

# Unit 1: Introduction

## Fiction and Film

For further enrichment, try reading a novel or watching a film about this period of American history. Although movies and books do not always stick to historical fact, they can give a wonderful flavor of what it might have been like to live, love, work and struggle in times gone by. Recommended novels and films set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include:

### Novels

**Gardens in the Dunes**, by Leslie Marmon Silko. A novel that moves with extraordinary fluidity and grace between the timeless, "traditional" world of American Indian peoples and the elaborate, stylized world of American upper-class culture, at the height of the Gilded Age.

**Sister Carrie**, by Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser's revolutionary first novel, about an eighteen-year-old country girl who moves to Chicago and becomes a kept woman. An astute, non-moralizing account of a woman and her limited options in late nineteenth-century America.

**The Age of Innocence**, by Edith Wharton. Wharton's story of the upper classes of Old New York and Newland Archer's impossible love for the disgraced Countess Olenska is a perfectly wrought book about an era when upper-class society had rules as rigid as any in history.

**The House Behind the Cedars**, by Charles W. Chestnutt. First published in 1900, *The House Behind the Cedars* explores the lives and fates of two young African Americans who "pass" for white in the post-Civil War South. This book reveals how the legacy of slavery endures in racism, segregation, and cultural division.

### Films

**Little Big Man**, d. Arthur Penn. A centenarian, the only white survivor of the Battle of Little Big Horn, shares his story in this tall tale of the Old West. Moving back and forth between the white and Indian worlds, Jack Crabb is a gunslinger, a snake-oil salesman, and an Army scout, befriending everyone from Wild Bill Hickock to General Custer. A solid blend of comedy and

tragedy, with a lot to say about America's treatment of American Indians.

**The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez**, d. Robert M. Young. This gripping adventure film recounts the true story of the largest manhunt in Texas history. In June 1901, six hundred Texas Rangers chased Gregorio Cortez, a Mexican American ranch hand, for eleven days across 450 miles of terrain. Was Cortez a cold-blooded killer or an innocent man fleeing injustice? You decide.

**Days of Heaven**, d. Terence Malick. This lyrical story chronicles a trio of working-class protagonists from the steel mills of Chicago to the pastoral wheat fields of the Texas Panhandle during a time of growing industrialization. A classic love triangle plays out to its inevitably bitter end in this exquisite film of exceptional visual beauty.

**Matewan**, d. John Sayles. A little-known chapter of American labor history is brought vividly to life in this period drama. It is a fictional story about a West Virginia coal miners' strike, but every detail is so right that the film has the unmistakable ring of truth. The miners are joined by black and Italian workers who initially resist the strike, and a fateful battle ensues when detectives hired by the coal company attempt to evict miners from company housing.