

English 553 **U.S. Literary Regionalisms**

Spring 2012
Section 00
MWF 10-10:50 a.m.
Oddfellows 222

Prof. Jeremy Wells
jwells@allegheny.edu
Office: Oddfellows 235
Office hours: M 11-2:30, Th 8:30-11, or by appt.
Office phone: x4322

“One of the facts which we Americans have a difficulty in making clear to a rather inattentive world outside is that, while we have apparently a literature of our own, we have no literary center.” So wrote William Dean Howells, a leading figure in late 19th-century American literature, in 1898. “I shall not now be doing our decentralized literature a disservice by saying that its chief value is its honesty, its fidelity to our decentralized life.”

Our decentralized life. This course will take seriously Howells’ admonition to a “world outside” that among the chief values of American literature is its geographical and cultural diversity—its attentiveness to life beyond the big cities, the better known localities, the centers of political power, and the concentrations of capital. We will read numerous examples of regionalist fiction and poetry, many from the period about which Howells was writing: the second half of the 19th century, when such writers as Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, Charles Chesnutt, Sarah Orne Jewett, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Jack London worked in various ways to expand American literature into new spatial and sociocultural territories. We will also read selectively from the 20th and perhaps 21st centuries, exploring what regionalism becomes as an aesthetics of Realism gives way to Modernism and Postmodernism.

Throughout the course we will pay attention to the *uses* different writers make of regional space. How does an engagement with the local raise issues of national and global significance? How did local color writing enable writers from diverse subject positions to enter the literary marketplace? And perhaps above all else, what might we learn from regionalist writers now, when such out-of-the-way places as northern Appalachia, to cite our own region, reflect complex problems that deserve more attention than they are being given in U.S. mass media? What roles might creative writers and other artists play in order to raise consciousness about these problems, and what might an engagement with earlier regionalist writers teach us about ourselves?

Required Texts All texts (except for those uploaded to Sakai) are available at the Campus Center bookstore. If you do not already own copies of the texts ordered for this course, buy the editions listed below. If you happen already to own a different edition of a text and do not wish to purchase another, check with me to make sure your edition is acceptable.

Fetterley and Pryse, eds., *American Women Regionalists* (Norton)
Charles Chesnutt, *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line* (Penguin)
Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Penguin)
Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Signet)
Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Penguin)
Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Vintage)
Jean Toomer, *Cane* (Liveright)

Course schedule Tentative and subject to change

- 1/18 **Introduction and Course Overview**
- 1/23 **UnAmerican Literature? Regionalism and U.S. Literary Nationalism**
Primary texts: Freeman, "On the Walpole Road" and "A Poetess" (*AWW* 306-314, 365-377)
Secondary texts: Fetterley and Pryse, "Introduction" (*AWW* xi-xx); Fetterley, "Not in the Least American" (Sakai)
- 1/25 **Gender, Subjugation, and the Liberation of the Local**
Primary: Stowe, "The Minister's Housekeeper"; Cooke, "How Celia Changed Her Mind" (*AWW* 47-57, 137-153)
Secondary: Donovan, "Breaking the Sentence" (Sakai)
- 1/30 **Deep Ecologies**
Primary: Jewett, "A White Heron"; Austin, "The Land of Little Rain" and "The Basket Maker" (*AWW* 197-205, 567-77)
Secondary: Kowalewski, "Bioregional Perspectives in American Literature" (Sakai)
- 2/1 **Who Gets To Be "Local," I?**
Primary: Zitkala-Sä, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl," and "The Trial Path" (*AWW* 535-563)
Secondary: Hafen, "Indigenous Peoples and Place" (Sakai)
- 2/6 **Who Gets To Be "Local," II?**
Primary: Sui Sin Far, "The Sing Song Woman," "Mrs. Spring Fragrance," and "Its Wavering Image" (*AWW* 502-515, 526-531)
Secondary: Pryse, "Linguistic Regionalism and the Emergence of Chinese American Literature" (Sakai)
- 2/8 **Who Gets To Be "Local," III?**
Primary: Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," "Po' Sandy," and "The Passing of Grandison" (*Conjure Tales* 1-13)
Secondary: Birnbaum, "Dark Dialects" (Sakai)
- 2/13 **Additional Critical Problems I**
Primary: None (or better yet, all of the above!)
Secondary: Brodhead, "The Reading of Regions" (Sakai)
- 2/15 **Additional Critical Problems II**
Primary: None/all of the above
Secondary: Dainotto, "All the Regions Do Smilingly Revolt" (Sakai)
- 2/20 **Local Possibilities**
Primary text: Deland, "The Promises of Dorothea"
Secondary: None/all of the above
- 2/22 **Library Session: Advanced Research Strategies**
Meet at the Pelletier Library; no reading assignment
- 2/27 **"All over the map" projects** **"AOTM" project due**
- 2/29 **"All over the map" projects** **Paper 1 proposals due**
- 3/5 **Critical Case Studies I: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885)**
Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- 3/7 Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

3/12 Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

3/14 Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Paper 1 due

3/17-3/25 SPRING BREAK

3/26 **Critical Case Studies II: *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896)**

Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

3/28 Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

4/2 **Critical Case Studies III: *The Awakening* (1899)**

Chopin, *The Awakening*

4/4 Chopin, *The Awakening*

4/9 **Critical Case Studies IV: *O Pioneers!* (1913)**

Cather, *O Pioneers!*

4/11 Cather, *O Pioneers!*

4/16 **Critical Case Studies V: *Cane* (1923)**

Toomer, *Cane*

4/18 Toomer, *Cane*

Paper 2 proposals due

4/23 **Regionalisms Now**

Text(s) to be determined

4/25 **Regionalisms Now**

Text(s) to be determined

4/30 **Regionalisms Now**

Text(s) to be determined

Paper 2 due

Course policies and procedures

Contacting me In addition to my regular office hours, I am available for appointments. You will need to e-mail or talk to me before or after class to arrange one. I tend to do most of my e-mailing in the morning and early afternoon. I cannot be counted upon to check e-mail during the evening, though, so if you're wanting to correspond about an upcoming assignment, do not wait until the evening before it's due to contact me.

Readings You should complete the assigned reading before each class and be ready to discuss it. During the first half of the semester this will require you to have read 2-3 short stories and 1 work of literary theory or criticism prior to each class. During the second half of the semester it will require you to have read the entire novel by the first day we discuss it. To borrow a line from a great teacher of mine, you should also think of reading as a contact sport. Active reading requires writing, so be sure to mark your text, noting specific passages, questions, etc. you would like to discuss in class.

Attendance and participation Given the size and nature of a junior seminar, the success of our course depends on the enthusiastic participation of each and every member. I thus expect you to arrive to every class having completed the assigned reading and prepared yourself to contribute to class discussion. Come with responses to the questions I may have posed during the class before. Come also with questions and comments of your own—and, more generally, with a willingness to involve yourself in the give-and-take of that day's discussion. I do a fair amount of preparation to ensure productive discussions, but my favorite classes are inevitably those that assume lives of their own (which is to say, those in which students take the lead and work collaboratively to address the issues they find most compelling).

You may wish to e-mail or meet with me before or after class if there are specific issues you would like to discuss. I consider these forms of participation, too, though they cannot entirely substitute for active in-class participation.

Your participation grade (25% of your final grade) will reflect how well you make these contributions. The student who does not miss class and comes always prepared, always willing to contribute insights of his or her own, and always willing to respond thoughtfully to the questions and comments of others will receive a grade in the "A" range. The student who does not miss class but contributes less frequently will receive a "B." The student who misses class routinely (four or five unexcused absences) will receive a "C," as will the student who shows up but participates infrequently and/or unpreparedly. The student who receives a "D" participation grade likely has six unexcused absences. The student who has seven or more unexcused absences simply fails the course.

Excused absences generally involve family emergencies, illness, or activities related to other collegiate commitments (athletics, e.g., or the occasional field trip required by another course). Excused absences do not generally involve personal travel plans; if your ride home for fall break necessitates that you leave campus a day early, you do so at the expense of an unexcused absence. In the case of illness, you are required to provide a doctor's note. Should you miss class for any reason, you are responsible for knowing what went on, including any changes to the syllabus or revisions to assignments.

Papers You will write two papers for this course, the first of which will be approximately 5 pp. in length, the second approximately 10 pp. Both will require proposals to be turned in two weeks before the paper's due date. We will discuss before paper 1 is due what constitutes a successful paper, and I will provide you a handout that outlines my expectations and explains what in my book separates "A" from "B" from "C" work, etc.

Exams There will be a take-home final exam for this course, details of which will be discussed during the final few weeks of the semester.

"All Over the Map" project Much of what we are reading this semester was first published in magazine form in such venues as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, the *Century*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Many of these magazines are available in digital form in one or another online archive, and we will devote one week of the semester toward scavenging among these magazines for interesting items—perhaps even items of local interest to you or us—and reporting back to each other what we've found. Additional details will be provided in advance of the assignment.

"Critical case study" group project The second half of the semester is devoted to novels, and unlike the first half of the semester, I am not requiring that we all read a single work of literary criticism in connection with each text. Rather, I will ask that, in groups of three, you canvass the recent scholarship on the novel (let's say "recent" means 1990 or later), identify three journal articles or book chapters that seem relevant to the course (and interesting in their own right), and prepare a presentation, complete with handouts, that describes what you have found. Your goal is both to give your classmates and me a sense of the recent scholarly conversations (what topics or debates keep coming up, etc.?) and to jump-start that day's class discussion. Each will be due on the final day of our discussion of a novel. Additional details will be provided later.

Plagiarism Article III, section 3 of the Allegheny College Honor Code defines plagiarism as "using the ideas or words of another without citing the sources from which the ideas or words are taken." We will devote a portion of an upcoming class to discussing plagiarism and how to avoid it. Know now simply that I take it very seriously, that it will result in an "F" for the course, and that I will refer any instance of it to the Honor Committee.

Grading Your grade for the course will be computed as follows:

Participation	25%	AOTM project.....	10%
Paper #1	15%	Group presentation.....	10%
Paper #2	25%	Final exam.....	15%

Disability concerns Students with disabilities who believe they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact Disability Services at (814) 332-2898. Disability Services is part of the Learning Commons and is located in Pelletier Library. Please do this as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.

Religious accommodation If you need to miss class due to a religious observance, then please speak to me in advance to make arrangements to cover material from that day. See <http://sites.allegheny.edu/religiouslife/religious-holy-days>.