

San José State University
English and Comparative Literature

English 117A: American Film, Literature and Culture
Seeing the Primitive in 20th Century American Literature and Film

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| Instructor: | Dr. Faith Kirk |
| Office Location: | Faculty Office Building (FOB), Rm. 217 |
| Office Hours: | Wednesdays 12:00-1:00 pm or by appointment |
| Email: | faith.kirk@sjsu.edu |
| Class Time: | Fridays 9:30 am -12:15 pm |
| Class Location: | Clark 111 |
| Prerequisites: | Writing Skills Test (WST), completion of Core General Education, and completion of, or co-registration in, 100W |
| GE/SJSU Studies Category: | Area S: "Self, Society, and Equality in the U.S." Note: Courses used to satisfy Areas R, S, and V, must be taken from three separate SJSU departments, or other distinct academic units. |

Course Description

Throughout the 20th century, artists, writers, and scholars were fascinated with the concept of savagery and with people they considered "exotic," animalistic, and outside the bounds of civilized society. Using similar practices, 20th century writers and filmmakers sought to observe and record "primitive" bodies, behaviors, and ritual acts. Although an early Hollywood film like *King Kong* was made for a different audience than a documentary film like *Nanook of the North*, both films capitalized on images of "real primitives" to captivate American viewers.

In this course, we will investigate the relationship between literary and cinematic representations of people who were considered "primitive" or "native" in 20th century U.S. culture. We will apply similar questions about visual observation and ideology to a wide range of texts, from popular fiction and travel writing to fiction and documentary films. As we watch and read, we will pay close attention to the ways so-called "primitive" peoples are represented and how those representational strategies change (or not) over time.

Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to actively think, read, and write about the ideologies at work in concepts like civilization, savagery, race, culture, gender and objectivism. Some of these concepts might now seem safely at a distance from our lives, but others are not. While some of the work of this class will be about reading and understanding the ideas of others, your other big task will be to examine your own ideas, beliefs, values, and experiences.

Our Class Atmosphere

Our classroom is a learning environment where everyone's right to explore ideas needs to be respected. There is nothing wrong with disagreement and debate. In fact, saying that you disagree with someone and why you do is crucial for really doing the work of critically thinking. What *is* wrong is being disrespectful to anyone in our class or actively suppressing a colleague's ability to think, collaborate, and write. We will be practicing how to engage with each other with mutual respect.

Using your cell phone or other technology in our classroom can be, but is not always, extremely disrespectful. Everyone here is an adult and so it would be wrong of me to dictate that you cannot check the time on your cell phone or use it to look up a word or concept that you don't know. However, we live in a culture where texting or staring at your phone while we are trying to learn something is intrusive and rude. Please respect me, your colleagues, and the learning environment we all want to create by using technology respectfully in our classroom.

Screenings

We will watch many films during our class this semester. Watching a film in a college classroom may be unlike any other film viewing experience you have had before. Usually, when you go to the movie theater or watch a film at home, your purpose is to be entertained. You eat snacks and get comfortable in your seat. *The purpose of screening a film in our class is to subject it to analysis.* That means that you will be watching the film with a pencil in hand, methodically recording the events of the film in what is called a "plot segmentation". You will be writing in the dark (a skill that you learn through practice) and you will need to concentrate.

GE Area S Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

After successfully completing the course, students shall be able to:

- GE 1.** describe how identities (i.e. religious, gender, ethnic, racial, class, sexual orientation, disability, and/or age) are shaped by cultural and societal influences within contexts of equality and inequality;
- GE 2.** describe historical, social, political, and economic processes producing diversity, equality, and structured inequalities in the U.S.;
- GE 3.** describe social actions which have led to greater equality and social justice in the U.S. (i.e. religious, gender, ethnic, racial, class, sexual orientation, disability, and/or age).; and
- GE 4.** recognize and appreciate constructive interactions between people from different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups within the U.S.

Departmental Learning Objectives

English 117A serves four of the five learning objectives of the Department of English and Comparative Literature, by having students demonstrate the ability to

- E 1.** read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of "close reading" or close analysis in both the study of literature and the study of film;

- E 3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
- E 4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
- E 5. articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Texts to Purchase

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| <i>Tarzan of the Apes</i> , Edgar Rice Burroughs | ISBN: 0140184643 |
| <i>Of Mules and Men</i> , Zora Neale Hurston | ISBN: 9780061350177 |
| <i>A Small Place</i> , Jamaica Kincaid | ISBN: 9780374527075 |

All other readings will be available to you as PDFs on Canvas and will be either selections from larger texts, scholarly articles, or essays and comments published online.

I have provided these ISBN numbers so that you have the opportunity to buy the edition that I am using (for the purposes of having matching pagination and supplementary materials). If you find these texts somewhere else for cheaper, feel free to get them.

Assignments

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| Canvas Assignments & Discussions | 15% |
| Film Notes | 20% |
| Three Reading Responses | 25% |
| Critical Analysis Paper | 20% |
| <u>Final Exam</u> | <u>20%</u> |
| Total | 100% |

Film Notes

Each time you watch in film in class, you will create what is called a “plot segmentation” of the film. A plot segmentation is a method film scholars use to methodically record the events of the film, when they occur, and any other formal observations you may notice along the way about lighting, shot composition, or special effects. In other words, every time you notice something about what you are watching and how it looks, write it down!

*Please note: I have included a sample plot segmentation at the end of this syllabus for your reference.

Three Reading Responses

You will be asked to write three “reading responses” this semester and to submit them on Canvas. These responses are opportunities to make connections between the concepts we have discussed and the texts we have watched and read in class. You will receive a prompt with more specific instructions and requirements before the first reading response is due and we will discuss the expectations more fully in class.

Critical Analysis Paper

This assignment will be a detailed research essay in which you will make an argument about one of the texts we have watched or read this semester. You will be required to conduct scholarly research, effectively cite at least two scholarly sources, and make a compelling, original argument about how a text makes meaning. We will discuss this assignment in much more detail when it is assigned.

Final Exam

We will hold a final examination for this class during our scheduled final exam time. The exam will be cumulative and will contain identifications and short answer questions. You will have the opportunity to choose among a selection of IDs and questions. We will discuss the exam in more detail closer to the date.

How Your Work Will Be Assessed and Evaluated

Assessment

You will get different kinds of feedback in this course. You will receive feedback from me and from your colleagues. When you submit an assignment to me to be evaluated, you will receive a numerical score, a scoring guide, and written feedback. When we talk after class or in my office hours, you will receive verbal feedback from me, about a particular assignment or your general performance in the course if you wish.

Evaluation

The following statement has been adopted by the Department of English for inclusion in all syllabi:

In English Department Courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the SJSU Catalog ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure.

In written assignments for English 117A, this scale is based on the following criteria:

A [90-92=A-, 93-96=A, 97-100=A+] = Excellent: The "A" essay is articulate and well developed with fluid transitions and a clear and persuasive use of evidence, which is drawn from the literary text itself, lecture materials (when appropriate), and research materials. An "A" essay contains a fresh insight that teaches the reader something new about the subject matter.

B [80-82=B-, 83-86=B, 87-89=B+] Above average: The "B" essay demonstrates a good understanding of its subject, a clear and persuasive use of evidence, a certain level of ease of expression, and solid organization. However, it usually lacks the level of originality and creativity that characterizes the insight found in an "A" essay.

C [70-72=C-, 73-76=C, 77-79=C+] = Average: The "C" essay makes a good attempt at all the assignment's requirements. It has a reasonable understanding of its subject matter but its ideas are frequently simplistic or over-generalized. The writing style is also more bland and repetitive than the style shown by "A" and "B" essays and it often contains flaws in grammar, punctuation, spelling and/or word choice. It may also use textual evidence out of context.

D [60-62=D-, 63-66=D, 67-69=D+] = Below average: The "D" essay is poorly organized and generally unclear. It has inappropriate or inadequate examples, is noticeably superficial or simplistic, and/or contains some serious mechanical and grammatical problems. A "D" essay may also reveal some misunderstanding of the assignment requirements.

F [59 or below]= Failure: An "F" essay has not addressed the requirements of the assignment and is unacceptable work in terms of both form and content.

Attendance

Attendance in this class is necessary. I want to know what you think. I want other students to know what you think. I will take attendance at the beginning of each class period. If you are not in the room when I take attendance, *it is your responsibility* to make sure that I record your presence. If you miss class, I expect that you will make up any missed work.

Late Work

While I understand that you have a life outside of school, I cannot and will not accept late work this semester. I teach classes at SJSU and at other institutions. It would be impossible for me to accept late assignments and keep up with assessing and evaluating student work that is submitted on time.

Resources

SJSU Writing Center

The SJSU Writing Center is located in Room 126 in Clark Hall. It is staffed by professional instructors and upper-division or graduate-level writing specialists from each of the seven SJSU colleges. The Writing Specialists have met a rigorous GPA requirement, and they are well trained to assist all students at all levels within all disciplines to become better writers. [The Writing Center website is located at http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/about/staff/.](http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/about/staff/)

Office hours

Each week, I hold office hours, which means I sit in my office ready and waiting to talk with you about what you need, what you want to accomplish, and how I can help you do that. You can either drop on by or email me to make an appointment.

Work Schedule

This schedule is not yet complete. Readings that listed as “TBA” will be selections of larger texts or short essays and will be available to you on our course Canvas page.

| WEEK | READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS |
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| 1: August 25 Introductions | In class: Introduction to course and screen film <i>King Kong</i> (Cooper & Schoedsack, 1933) First draft of plot segmentation |
| 2: September 1 Seeing “Savages” | To Prepare: Complete plot segmentation of <i>King Kong</i> Read “Introduction” to <i>The Third Eye</i> (Rony, 1996) and take substantial notes In Class: Collaborative analysis |
| 3: September 8 “Savages” versus “civilized citizens” | To Prepare: Read <i>Tarzan the Ape Man</i> (Burroughs, 1914) and take substantial reading notes In Class: Collaborative analysis Sunday September 10: Reading Response #1 Due to Canvas by 11:59 pm |
| 4: September 15 Ethnographic documentary looking | To Prepare: Reading TBA (Canvas) In Class: Screen selection of Edison shorts and clips from <i>Nanook of the North</i> (Flaherty, 1922) and <i>Moana</i> (Flaherty, 1926) in class Complete film notes |
| 5: September 22 Looking for the Primitive Self | To Prepare: Read D.H. Lawrence essays and short story (Canvas) In Class: Discussion and analysis |
| 6: September 29 Adventures with African wildlife | To Prepare: Read selection from <i>Congorilla</i> (Johnson, 1933) (Canvas) In Class: Screen clips from film version of <i>Congorilla</i> (Martin and Osa Johnson, 1932) and Collaborative Analysis Sunday September 31: Reading Response #2 Due |
| 7: October 6 Recording the customs of the “Negro South” | To Prepare: Read <i>Of Mules and Men</i> (Hurstun, 1935) In Class: Collaborative Analysis |
| 8: October 13 Ethnographic looking gets refined | To Prepare: Reading TBA (Canvas) In Class: Screen Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson short documentaries and <i>The Hunters</i> (Marshall, 1957) |
| 9: October 20 Revising ethnographic looking | To Prepare: Reading TBA (Canvas) In Class: Screen <i>N!ai, the Story of a !Kung Woman</i> (Marshall, 1980) and complete plot segmentation (film notes); Collaborative Analysis |
| 10: October 27 Ethnographic tourism | To Prepare: Reading TBA (Canvas) In Class: Screen <i>Cannibal Tours</i> (O’Rourke, 1988) and complete plot segmentation (film notes); Collaborative Analysis Sunday October 29: Reading Response #3 Due to Canvas by 11:59 pm |
| 11: November 3 Writing Workshop | To Prepare: Write a complete first draft of your Critical Analysis Paper In Class: Writing Workshop |
| 12: November 10 Revising and Submitting | VETERANS DAY- CAMPUS CLOSED Sunday, November 12: Critical Analysis Paper Due to Canvas by 11:59 pm |
| 13: November 17 Against Tourism | To Prepare: Read <i>A Small Place</i> (Kincaid) In Class: Collaborative Analysis |

| WEEK | READINGS & ASSIGNMENTS |
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| 14: November 24 | THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY BREAK- CAMPUS CLOSED |
| 15: December 1 Exploding the ethnographer's gaze | To Prepare: Reading TBA (Canvas) In Class: Screen <i>Sur Nam Viet Given Name Nam</i> (Trinh, 1989) |
| 16: December 8 Who is a "natives" now? | To Prepare: Reading TBA (Canvas) In Class: Discussion and analysis |
| 17: Wednesday December 13 FINAL EXAM | 7:15-9:30 AM. |

Sample Plot Segmentation

THE WIZARD OF OZ: PLOT SEGMENTATION

C. Credits

1. Kansas

- a. Dorothy is at home, worried about Miss Gulch's threat to Toto.
- b. Running away, Dorothy meets Professor Marvel, who induces her to return home.
- c. A tornado lifts the house, with Dorothy and Toto, into the sky.

2. Munchkin City

- a. Dorothy meets Glinda, and the Munchkins celebrate the death of the Wicked Witch of the East.
- b. The Wicked Witch of the West threatens Dorothy over the Ruby Slippers.
- c. Glinda sends Dorothy to seek the Wizard's help.

3. The Yellow Brick Road

- a. Dorothy meets the Scarecrow.
- b. Dorothy meets the Tin Man.
- c. Dorothy meets the Cowardly Lion.

4. The Emerald City

- a. The Witch creates a poppy field near the city, but Glinda rescues the travelers.
- b. The group is welcomed by the city's citizens.
- c. As they wait to see the Wizard, the Lion sings of being king.
- d. The terrifying Wizard agrees to help the group if they obtain the Wicked Witch's broomstick.

5. The Witch's castle and nearby woods

- a. In the woods, flying monkeys carry off Dorothy and Toto.
- b. The Witch realizes that she must kill Dorothy to get the ruby slippers.
- c. The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion sneak into the Castle; in the ensuing chase, Dorothy kills the Witch.

6. The Emerald City

- a. Although revealed as a humbug, the Wizard grants the wishes of the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion.
- b. Dorothy fails to leave with the Wizard's hot-air balloon but is transported home by the ruby slippers.

7. Kansas—Dorothy describes Oz to her family and friends

E. End credits