

**LEH 301-ZL01W—Perfect America:
The Utopian Impulse in American
Cultural History and Literature**
Saturdays, 9:15 -11:45, Carman 332
Spring 2007

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Office Hours: Saturdays 12-1 p.m.

Course Description:

What would a perfect America and the perfect American look like? This course will consider the importance of the utopian ideal and the perfect community in American cultural history and literature. The course will begin by investigating the discursive origins of the United States: the peculiarly American combination of the utopian and the apocalyptic/dystopian. We will then proceed to a consideration of real and imagined communities: from historical records and literary representations of intentional communities like Brook Farm; to utopian novels aimed at critique and reform of an imperfect America; to geographical representations of the perfect America in visual art, utopian theme parks such as Disneyland, and the World's Fairs.

Drawing from the academic disciplines of literature, history, philosophy, film and the visual arts, this interdisciplinary course will consider the importance of the utopian ideal in American cultural history and literature.

Books available at the Lehman College bookstore:

Bellamy, Edward *Looking Backward*
Emerson, Ralph Waldo *"Nature" and Other Writings*
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins *Herland*
Hawthorne, Nathaniel *The Blithedale Romance*
Lowry, Lois *The Giver*
Paine, Thomas *Common Sense*
Thoreau, Henry David *Walden*

Additional short readings will be posted on the course Blackboard site, emailed, or distributed in class.

Course Requirements:

Informal (ungraded) assignments: Students will keep a journal throughout the semester as a record of their responses to verbal and visual texts (both in-class and out-of-class) and to build ideas for essays. 5 short informal essays (2-3 pages each) will be assigned over the course of the semester. The short informal essays will be handed in for comment, but will not be graded. At the end of the semester, students will turn in a portfolio of their work which will include the journal and the short informal essays. The portfolio will be evaluated by both the student and the professor.

Formal (graded) assignments: Students will revise TWO of the five short informal essays and submit them as formal essays. The first formal essay will be due around midterm, the second will be due at end-of-term. The formal essay is a substantial revision of a short informal essay and *will be graded*. Formal essays will also be evaluated by the student in the form of a cover letter.

Summary of requirements:

25% **1st formal essay** – due March 24
25% **2nd formal essay** – due May 19
50 % **Portfolio** of student work – due May 12

Changes to the syllabus will be posted on the Blackboard site in announcements.

Class date	Topic and readings	Assignments due
Unit 1:	America as the land of possibility and plenitude: the explorers, the pilgrims, and the Indians.	
Feb 3	Course Introduction: What is Utopia? Video: Star Trek episode Film suggestion: <i>Lost Horizons</i> (Frank Capra, 1937)	Letter to Prof. Radford (delivered via email by 2/9)
Feb 10	The New World: Paradise & its Inhabitants Introduction to Blackboard Reading packet distributed in class on Feb 3. 1. Plato's <i>Critias</i> (excerpts) 2. Cluster: America in the European Imagination 3. Columbus's <i>Journals</i> and Letters (excerpts) 4. Fray Marcos de Niza's "A Relation of Fray Marcos... Touching his discovery of Ceuola or Cibola..."	
Feb 17	John Winthrop Selections Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative (excerpt) Film suggestion: <i>The Village</i> (Shyamalan, 2004)	Short Informal #1 DUE
Unit 2:	Revolution and the Democratic Utopia.	
Feb 24	What is an American? Crevecoeur's "Letters from an American Farmer" (excerpts of letters 3, 9, & 12) Ben Franklin's <i>Autobiography</i> , excerpts	Journals DUE
March 3	Revolution and Envisioning a Nation Paine's <i>Common Sense</i> (excerpts) Jefferson's draft of the <i>Declaration of Independence</i> Stanton & Douglass responses	
Unit 3:	Individualism, the Perfectable Self, and Brook Farm	
March 10	Transcendentalism R.W. Emerson's "Nature"	Short Informal #2 DUE
March 17	Living Transcendentalism I Thoreau's <i>Walden</i> (excerpts)	
March 24	Living Transcendentalism II Louisa May Alcott, "Transcendental Wild Oats" Hawthorne <i>The Blithedale Romance</i> **Research group: Brook Farm & Fruitlands	Formal Essay #1 DUE
Fri, Mar 30	LAST DAY TO WITHDRAW w/o academic penalty	
March 31	Hawthorne, <i>The Blithedale Romance</i> , cont. **Research groups: Oneida, Shakers, etc.	Short Informal #3 DUE
April 7	Spring Break – NO CLASS	

Unit 4:	Utopia and Social Reform	
April 14	Bellamy's Socialist Revision of America Edward Bellamy's <i>Looking Backward</i> Guest Lecturer on economics	Journals DUE
April 21	Class meets online Bellamy, cont.	Short Informal #4 DUE
April 28	Gilman's Feminist Utopia Charlotte Perkins Gilman's <i>Herland</i> and segments of <i>Women and Economics</i>	
May 5	Race and Utopia Reading: TBA Film: <i>Buck and the Preacher</i> (Poitier, 1972)	Short Informal #5 DUE
Unit 5	World Gone Wrong: Dystopia	
May 12	A World without Pain, a World without Love Lois Lowry's <i>The Giver</i>	Portfolio DUE
May 19	NO CLASS – All work for course must be submitted by this date	Formal Essay #2 DUE