

American Studies 213: Heroes and Villains in American Film  
TYS Summer Course – Draft Syllabus

**Instructor:** Susan Pramschufer  
**E-mail:** susanmp@umd.edu  
**Office:** Tawes 2232  
**Office Hours:** By appointment

**Course Description and Objectives:**

Stories detailing a hero's epic journey and a villain's ultimate undoing, most often at the hands of the hero, make a persistent appearance in popular American films. From the heroic cowboy, whose brave but isolated character is frequently found in classic John Ford westerns, to today's ever-popular comic book movie superheroes, these traditionally white, heterosexual, and "able-bodied" men work to bring "order" to society, often by defeating a perceived enemy who will not or cannot fit into that "order."

In this course, we will examine the complex, changing, and ever-present representations of heroes and villains in American film. Beginning with a foundational understanding of how heroes and, conversely, villains have been defined through classic Hollywood film, we will explore how these definitions have shifted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century in various narrative genres, including westerns, war films, fantasy, science fiction, and, of course, superhero movies. In particular, we will be focusing on how the hero and villain maintain or disrupt specific cultural ideologies concerning race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability. This course will examine how these various ideologies have evolved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, impacting the ways in which heroes and villains are both represented in American film and perceived by diverse audiences. Finally, we will examine our own complicated and sometimes troubling identification with these heroes, even when they might stand in stark contrast to our cultural values and identities. Through the close study of this popular medium, students will develop analytical skills, using methods drawn from the humanities, to bridge academic inquiry across the fields of Cinema/Media Studies and American Studies.

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand how films may be viewed as cultural artifacts (reflecting and even helping to shape ideological shifts in American culture) and how representations of heroes and villains in particular speak to and about American culture.
- Understand how film representations speak to/reflect cultural attitudes regarding race, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability.
- Understand the intersection of American Studies and Cinema Studies (including the applicable concepts in film theory and cultural studies) and utilize appropriate terminology for these fields of study.
- Effectively research and write about American film and culture.
- Demonstrate improved critical viewing/reading and analytical skills.

**Readings:**

All readings are available on ELMS.

**Viewing Films:**

All of the films will be available on our course space on ELMS. Please be aware that the films we are viewing may include sensitive material, including nudity and graphic violence, which may be offensive to some viewers.

**Course Requirements:**

**Essays/Projects-**

In this course you are required to complete three formal assignments: a scene analysis, a creative project (including a research paper), and a final group project. The scene analysis and essay components of the projects will be of varying length, depending on the assignment, typed in 12-point standard font (Times New Roman), and double-spaced. Computer errors will not be excused, so please complete your assignments and submit them on ELMS ahead of the deadlines. Please let me know at least a day in

advance (prior to 5pm the day before an assignment is due) if you are having a problem meeting a deadline. Even if you miss a class, you are still responsible for turning the work in by the due date!

For the scene analysis, you will be closely analyzing a particular scene or scenes in one of the films, using appropriate terminology for a film analysis and detailing how that scene or scenes work to support a specific theme.

The creative project (Exploring Our Heroes and Villains Project) is a two-part assignment. In the first part of the assignment, you will be asked to create your own hero and villain, presenting these characters' strengths or powers, desires, and backstories. In the second part, you will analyze how this hero and villain pair do/do not align with current cultural ideologies and expectations, as well as how your characters compare to the film representations we are studying in this course. You will be required to utilize specific terminology associated with film and cultural studies as well as the concepts and ideas brought up in class, the readings and your research.

For the final group project, you will be applying the concepts brought up throughout the course to a film of your choosing (one that was not assigned), creating a nuanced analysis presented in a digital platform (website, PowerPoint, etc.). Each group will present their project to the class at the end of the summer session during our final class meeting.

### **Participation and Informal Assignments-**

I expect you to be actively engaged in this course, so please prepare by completing the film viewings and readings prior to the dates listed in the schedule below and attend all class meetings!

You will also frequently be asked in class to write short responses to the films you viewed, so please prepare for this by taking copious notes while you watch the films. These in-class writings will be used to stimulate class discussion and, at times, to quiz you on the viewings and/or readings. If you miss class on a day an informal writing assignment is completed, you must provide an acceptable documented excuse (as outlined below) to make up the assignment.

### **Grade Breakdown-**

Scene analysis = 10%

Exploring Our Heroes and Villains Project - Part 1 = 15%

Exploring Our Heroes and Villains Project - Part 2 = 25%

Final Group Project = 30%

Informal Writing Assignments and Activities = 20%

### **Absences:**

The University allows absence in particular cases (illness, representing the University at an approved event, religious holidays), *but you must provide adequate documentation*. For a medically necessitated absence from a *single* lecture during the course, you may submit a self-signed note to me when you return to class, identifying the date of and reason for the absence, and acknowledging that the information in the note is accurate (in accordance with the Code of Student Conduct). *All major assignments will still be due on the dates assigned.*

For any other medically necessitated absences, including those that require missing more than one class session in a semester or those that occur during one of the major assignment due dates noted on the schedule, you must provide written documentation of the illness from a health provider verifying you were unable to participate and complete the work in order to make up any missed assignments. For more information about the University's attendance policies, please visit [https://www.faculty.umd.edu/teach/attend\\_student.html](https://www.faculty.umd.edu/teach/attend_student.html).

If you will be missing class for a planned University event or religious holiday, you must let me know during the *first day of class* and provide written documentation so arrangements can be made to make up any missed assignments. For any other excused absences, please let me know ahead of time when possible and be sure to get the assignments from a classmate, as the readings scheduled may be changed. *If you miss an in-class assignment*

as a result of an excused absence, it is your responsibility to contact me by the next class period to schedule a time to make up the assignment.

### **Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty:**

Plagiarism is a form of cheating. Make sure that your work is original. Any time you use someone else's work and do not give that person credit, it is plagiarism. Copying the work of another person, whether an essay or answers during a test, is considered plagiarism. If you are uncertain about sharing vs. plagiarism, be sure to ask for clarification before you turn in the assignment. If you are "suspected" of plagiarism, you will bear the burden of proof. You must be able to present rough drafts or related materials and discuss the topic thoughtfully.

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit <https://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>.

### **Student Learning:**

Your success in this class is important to me; therefore, if there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to both meet your needs and the requirements of the course.

#### **Classroom Environment-**

Our classroom environment will be built on mutual respect, valuing behaviors such as listening to others before responding, critiquing our peers' ideas rather than our peers themselves, and framing disagreements as opportunities to develop and nuance our own positions. If at any point in the semester you feel like I can better facilitate a respectful and productive learning space, please come and talk to me. I would love to hear your ideas.

#### **Support Services-**

If you have a registered disability and wish to discuss accommodations with me, please let me know. In order to receive official university accommodations, you will need to register and request accommodations through the Accessibility and Disability Service. ADS provides services for students with physical and emotional disabilities and is located in 0106 Shoemaker on the University of Maryland campus. Information about Accessibility and Disability Service can be found [www.counseling.umd.edu/ads](http://www.counseling.umd.edu/ads). You can also reach ADS by phone at 301-314-7682 or email at [adsfrontdesk@umd.edu](mailto:adsfrontdesk@umd.edu).

#### **Writing Center-**

The Writing Center offers free assistance with any undergraduate writing assignment. For hours or to schedule an appointment, visit the Writing Center website: <http://english.umd.edu/academics/writingcenter>.

---

## **Superheroes and Supervillains**

7/8 M Introduction to the course

#### **Readings:**

"The American Monomyth in a New Century" from *The Myth of the American Superhero* by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett (p. 3-17)

"Values and Villains: What's at Stake?" from *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* by Danny Fingeroth (p. 155-168)

#### **Recommended Reading:**

"The Hero and the God" from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell (p. 30-46)

T      *Unbreakable* (Shyamalan, 2000)

Reading:

“Refracting Mental Illness Through Disability: Towards a New Politic of Cultural Locations” by Valerie Palmer-Mehta

### “Cowboys and Indians”

W      **Exploring Our Heroes and Villains Project - Part I due**

*The Searchers* (Ford, 1956)

Reading:

“Introduction” from *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* by Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr (p. 1-6)

Th      View:  
*No Country for Old Men* (Coen and Coen, 2007)

Readings:

“Revisiting Heroism and Community in Contemporary Westerns: *No Country for Old Men* and *3:10 to Yuma*” by Mary P. Nichols (p. 207-211)

Recommended Reading:

“Coda” from *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* by Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr (p. 269-280)

### National Heroes and the Enemy “Other”

F      View:  
*Bataan* (Garnett, 1943)

Reading:

“Strange Fruit: White, Black, and Asian in the World War II Combat Film *Bataan*” by Brian Locke

---

7/15    M      View:  
*American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014)  
Noam Chomsky interview

Reading:

“Prologue: Evil in the Crosshairs” from *American Sniper* by Chris Kyle

T      **Scene analysis due**

View:

*Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017)

Reading:

“Battle Scars: *Wonder Woman*, Aesthetic Geopolitics and Disfigurement in Hollywood Film” by Philip Kirby

## Detectives and Criminals

- W View:  
*Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974)
- Reading:  
“Chinatown and the Detective Story” by R. Barton Palmer

- Th View:  
*Chan is Missing* (Wang, 1982)
- Reading:  
“Wayne Wang’s Chinatown: *Chan is Missing*” by Betsy Huang

## Cops and Robbers

- F *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967)
- Reading:  
The Motion Picture Production Code  
“From ‘F\*\*\*\*\* Cops!’ to ‘F\*\*\*\*\* Media!’: Bonnie and Clyde for a Sixties America” by Steven Alan Carr
- 

- 7/22 M **Exploring Our Heroes and Villains Project – Part II due**
- View:  
*Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991)
- Reading:  
“Gender Bender Over *Thelma & Louise*: A White-Hot Debate Rages Over Whether *Thelma & Louise* Celebrates Liberated Females, Male Bashers – Or Outlaws” by Richard Schickel

## The Princess and the Evil Stepmother

- T View:  
*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937)
- Readings:  
“Snow White” from *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim  
“The Dichotomy of the Great Mother Archetype in Disney Heroines and Villainesses” by Sarah Lynne Bowman
- W View:  
*Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014)
- Reading:  
“Maleficent Reborn: Disney’s Fairytale View of Gender Reaches Puberty” by Benjamin Justice

## Enduring Myths

Th View:  
*Star Wars: A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977)

Reading:  
“Facist Faith in the *Star Wars* Universe” from *The Myth of the American Superhero* by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett (p. 265-282)

F **Final Group Project due**

View:  
*Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn, 2017)

---

\*\*\*Note- Syllabus subject to change based on the needs of the students and instructor’s discretion.