**THE NATIONAL AND KAPODISTRIAN UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS**



# Faculty of English Studies

5th semester elective

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Mondays, 12:00-14:00, Amphitheatre 432

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Office and Consulting Hours:

Mondays and Wednesdays, 14:15-15:15

(Office #703)

**Course Profile:**

Myths, legends, and folktales seem never to go out of style, constantly making comebacks (and not only in popular culture). Why the appeal? Besides pleasantly satisfying escapist tendencies or our need for sensational answers to our existential questions, and exercising our imagination, myths and legends have survived as the synecdoche for, and condensation of, the defining character of a nation or a culture. This course, through its detailed examination of American-born legends and myths created and disseminated from the 15th to the early 19th century will attempt to elucidate the defining traits of the nascent culture of the United States. Such knowledge can then be used in consequent evaluations of the North American literature and cultural phenomena. Following the theoretical approach of American Cultural Studies critic Stephen Greenblatt, who sees culture and text as interacting through the manipulation of communicational “codes,” the myths and legends will be examined both as literary (or oratory) statements and as negotiators of cultural norms. At the same time, those legends also serve as charter agents of a more shadowy kind, equally trafficking problematic concepts and rules that culture would otherwise refuse to acknowledge openly. Students will therefore be called upon to evaluate and comment both on the overt and clandestine—to the point of becoming deconstructed—meanings of the stories of, among others, Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Calamity Jane, Pecos Bill, John Henry, Ragged Dick, La Llorona, and a number of texts about the First Peoples that show the influences of their persecuted cultures on their supplanters.

**Aims:**

To familiarize students with a number of key myths, legends and fairy tales native to the American soil (at least in their final form), which help form the U.S. literary and cultural background.



To render students capable of recognizing and evaluating the importance of those myths in the shaping of a national literature and culture, and of using those myths further as tools for literary and cultural applications, theoretical or practical.



To a lesser extent, to sharpen student skills in dealing with the various folk genres, myth, and legend theoretically.



To train students further in deconstructive thinking and cultural criticism, allowing them to use this folk material as practice in the discovery of hidden meanings and complexities or flaws in reasoning of what appears to be fairly “straightforward” and “simple” traditional material.



To offer students a glimpse of the diversity and depth of the USA folk tradition.



To have fun: you don’t love it, you don’t learn—a pity to waste time like that!



**Procedures and Grading Components:**

Teaching will be conducted in the form of **introductory lectures**, followed by **class discussion** on the texts, with the instructor acting as facilitator. Though this is a non-graded class component, your input is essential for class operations and for your own assimilation of the material, so you are strongly urged to participate regularly. A class website (see below) will facilitate group study and exchange of ideas. Should any problems arise, please see the instructor as soon as possible.

Students will also be required to submit **four (4) class journals** on the dates designated on the schedule below. Each journal should be a 1-page minimum reaction papers, written right after your readings and reflecting your own personal thoughts on, or analyses of, **one** of the texts assigned for the given date. Journals must be typed, with 1.5 space and 12-pt. font regular letters. Please, no cover pages or plastic sheaths (spare the environment!). You are responsible for missed class material and journals: in case of absence on a journal date, either submit your paper electronically, or see the instructor about making it up. A hard copy of your journal should also be present at the start of the class on their due date, as students may be asked to read aloud their entries for the benefit of their peers. Journals (whole or parts) may also be posted on the website for peer-sharing, if the instructor sees fit to do so. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Journals are collectively worth one (1) final grade point.

The **final exam** will consist of questions evaluating both your knowledge of the material offered in class and your ability to handle this material critically, analytically and comparatively. The exam will be worth nine (9) points.

Finally, for those who wish to earn up to a **2-point extra credit** advantage, there is the option of preparing an individual **research paper** on an American legend or folktale not discussed in class (see list of suggested themes below). The assignment should not simply compile information on the subject, but should constitute your own critical or deconstructive analysis of the its elements, its relationship to its historical background and its formative ideology, following the footsteps of class procedures. Original thinking will be especially appreciated. Papers should be 6-8 typed pages long (see specifications for the journals above), with a Works Cited section of at least 6 sources, 3 of which should be from printed material (not only websites). Citation of sources should be according to the MLA Style Manual (available both at the Library and online at “The Owl at Purdue,” <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/>); the parenthetical author-page number system should be used for in-text citation. **Plagiarism**? Don’t even *think* about it!

**Material:**

An *American Legends Reader*—PDF format. Ed. Christina Dokou. Athens: UoA, 2007. This, along with supplementary bibliography, texts, and other information can be found in the instructor’s website at <http://users.uoa.gr/~cdokou/>

## Schedule

Wherever no page numbers or text titles are mentioned, all the texts anthologized under the author’s name are included.

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| **Date:** | **Subject:** | **Readings Due:** |
| Week 1 | Introduction | The nature of myth, legend, fairy tale; theoretical approaches; America as a legendary land |
| Week 2 | The Native Heritage | “The Iroquois Creation Story”; Radin, “From the Winnebago Trickster Cycle” (chapters 18-25); The Odjibwa Corn God; Wovoka. **JOURNAL 1** |
| Week 3 | God’s People, Devil’s Land | W. Bradford, from *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Book 1, chapters 1, 4 and 9 at [Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation: 1620-1647" (illinois.edu)](http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/plymouth/bradford.html#one), and pdf from “The First Encounter” to the end; C. Mather, from *Wonders of the Invisible World* |
| Week 4 | From There to Eternity | *Hiawatha;* V. Lindsay; Custer’s Last Stand; **THESIS CHOICE DUE.** |
| Week 5 | Familiar Monsters | Bigfoot; A Loup-Garou…; The Windigo; “He Ate All the Democrats”; **JOURNAL 2** |
| Week 6 | Whiteout | La Llorona; Chapters 41 and 42 from [The Project Gutenberg eBook of Moby Dick; Or the Whale, by Herman Melville](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm#link2HCH0036) |
| Week 7 | Homosocial Strongmen | Paul Bunyan stories; Mike Fink stories |
| Week 8 | The Taming of the Shrub | Johnny Appleseed stories; Davy Crockett stories; **JOURNAL 3** |
| Week 9 | Men of Steel—Stealing Man | John Henry stories; Casey Jones stories; Joe Magarac |
| Week 10 | Kill Bill Thrill | Billy the Kid stories; Wild Bill stories; Jesse James stories. **BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE**. |
| Week 11 | The Wild, Wild Words | Pecos Bill stories; Buffalo Bill stories; Calamity Jane stories. **JOURNAL 4** |
| Week 12 | Rags 2 Riches: The Paradox | Franklin; The Work Ethic; Stackalee. |
| Exam Day |  | **FINAL EXTRA-CREDIT PAPER DRAFT DUE** |

**Suggested Research Topics (please see instructor first to avoid double bookings!):**

* Leif Ericson
* Paul Revere
* Asa Jennings
* Typhoid Mary
* Sitting Bull
* Stormalong the Sailor
* The Pirate Jean Lafitte
* High John the Conqueror
* Tar Baby (or other Br’er animal stories)
* Kit Carson
* Wyatt Earp
* Judge Roy Bean
* James “Grizzly” Adams
* Daniel Webster
* Marie Lalaurie
* Amelia Earhart
* John Brown
* El Zorro
* The Mormons
* Lillie Hitchcock-Coit
* P.T. Barnum
* Sojourner Truth
* Little Orphan Annie
* The Lindbergh baby kidnapping
* Florence Foster Jenkins
* Elvis Priestley
* Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt
* Susan B. Anthony
* Roswell, New Mexico
* Las Vegas, New Orleans, Chicago, New York or any other city with a “legendary” profile