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## Frederick Jackson Turner "Significance of the Frontier"

*One basic theme of America's collective attitude about itself is what is referred to as "exceptionalism"—the notion that America as a nation has occupied a special niche in the history of world cultures by offering freedom of opportunity to all comers. Critics of the notion point to American slavery, our troubled civil rights history, etc., and argue that the idea of American exceptionalism is self-serving and jingoistic.*

*Frederick Jackson Turner remains one of the most influential historians of America's past, and his famous frontier thesis is related to the above idea, in that his basic idea is that constant contact with an open frontier for almost 300 years of American history contributed to America's uniqueness—or exceptionalism. He presented his thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," to a gathering of American historians in Chicago in 1893. Over time, Turner's ideas came to be so well known that one historians has called it "the single most influential piece of writing in the history of American history."*

*Turner's conclusion, that the most important effect of the frontier was to promote individualistic democracy, has been both criticized and incorporated into various texts on America. From colonial times to the late 19th century, Turner argues, the value of individual labor and the ubiquity of opportunity contributed to American democratic ideals and discouraged monopolies on political power from developing.*

### **Excerpt:**

In a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear these significant words: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.

Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. Said Calhoun in 1817, "We are great, and rapidly—I was about to say fearfully—growing!" So saying, he touched the distinguishing feature of American life.... American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the great West....

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American....

The Middle region, entered by New York harbor, was an open door to all Europe.... It had a wide mixture of nationalities, a varied society, the mixed town and county system of local government, a varied economic life, many religious sects. In short, it was a region mediating between New England and the South, and the East and the West. It represented that composite nationality which the contemporary United States exhibits, that juxtaposition of non-English groups occupying a valley or a little settlement, and presenting reflections of the map of Europe in their

variety. It was democratic and nonsectional, if not national; "easy, tolerant, and contented;" rooted strongly in material prosperity. It was typical of the modern United States....

But the most important effect of the frontier has been in the, promotion of democracy here and in Europe. As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression.

So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power. But the democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its benefits. Individualism in America has allowed a laxity, in regard to governmental affairs which has rendered possible the spoils system and all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly developed civic spirit. In this connection may be noted also the influence of frontier conditions in permitting lax business honor inflated paper currency and wild-cat banking. The colonial and revolutionary frontier was the region whence emanated many of the worst forms of an evil currency. The West in the war of 1812 repeated the phenomenon on the frontier of that day, while the speculation and wild-cat banking of the period of the crisis of 1837 occurred on the new frontier belt of the next tier of States. Thus each one of the periods of lax financial integrity coincides with periods when a new set of frontier communities had arisen, and coincides in area with these successive frontiers, for the most part. The recent Populist agitation is a case in point. Many a State that now declines any connection with the tenets of the Populists, itself adhered to such ideas in an earlier Stage of the development of the State. A primitive society can hardly be expected to show the intelligent appreciation of the complexity of business interests in a developed society.

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**Questions:**

1. As of 1890 what does Turner note has "ceased to exist" in America? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What does Turner believe the existence of the American frontier did throughout US History? Do you agree with Turner? Why or why not?

3. What according to Turner has been the greatest effect of the Frontier on American society/institutions? Why? Do you agree?

4. Turner believed that post 1890 that the US would have to “construct a new frontier” or risk losing their identity. Do you believe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have constructed this “new frontier”. If so, what is it? If not have we lost our identity?

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## **Socratic Seminar: Robber Barons or Captains of Industry?**

*Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

**Directions:** In a Socratic seminar students will participate in a discussion based on a text, historical question or idea. The discussion will be guided by the teacher but will explore aspects of the text/question and how it relates to historical trends, patterns and or facts we have discussed in class. Students will be asked to refer back to the text and also to support ideas with information from the text and/or historical items we have discussed in the course up to the point of the seminar.

**Author's Thesis Paper:** In the seminar we will discuss two opposing points of view on a question of historical importance in US History. You will read two primary or secondary sources and be asked to answer a few questions on each source. We will then discuss the question in class during the Socratic Seminar, using the perspective of each author as a starting point for our discussion. For each source you need to determine the following:

The Thesis?

- What is the main argument of each author?

The Evidence?

- Looking at the supporting evidence, analyze whether they are logically interpreted by the authors. Do they clearly support the thesis?

Critical Analysis?

- What do the sources add to your understanding of the topic? How does the author's ideas fit into other points of view or historical information as you understand it?
- What points are strongly made and well documented?

Final Analysis?

- Which of the sources makes the most convincing case and why?

**\*\* For each source complete the Thesis, Evidence and Critical Analysis sections (you only need to complete the Final analysis section once) \*\***

**Overall Q: Based on the arguments presented by both sides of our class discussion, do you believe that US Industrial leaders of the late 1800's are better categorized as Robber Barons or Captains of Industry?**

Author's Thesis Paper: Are Industrialists of the late 1800's (i.e. Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan) better described as Captains of Industry or Robber Barons?

Source #1 => *Robber Barons and Rebels* by Howard Zinn

**Thesis:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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**Evidence:** \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

**Critical Analysis:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Source #2 => Was There Ever Such a Business by John Gordon**

**Thesis:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Evidence:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Critical Analysis:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## **1894 Pullman Strike**

*Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

1. What business was the Pullman company engaged in? What was their main product? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Describe George Pullman's model industrial town of Pullman Illinois – what did its proponents say about it? It's detractors?

Town: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Proponents: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Detractors: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What was the economic condition in the country at the time of the strike (i.e. 1893-94)? How did the Pullman company respond to the economic downturn & how did this effect the Pullman workers?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What was the ARU and how did the Pullman company respond to its demands and striking? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_



5. How did the Pullman strike become a national event? What did the Pullman strike do to the national Economy, transit system and mail delivery? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. How did the federal government respond to the Pullman Strike? What does this show about the position and ideology of the federal government in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. How did the Pullman strike end when federal troops arrived? What was the result for the strike's leaders like Debs? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. Did the federal government handle the strike appropriately? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives***

*Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

1. Describe 3 disgusting things in the passages concerning how the Other Half Lived during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – be specific & how is this different from life today?

A: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

B: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

C: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. What is wash day in the tenements? What does this show about life among the poor? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. How many people live in the single tenement described in passage #2? What problems did this cause during a hot summer day? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Why do you believe that Jacob Riis's book, *How the Other Half Lives* was so effective in bringing attention to the plight of the urban poor during the Gilded Age? \_\_\_\_\_

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## The Politics of Oz

Mr. Rhinehart AP US History

Identification (i.e. what is the author's main argument): \_\_\_\_\_

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Analysis (TWO of the following features => historical context, purpose and intended audience, POV, type of source, argument and tone)

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Evaluation (i.e. is the author's argument believable? Identify problems or central elements that prove his idea):

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## **Henry Grady, *The New South***

*Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

1. Who was Henry Grady? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. What was his idea of the "New South"? How did he promote it? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. When Grady attended a funeral in Pickens county what did he notice? Why did he say that would not happen anymore in the South? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What does Grady say about the condition of the southern negro? Is he accurate in his picture of life in the South for black Americans? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. How is the New South different from the Old South according to Grady? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

6. What type of picture does Grady paint of the "New South"? What faults does his portrayal have? Why does he give this type of portrayal? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

### *Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

**Background:** *Sister Carrie* was written by Theodore Dreiser in 1900 to describe the living conditions for women in the great American city. In the novel Carrie comes to live with her sister Minnie in Chicago to earn a better living than she could in the country and to escape the restrictions of small town life. She struggles to find work and is almost forced to leave when she comes across a man named Drouet, who offers to “loan” her money and rent an apartment for her while she continues to look for work. This is one chapter from the book where Carrie comes to consider Drouet’s arrangement.

1. What power do money and material objects seem to hold over Carrie? How does it affect her decisions? Provide examples from the passage.

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2. How does Carrie feel when she is looking at all the new materials items (i.e. coats, corsets, jewelry) to be had in the modern city department store? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. When Carrie goes shopping with Drouet how does she feel when she purchases the new clothes and shoes?

What helps her misgivings to fade away? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What do you think of Carrie's decision making in this chapter? What do you think will happen to her in the next chapters of the novel? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Based on this chapter, what seems to be the "allure of the American city" in the late 1800's? How is Carrie entrapped by it? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **A Century of Dishonor, Helen Hunt Jackson**

*Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

**Background:** Helen Hunt Jackson wrote a Century of Dishonor in 1881 after years of research into Native American policy and treatment. It was well received by many Americans, including members of Congress and changed sentiment in America towards Natives, shifting popular ideas towards a more sympathetic stance on the Native question. Many feel that it was instrumental in the passage of the Dawes Act in 1887.

1. Who was Helen Hunt Jackson? When did she write a Century of Dishonor? What policy was it instrumental in creating in the 1880's? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is Jackson's general perception of the treatment of the Natives at the hands of the US government & US settlers over the last 100 years? Has one tribe been mistreated more than others? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

3. According to Jackson's sources, who is at fault for the outbreak of warfare between Natives and whites? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

4. According to Jackson, what has been the effect of denying Natives citizenship and land ownership rights for the last 100 years? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Jackson says at one point, "The history of the government's connection with the Indians is a shameful record of broken treaties and unfulfilled promises. The history of the border white man's connections with the Indians is a sickening record of murder, outrage, robbery and wrongs . . ." Is this an accurate portrayal of the interaction between whites and Natives? Why or why not? (provide 1-2 specific examples)

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**John Muir, Hetch Hetchy Valley**

*Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

*Identification (i.e. what is the author's main argument):* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Analysis (TWO of the following features => historical context, purpose and intended audience, POV, type of source, argument and tone)*

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*Evaluation (i.e. is the author's argument believable? Identify problems or central elements that prove his idea; What ideas or movements would this passage potentially lead to in the future?):*

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**Ida B Wells, Lynch Law in America**

*Mr. Rhinehart AP US History*

1. According to Ida B Wells, what was lynching? What kind of crime is lynching? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. According to Wells, why did lynching exist in the "Wild West"? Why did it eventually disappear? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. According to Wells, what does Lynch law represent in the South? What is its purpose in the South?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. According to Wells, what "crimes" were southern blacks lynched for? What argument do southern whites make as to why lynching of blacks is necessary – i.e. what does lynching "protect"? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

5. According to Wells how do white authorities in both the North and South respond to lynching? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. According to Wells, why are Southern lynchings barbaric events even in comparison to the public executions of 100 years ago? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

7. How many lynchings took place in 1892? Looking at the stats, where do the lynchings seem to be concentrated? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What are the main "offenses" that lynchings took place in response to? \_\_\_\_\_

○ What are some of the strange offenses on the list? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What arguments does Ida B Wells make at the conclusion of the article as to why lynching needs to stop immediately in the US? (4 parts) \_\_\_\_\_

10. Ida B Wells is said to be a type of muckraking journalist in her technique – employing statistical analysis combined with gripping accounts of horror to prove her point. Do you believe to be an accurate depiction of her account here? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_