

MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC
RESEARCH
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UNIVERSITY OF GAFSA

INSTITUT SUPERIEUR DES ETUDES APPLIQUEES EN
HUMANITES DE GAFSA

AMERICANA'S 10th Conference

GAFSA: NOVEMBER 19th – 20th, 2010

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Department of English at *INSTITUT SUPERIEUR DES ETUDES APPLIQUEES EN HUMANITES DE GAFSA* is pleased to announce its forthcoming conference on:

Desert and Wilderness in American Culture

VENUE: *INSTITUT SUPERIEUR DES ETUDES APPLIQUEES EN HUMANITES DE GAFSA*

DATE: November: 19th – 20th, 2010

They can not scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars- on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

Robert Frost

Ever since the American explorer Meriwether Lewis reported in 1805 of the “Great American Desert”, the literature of the desert has proliferated. Going up the Mississippi in 1819, Thomas Nuttall reported finding an inhospitable “pathless desert”. Zubeon Pike saw the land stretching out from New Mexico north to 48th parallel as a convenient barrier to westward migration.

Undoubtedly, the American perception and imagination of the desert have undergone a significant evolution. The oppressive and repulsive desert and the hostile and obtuse attitudes towards it gave way to its perception as an exotic and controllable place. Most often it was seen as a place where the human and the natural are separated and where the wild and the civilized are set apart. Indeed popular attitudes have always run against the ecology of the region.

However, the indigenous attitudes towards the desert have always been related to seeking balance and meditation with the natural world. Their cultures entail a fluid conversation with people and place. Even the

early settlers' attitudes of hostility towards the wilderness, which gleaned from the images of the Old Testament, have changed to sound spiritual themes including those of its biblical value where the desert is a real place as well as an interior space with mystical, religious and theological meanings.

Yet, while the desert has been, historically speaking, related to both a geographic and chronological end, wilderness is inextricably linked to the notion of drift both as an encounter with the wild and as retreat from human entanglement. In this respect wilderness can be perceived as a literary motif of an idealized 'locus' of retreat or as a state of mind of detachment from and indifference to the world.

In the American literary imagination those encounters with and retreat into the wild, have shaped the American responses to both desert and wilderness as what formed the character, achieved identity and created values. The great American myth of wilderness is unquestionably a reminder of the existence of a Golden Age, a return to the world of innocence, a revisiting of a pre-industrial garden, a furious and elegiac report on the disappearance of the Western Garden and a place of nostalgia where the past still exists but is held 'in reverse' against an unbearable present.

With the advent of technology, as well as the encroachment of American culture with other cultures through wars and cultural hegemony, the desert has become more and more associated with the 'tabula rasa' frenzy of the recreation of a new world on the ashes of a corrupt one. In this sense, the American science fiction and especially that of the 60's has been instrumental in shaping up a new view of the desert as a place where desire looms large as exemplified by Frank Herbert's "Dune" series.

This interdisciplinary conference will focus on the following topics; related themes will also be welcomed as part of the discussion:

- The desert as a home, a site of travel and an endless physical and spiritual voyage.
- The spiritual internalization of the ideal of the desert.
- Desert as a typological landscape.
- Desert as an anti-thesis of the lush landscape.
- Desert and temperaments (its colours, its silences, its starry skies etc)
- Desert as an initiative path
- Desert and the exploration of the American territory.
- Desert / wilderness and Celts.
- Desert aesthetics
- Desert, wilderness and nostalgia
- Desert, wilderness and American art
- Desert/ wilderness in American movies.
- Wilderness Act of 1964 and its definition of wilderness.
- Wilderness, struggle and identity in a frontier environment.
- The aesthetic detachment from destructive experiences/ places.
- Is there any cultural or historical context for understanding the American contemporary attitudes about the desert?
- The meaning of the desert for Anglo, Hispanic and Mexican Americans and Indian cultures.
- The desert and its capacity of liberating women from the silencing structures of femininity
- The desert as 'tabula rasa'.

The editors invite abstracts of 300 words by **May 10th, 2010**. The participants will be informed about their status by **May 30th, 2010**. The full text of the accepted papers should be given to the head of the Department of English upon attending the conference.

Please send your contributions to the steering committee at: **americanidentity@lycos.com**.
The same email address can be used for any inquiry.