



AMERICAN

LITERATURE

Literature of the West

1850–1900 After gold was discovered in California, Americans came to view the West as a region of unlimited possibility. Those who could not venture there in person enjoyed reading about the West in colorful tales by writers such as Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) and Bret Harte. Dime novels, cheaply bound adventure stories that sold for a dime, were also enormously popular in the second half of the 19th century.

Since much of the West was Spanish-dominated for centuries, Western literature includes legends and songs of Hispanic heroes and villains. It also includes the haunting words of Native Americans whose lands were taken and cultures threatened as white pioneers moved west.



▲ Mark Twain

THE CELEBRATED JUMPING FROG OF CALAVERAS COUNTY

The American humorist Samuel Clemens—better known as Mark Twain—was a would-be gold and silver miner who penned tales of frontier life. “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” is set in a California mining camp. Most of the tale is told by Simon Wheeler, an old-timer given to exaggeration.

“Well, Smiley kep’ the beast in a little lattice box, and he used to fetch him downtown sometimes and lay for a bet. One day a feller—a stranger in the camp, he was—come acrost him with his box, and says:

“‘What might it be that you’ve got in the box?’

“And Smiley says, sorter indifferent-like, ‘It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain’t—it’s only just a frog.’

“And the feller took it, and looked at it careful, and turned it round this way and that, and says, ‘H’m—so ‘tis. Well, what’s *he* good for?’

“‘Well,’ Smiley says, easy and careless, ‘he’s good enough for *one* thing, I should judge—he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.’

“The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and give it back to Smiley, and says, very deliberate, ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I don’t see no p’int about that frog that’s any better’n any other frog.’

“‘Maybe you don’t,’ Smiley says. ‘Maybe you understand frogs and maybe you don’t understand ‘em; maybe you’ve had experience, and maybe you ain’t only a amature, as it were. Anyways, I’ve got my opinion, and I’ll resk forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.’”

—Mark Twain, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”
(1865)



THE BALLAD OF GREGORIO CORTEZ

In the border ballads, or *corridos*, of the American Southwest, few figures are as famous as the Mexican vaquero, Gregorio Cortez. This excerpt from a ballad about Cortez deals with a confrontation between Cortez and a group of Texas lawmen. Although he is hotly pursued, Cortez has an amazingly long run before being captured.

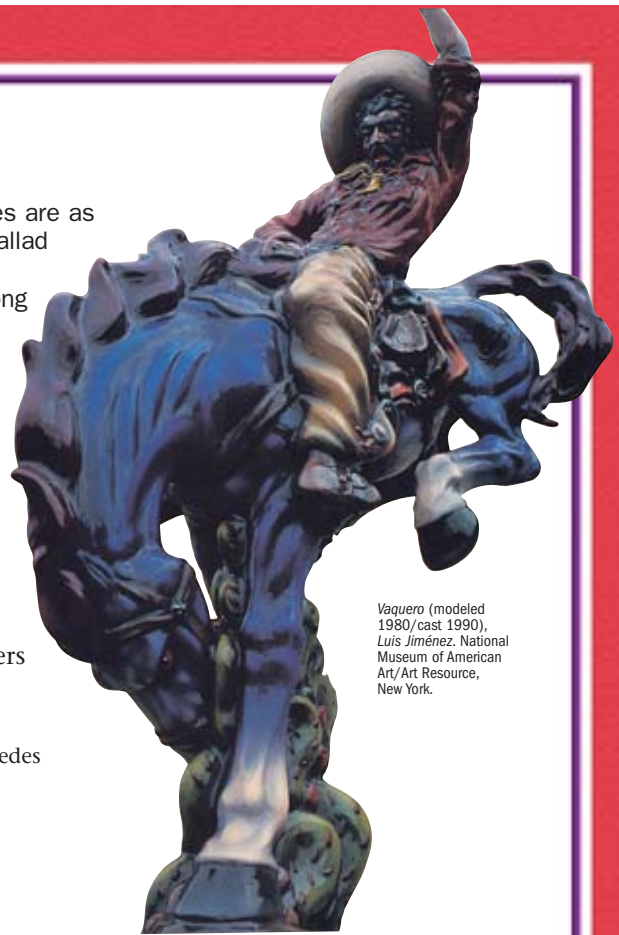
. . . And in the county of Kiansis
They cornered him after all;
Though they were more than
three hundred
He leaped out of their corral.

Then the Major Sheriff said,
As if he was going to cry,
“Cortez, hand over your weapons;
We want to take you alive.”

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
And his voice was like a bell,
“You will never get my
weapons
Till you put me in a cell.”

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
With his pistol in his hand,
“Ah, so many mounted Rangers
Just to take one Mexican!”

—Anonymous, “The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez,” translated by Américo Paredes



Vaquero (modeled 1980/cast 1990), Luis Jiménez, National Museum of American Art/Art Resource, New York.



▲ Chief Satanta

sends us, but they never do what they say. I don't want any of the medicine lodges [schools and churches] within the country. I want the children raised as I was. When I make peace, it is a long and lasting one—there is no end to it. . . . A long time ago this land belonged to our fathers; but when I go up to the river I see camps of soldiers on its banks. These soldiers cut down my timber; they kill my buffalo; and when I see that, my heart feels like bursting; I feel sorry. I have spoken.

—Chief Satanta, speech at the Medicine Lodge Creek Council (1867)

CHIEF SATANTA'S SPEECH AT THE MEDICINE LODGE CREEK COUNCIL

Known as the Orator of the Plains, Chief Satanta represented the Kiowa people in the 1867 Medicine Lodge Creek negotiations with the U.S. government. The speech from which this excerpt is taken was delivered by Satanta in Spanish but was translated into English and widely published in leading newspapers of the day.

All the land south of the Arkansas belongs to the Kiowas and Comanches, and I don't want to give away any of it. I love the land and the buffalo and will not part with it. I want you to understand well what I say. Write it on paper. Let the Great Father [U.S. president] see it, and let me hear what he has to say. I want you to understand also, that the Kiowas and Comanches don't want to fight, and have not been fighting since we made the treaty. I hear a great deal of good talk from the gentlemen whom the Great Father

THINKING CRITICALLY

- 1. Comparing and Contrasting** Compare and contrast the views these selections give of the American frontier in the second half of the 19th century. Use details from the selections to help explain your answer.



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R8.

- 2. INTERNET ACTIVITY** CLASSZONE.COM

From the gauchos of the Argentine pampas to the workers on Australian sheep stations, many nations have had their own versions of the cowboys of the American West. Use the links for American Literature to research one such nation. Prepare a bulletin-board display that shows the similarities and differences between Western cowboys and their counterparts in that country.