English 642: Graduate Seminar: The American Novel and Its Genres

This graduate seminar focuses on the issues of Genre in the development of American literary culture with specific attention to the ways in which genre issues shape the development of the Novel and reveal or confront the underlying issues of American democracy, including the conquest of the frontier, race, social and political justice, and ideas of identity formation. These broad terms are given meaning through a focus on the way specific genres are transformed repeatedly in the American novel often in a process that involves the fusion of generic forms. Thus, the fusion of the historical novel and the Gothic mode receives attention through the exploration of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The course also includes some less well known and perhaps non-canonical works, including three intriguing works of science fiction: Jack London’s *The Star Rover*, George Schuyler’s *Black No More*, and Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*. London’s novel picks up on the themes of American history and Schuyler’s develops new treatments of the idea of race while Collins brings these issues home to a media generation in which the ultimate form of the Gothic is torture porn. Underlying genre concepts of tragedy and comedy are brought into sharper focus with the close examination of novels by both men and women that re-shape the conventional understandings of American experience. Thus, Willa Cather’s feminist revision of both pastoral and bildungsroman in *My Antonia* will be set off against the treatment of love and war in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. We will explore other feminist revisions of genre forms in Anita Loos’s hilarious assault on the usually male and frequently sexist picaresque form, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and Ellen Glasgow’s transformation of the Jane Austen novel of manners into one of the masterpieces of modern southern writing, *The Sheltered Life*. We end with Philip Roth’s *The Great American Novel*, a comic re-examination of almost all the genre issues that we shall discuss this semester.

Students will produce several short papers and presentations as well as a final seminar paper. Students should gain a subtle and useful understanding of genre theory. In addition, students should emerge from this course with a greater understanding of the meaning of genre, the specific conventions that mark some of the crucial forms of American fiction, and the ways in which authors work within and transform genre traditions.