will revise and expand one of the papers 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? A creative response might be film or photography in another course (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 so to you? How to others? How can we communicate their importance?

What is most important about the pieces you write/create is a clear focus and a narrow focus. Obviously, the topics are extremely broad. Your challenge as a writer/creative artist is to narrow the scope of your response.

I will set up an online platform for each student to share work with other students; each student will post original responses/revisions by Monday at noon, and that student's reading group will read and comment on other's short papers before class. I will explain the process more fully on the first day of class, August 30.

For the final work of the semester, each student will expand on one of piece and turn in a 10-page creative/critical/factual 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. Full participation in groups + 2 readings of your work in front of class: 15%. I will read your responses to your peers' work and observe group dynamics.**

### **III. Class discussion/participation, 15%**

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 will evaluate 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.

**Determination of final grade** will depend on completion of work noted under "Course Requirements and Assignments"—ie, close reading of texts; writing and revision on each text; participating fully in peer readings and in evaluation of peers' work; participating in final exam.

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading).

Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance:

*A+/A/A- = excellent; B+/B/B- = above average; C+/C/C- = average; D+/D/D- = below average; F = failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.*

### **Classroom Protocol**

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

### **University Policies**

Please see syllabus information web page at  
<http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo>

## Schedule

August 30: Introduction: Each student will introduce him/herself with a 3 minute power point (time limit firm), brought to class on a flash drive. Mention at least one social issue that matters to you. Please read UTC Chapters 1-5; we will watch scenes from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* + begin discussing *Mightier than the Sword*.

September 6: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, through Vol I. 2-page reading response (this is preliminary work for your creative responses).

September 13: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, complete; 2-page reading response.

September 20: *Mightier than the Sword* (selections) and U. of Virginia website (see p. 456); writing workshop (race)

September 27: *The Jungle*; writing workshop (revisions)

October 4: *The Jungle*; writing workshop (food)

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

October 18: *The Grapes of Wrath*, 12-20; writing workshop (homelessness, migration, class)

October 25: *The Grapes of Wrath*, complete; selections from *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*; writing workshop (revisions)

November 1: Film of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

November 8: *Silent Spring*, 1-9; writing workshop (revisions)

November 15: *Silent Spring*, complete; Film on *Silent Spring*; writing workshop (environment)

November 22: selections from Aldo Leopold; writing workshop (revisions)

November 29: *On the Road*; writing workshop (revisions)

December 6: *On the Road*; writing workshop (youth)

December 20: Final exam: reading of best piece to class.