

# ENGLISH 123: LITERATURE AND GENRE

## *There's No Place Like Home: Realism and Fantasy*



PROFESSOR RUSSELL A. POTTER

Asynchronous Online

<https://eng123section4.blogspot.com>

Ever since the earliest days of the European colonization of North America, we've been dreaming. One could even say we were dreaming before we arrived, conjuring up fanciful lands to the west from the Irish *Tír Na nÓg* (the Land of Youth) to the Portuguese *Ilha das Sete Cidades* (the Island of Seven Cities). In the time since then, our dreams have grown and altered, sprinkled with the day-residue of rural and then of urban life, and shadowed with the nightmares of slavery and genocide. We've dreamed futures, too, some of which may even have come to pass, or yet may. The vehicle for our dreaming has been our literature, and in our films – in this class we'll look at the ways these imagined lives and events have shaped the actual landscape and culture of the “real” world of today.

We'll begin with *The Wizard of Oz*, perhaps the quintessential American dream narrative (though it should be pointed out that, in the original books, Oz is a *real* place – in the sixth Oz book Dorothy moves her Uncle Henry and Aunt Em to Oz, and never returns to Kansas again.). We'll follow it through of its many permutations, from *The Wiz* to *Wicked*, and arrive back home to set our sights on the future. We'll read *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, one of the most powerful of post-apocalyptic novels, as well as Kurt Vonegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* with its grim reflections on human inanity. We'll next look at fantastical narratives written to highlight the inequities of sexism and theocracy (*The Stepford Wives*, *The Handmaid's Tale*) and racism (*The Underground Railway*). Finally, we'll revisit the post-apocalyptic future, but in the form of a land that has been blasted backwards into an agrarian near-Utopia, with Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*.

As with other sections of our department's 12x courses, our aim here is to provide a rich experience of literature, even as we ask ourselves what literature is. How do *texts* shape our worlds? What are the generic boundaries between fanciful literature (fairy tales, science fiction, or speculative fiction) and the purportedly more "realistic" world of conventional literary fiction? How do they differently contribute to our understandings of cultural power and identity? What difference does it make when a story is conveyed in a graphical form? In a film? These and other questions will be the framework for our online discussions.

### COURSE BOOKS

L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*  
Walter M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*  
Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*  
Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives*  
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (graphic version)  
Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (graphic version)  
Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*  
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home Expanded Edition* (Library of America)

### COURSE FILMS

(These films will be viewed individual by students at home)

*The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939)  
*The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, 1978)  
*Return to Oz* (Walter Murch, 1985)  
*Slaughterhouse-Five* (George Roy Hill, 1972)  
*The Handmaid's Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1980)  
*The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975)

### COURSE STRUCTURE

Each week, we'll have a reading – a novel or part of a novel – and in some weeks, there will also be a film, which you'll be responsible for watching on your own. Every Monday, there will be a new main blog post, offering some initial thoughts and questions about the week's readings and/or viewings. Each student will be responsible for posting a 1-2 paragraph response to each of these main posts. There will also be a midterm and a final paper on a text or film of the student's choice from among the readings and viewings we'll have shared; I'm always happy to read a draft of a paper in progress, and you'll have the option of revising your midterms based on my feedback and comments. If you'd like to have comments on a draft of your final paper, you'll need to hand it in at least two weeks before the due date given in the syllabus. While I will accept emailed drafts, all final papers must be handed in via Blackboard.

## GRADING POLICY

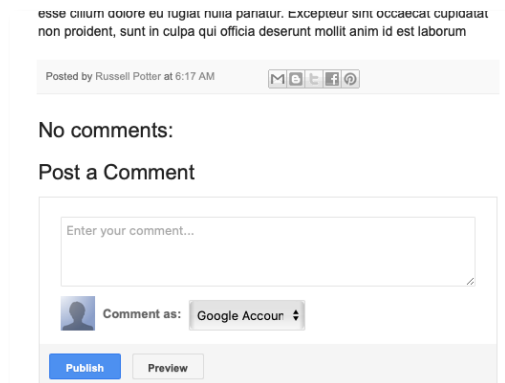
There are two kinds of work that will be evaluated for this class: the first is *quantitative* and the second, *qualitative*. The quantitative elements are:

- 1) Responses to each week's blog post
- 2) Attendance and class participation

These elements are essential requirements of the class, but are not graded. This is for two reasons: first, because having the blog posts ungraded creates, I hope, a more relaxed and informal space for expressing your opinions on our texts and viewings; second, because these elements are simple requirements. That is, if you attend regularly and respond to all required blog posts, you will receive full credit for these components and the grade for your formal written work will be unaffected. The only effect that these two areas have would be in a case where you missed classes or responses, which would have a negative effect on your final grade.

The *qualitative* element of the class is the formal, written work. As always, I am happy to read and respond to drafts at any point, and those are not graded; however, once your final version has been submitted, it will be graded. I assign a slightly higher weight to the second paper, in order to recognize the growth and improvement that I hope your writing will show over the length of the course.

A note on our blog: The comment field is at the end of each blog posting. If you use a Google identity, you can automatically tag your posts; you may also simply post anonymously – but in that case be sure to include your name in your post. I also recommend composing your response in a separate file, and then using “paste” to insert it – that way, if there are any issues with the posting, you won't lose your text. Remember also that you can reply to other students' posts; when you use the “reply:” function your text will be automatically threaded. NB: Be sure to have “cookies” enabled or the blog won't work properly.



## COURSE SCHEDULE

Week I (September 9) Thursday: Introduction to the course: What is literature? What is genre?

Week II (September 13, 16) Monday: Backgrounds on Oz. Thursday: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Week III (September 20, 23) Monday: Oz on stage and screen. Thursday: film, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

Week IV (September 27, 30) Monday: Beyond Oz; film *The Wiz* (1978). Thursday: The Darker side of Oz; film, *Return to Oz* (1985).

Week V (October 4, 7) Monday: 1<sup>st</sup> half of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Thursday: Second half of *Slaughterhouse-Five*; film, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Week VI (October 14) Monday: *The Stepford Wives*. Thursday: Film, *The Stepford Wives* (1975)

Week VII (October 18, 21) Monday: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, first half. For Thursday, finish *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Week VIII (October 25, 28) Monday: Film, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1980). Thursday: *The Underground Railroad – Ajarty, Georgia, Ridgeway*.

Week IX (November 1, 4) Monday: *The Underground Railroad – South Carolina, Stevens, North Carolina*. Thursday: *The Underground Railroad – Ethel, Tennessee, Caesar*.

Week X (November 8, 11) Monday: *The Underground Railroad – Indiana, Mabel, The North*. Thursday: *The Underground Railroad*, episode one (dir. Barry Jenkins).

Week XI (November 15, 18) *Kindred*.

Week XII (November 22) Monday: Audio adaptation of *Kindred* starring Alfre Woodard (link on our blog).

Week XIII (November 29, December 2) Monday: *Always Coming Home*: “A First Note,” “The Quail Song,” “Toward and Archaeology of the Future.” Thursday: *Always Coming Home*: “Stone Telling Part I,” “The Serpentine Codex,” “Chart of the Nine Houses,” “Where it is,” “Pandora Worries About What She is Doing: the Pattern.”

Week XIV (December 6, 9) Monday: *Always Coming Home*: “Time and the City.” Thursday: “Stone Telling Part II.”

Week XV (December 13, 16) Monday: *Always Coming Home*: “Stone Telling Part III.” Thursday: Review and conclusions.