Anne LaGrand, East Grand Rapids High School, East Grand Rapids, Michigan
This set of lessons for a high school literature class asks students to think about the idea of a frontier from the perspective of science fiction. During their reading of works, such as Ray Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles*, students are asked to compare and contrast fictional frontier’s themes with the historical frontier experience, and such major themes as rugged individualism and the often indistinct boundary between ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism.’

The frontier spirit in Science fiction: A study of the West through Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles* and popular culture

Anne LaGrand
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**Purpose:**
The purpose of this unit will be to explore aspects of frontier literature and how it was shaped by the characteristics of early settlers in America – specifically the spirit of rugged individualism, courage, ingenuity, and adaptation to harsh environments. We will then examine how Americans developed their own style of literature, and how this pushed the limits of another type of frontier once the line of geographical expansion had reached its limit. This will lead to an exploration of science fiction literature, film and television, specifically looking at how the spirit of frontier literature is incorporated into many works of science fiction.

**Procedure:**
1.) We will begin with a brief overview of the early settlers in America. Students will be asked to define the term “frontier” – both in its conventional use (i.e. the line between settled and unsettled territory) and the more accurate definition according to what happened on the frontier. Students will first be asked for their first reactions and assumptions to the terms *frontier, pioneer*, and *cowboy*. I anticipate that their responses may include:
   - sense of adventure, the unknown
   - discovery of “unsettled” territory
   - freedom, being in charge of one’s own fate
   - rugged individualism
   - promise of profit, fortune
   - brave, adventurous, glamorous
   - independent, self-sufficient
   - hard-working
   - stoic, not emotional
   - honorable, followed a strict moral code (“cowboy code”)

I will ask students to evaluate their responses by asking them the following questions:
   - Which of our assumptions would fit into our understanding of the *myth* of the frontier, and which would apply to the *true* representation of pioneer life?
   - How do we form our “romanticized” assumptions about frontier life?

2.) Then we will explore excerpts from pieces of early frontier literature from James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* and Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* I will ask students to note particular aspects of frontier life as shown through these excerpts. They will be asked to critically, taking notes on the atmosphere and setting, the characteristics of those living on the frontier, the general tone of the piece, and what message the authors may be trying to communicate through this piece of literature. They will then evaluate to what degree these works of literature match the common assumptions about the frontier that we addressed in the opening session. This will lead us to examine the way in which this spirit influenced early westerns in both film and television.
3.) The next step will involve a comparison between the depictions of the frontier in western literature and the actual primary documents from that era. Using a variety of primary source documents (mainly from the Library of Congress site and the PBS site on “The West”) students will compare the myth of the West to the actual experiences of those on the frontier.

4.) We will then look at a timeline, showing the evolution of the frontier. We will examine distinct time periods, showing how in each case, the “limits” of the frontier are reached, then we extend those limits.
   - By 1890 – settlement of the continental U.S. (“closing” of the frontier?)
   - 1850s – 1917: Age of imperialism – expansion of our frontiers beyond the continental U.S.
   - 1960: JFK’s inaugural: insisted that the frontier was not over, that Americans: “stand on the edge of a new frontier, a frontier of unknown challenges and perils. I am asking you to be new pioneers of that new Frontier.”

This will also involve looking at the close of the frontier and how this affected US policy and culture. We will examine how American writers experimented with new forms of literature at the turn of the 20th century, and how this shaped America’s identity as a nation. We will then look at how literature changed both in form and subject matter during this period.

5.) In examining the “final frontier” in our timeline, we will then explore the ways in which science fiction could be considered a form of “frontier literature.” For example:
   - In science fiction, new lands act as antagonists in the plot - not much different than the problems encountered by pioneers on the western plain.
     ■ “The land seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggles in its somber wastes.” – Willa Cather
   - Both Westerns and science fiction are about travel, movement, and spaciousness.
     ■ “not about place but about motion, not about fulfillment but about desire.” – Wallace Stegner.

6.) We will then read a short story, “The Settlers” from Ray Bradbury’s Martian Chronicles. Students will be asked to draw parallels between the situation in this story and the experiences of the pioneers on the American West. They should consider:
   - Reasons for leaving
   - Enticement to go to Mars (why?)
   - Government actions
   - Experiences of the first ones to settle

7.) As a class, we will then examine some of the common Western themes and motifs that can be found in The Martian Chronicles. Students should consider ideas such as:
   - Interaction between intruders and indigenous peoples. (plus – perception of the other culture as “strange”)
   - Technology – merits and detriments
   - Spirit of exploration
   - Conflict and assimilation
   - Civilization and savagery
   - Lack of respect for indigenous cultures.

   For the last two aspects, we will specifically examine a story called “And the Moon Be Still as Bright” which recounts the story of the 4th expedition to Mars, which turns out to be successful because the Martians were infected by chicken pox by humans from the first three expeditions, and have been virtually obliterated. This has obvious parallels to the smallpox epidemic brought to the Native Americans by the first European settlers. The disdain of the humans toward the dying Martian culture is evident in the views of most of the explorers. One notes: “There aren’t enough, I’ll lay you money, to be a native problem. This planet is through.” There is only one human, Spender, who is concerned that Earth has completely destroyed a beautiful,
civilized culture. He says: “We Earth Men have a talent for ruining big, beautiful things.” He respects this fallen culture, unlike his comrades, who delight in destroying pieces of art and architecture by using them for target practice.

8.) We will then look at the rise of science fiction literature in the mid 20th century, specifically the influence of western expansion in science fiction literature. Students will be asked to examine certain excerpts of science fiction literature and determine whether this genre could be considered distinctly “American.” Using excerpts from Bradbury and other works, we will look at how the spirit of the West can be found in both sub-genres – the “Science fiction Western” and the “Space Western.” We will then examine the way in which this influenced popular culture, using examples from classic Sci-fi like Star Wars, Babylon 5, Battlestar Galactica, and Star Trek, but also more recent works like Firefly. We will specifically use some examples from Firefly to examine the parallels between Westerns and Science fiction. These may include:

- Clash of cultures – with indigenous peoples
- Borderlands – outcasts of society
- Western settings, tone
- Harsh conditions - survival requires ingenuity, quick-thinking
- Civilization vs. savagery
- Defining a moral code

9.) Finally, we will examine Science fiction as a reinvention or resurgence of the spirit of Western literature. As many literary theorists have noted, science fiction allows us to “reinscribe the hopes and fears that shaped the stories of the 19th and 20th centuries.” In a sense, historical writing and science fiction share common roots, and by examining the past, we can get a clearer view of the future. Finally, students can use science fiction to re-examine the gray areas of history. As in science fiction, in history there are rarely cases of black and white; history is far more complicated. The moral code in Westerns, including sci-fi westerns does not adhere to straightforward, rule-driven morality, but rather to a higher sense of right and wrong. As Carl Abbott writes: “Both historians and science fiction writers have converged on the same understanding that both the past and future are complicated places.”

The unit will close with several open-ended questions about science fiction literature such as:

- What influenced the rise of science fiction literature?
- In what ways could science fiction literature be linked to the expansion of the frontier?
- Should “space westerns” be considered a new genre of literature, or merely a repetition of an old theme in a futuristic setting?
- Could the theme of the frontier be expanded in additional ways? What’s next?

**Assignment:**
Find one of more stories by Bradbury that explicitly relate to aspects of the Western frontier. In addition, find examples from popular culture (film, TV or music) that show influences from the American West. Explain how these are linked to the mythology of the West as well as actual historical evidence from the West. Show clear connections between the Bradbury stories you’ve chosen and the examples from popular culture.


