Assignment 2

• First draft (bring three copies to class) due Tuesday, October 11
• Second draft (with a copy of the first draft with my comments) due Thursday, October 20

My first thought for this assignment was that I wanted you to start working with what we call “secondary” sources: articles and books that are about what we usually call the “primary” texts – that is, the books themselves. I’ve changed my mind about that a little bit: I do still want you to do some secondary reading for this assignment. But I don’t want you to feel like you have to subordinate your own reading of the text to somebody else’s, or appeal to experts in order to make a point.

The trick to academic writing – and by that I mean the writing academics actually do and publish, as opposed to “literature papers” people write only for classes, and only because somebody told them they had to – is to understand that you never read alone. You read always in the company of other readers, and what those readers think and write about books can be helpful to you in focusing your own thoughts. In real life, academics don’t read secondary materials because they are written by experts, or because we want to prove we know how to use footnotes – we read them because the arguments made by other people about the books we’re interested in can help us to clarify our own thinking about those books.

So that’s how I want you to approach this assignment. Start by choosing a book you’re interested in from among the books we’ve read. Think a little bit about what interests you about it – and think especially about what puzzles you about it, what needs explaining in it. Then, go to the library. Use the references the research groups have given us as a guide, and start doing a little reading about the book. Download two or three articles written about it and just sit down somewhere and read them. Don’t go into them looking for quotations to use or looking for some particular idea. Just read them, and find out what people talk about – and what they can talk about – when they talk about the books you like. Make note of whatever seems interesting or useful. Make note, especially, of places where the articles help you to see something you didn’t see at first in the primary text, or helped you to understand something you did see but just couldn’t get.

When you’re done reading, you’ll probably have a much better idea of what’s possible than you did when you started out: that’s what reading the secondary material does – it gives you a sense of how you can talk about a book and what contexts make that book interesting and understandable. So it’s entirely possible that when you’re done reading the articles you’ll already have some good ideas you want to write about. But if you don’t, or you need a little nudge, try one of these:

• Write a paper in which you try to define “The Western Hero,” using The Virginian as your primary model. What qualities define him? What are his values? What is his relationship with the people he lives among, the society he lives in, the political and social institutions of America? What makes him tick? What problems – national,
social, psychological – does he solve? What problems does he create?

- Write a paper, this time using Molly Stark Wood as your primary model, in which you try to define the role of the woman in the nineteenth century myth of the West. Try to consider both individual, physical women, and “woman” as a concept.

- Write a paper in which you try to explain to somebody outside the class the similarities and differences between the West as we get it in *The Virginian* and the West as we get it in *Angle of Repose*. Is Stegner’s book still a western? Is it a revision of the western? Is it a complete revision?

- Write a paper in which you try to explain to somebody outside the class the relationship between East and West in *Angle of Repose*. Or in *The Virginian*. Or, if you want the paper to be longer and are thinking of it as a research paper, in both.

- Write a letter from Wallace Stegner to Owen Wister telling him what you think about his book. Then write a letter from Owen Wister to Wallace Stegner in response. In each letter, try to *embody* each writer – to see the world and the other writer’s book from his point of view.

OK, that’ll do for now. Remember, if you use one of my assignment prompts, that the prompt is meant to disappear – it’s a starting point, but once the paper becomes yours you should follow where it leads. Remember also that you may use secondary materials here – and in most cases it would help to do so. Quote them if it’s helpful to do so, paraphrase them if it helps you to make a point. If you use somebody else’s idea, supply a footnote so we can find it ourselves if we need to. But remember, above all, that the paper is *yours*, regardless of how much research you do. Don’t let anybody else take it away from you.

Finally, if you decide to write about something other than the prompts above, please let me know as soon as you can what it will be. If I can help you with it, I will.