

Poverty, Affluence, and American Culture
Emily Balch Seminar (ESEM) Section 24
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:40AM - 1:00PM, Carpenter B15

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Course Description

Poverty and economic inequality are among the most persistent and controversial problems in the United States, with a range of political, economic, and cultural dimensions. This Emily Balch Seminar (ESEM) explores poverty, wealth, and the American Dream from the 1700s to the present, through a critical examination of scholarly, historical, fictional, and video texts. We will look at how poverty, poor people, and class mobility have been discussed and represented, and how these representations have shaped the meaning and perception of America.

As an ESEM, this course involves critical reading, in-class discussion, and cogent, idea-driven academic essay writing with one-on-one meetings outside of class. Course materials draw from multiple genres and fields, and aim to promote rich, open-ended interpretation and conversation. Students will write and revise papers in which they actively engage the course texts to join the ongoing public conversation about this topic.

Course Texts

Required, and available for purchase at the Bryn Mawr bookstore:

- Horatio Alger. *Ragged Dick, Or Street Life in New York with the Boot-Blacks*
- Jacob Riis. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*
- Richard Wright. *12 Million Black Voices*

All other course texts are provided on Moodle. We also will screen films and documentaries.

Course Requirements and Policies

Participation Is Essential. You are expected to attend and participate actively in class; watch assigned films/videos; attend up to five individual writing meetings with me; complete all written work on time; and make use of the peer-tutoring services of the Writing Center.

Attendance. If you are absent without an excuse twice, I reserve the right to reduce your course grade. Three or more unexcused absences could result in a failing grade. An excused absence is one I approve beforehand, or afterwards if you have an unforeseen situation. **Staying in communication with me is key.** Religious observances are excused; just let me know.

Written Work. You will be responsible for three major papers:

1. A draft and revision of a 3-4 page analytical paper on a class reading;
2. A draft and revision of a 4-6 page comparative paper on two class readings;
3. A draft and revision of a 6-8 page paper on a topic you choose and develop.

You will write a draft, discuss it with me, and revise it. Drafts are ungraded. Revisions are graded on the Bryn Mawr point scale: 4.0, 3.7, 3.3, 3.0, 2.7, 2.3, 2.0, 1.7, 1.3, 1.0, 0.7, 0.3, 0.0. (At times I might assign a 3.5 grade to a revision.)

Format: Typed, double-spaced, 12-point type, standard margins, numbered pages. **Please upload papers as Word, RTF, or Pages documents.**

Late Work. Written work is due as noted on the syllabus. I reserve the right not to accept late work if I have not granted you an extension. **An excused absence does not automatically get you a paper extension, If you need an extension, you must request it.** If you are ill and cannot finish a paper on time, let me know or have your Dean contact me.

Grading. I will evaluate all of your work when I decide your final grade. Class participation counts for 30%, Paper 1 20%, and Papers 2 and 3 25% each. Class participation is based on:

1. Attendance: class, one-on-one meetings, watching assigned films and videos;
2. Engagement in and contribution to class discussion and class activities;
3. Timely handing in of written work;
4. Completion of occasional, otherwise ungraded assignments.

Writing and Computing Help. Writing Center: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/offices-services/writing-center>; easy online appointment system. I will refer you there. If you have a Writing Partner, that counts. Tech help: x7440, help@brynmawr.edu. You are responsible for saving, uploading, and backing up course readings and written work, and learning to use Moodle.

Accessibility. Bryn Mawr welcomes the full participation of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of campus life, and I will do whatever I can to assist. Access Services: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/offices-services/access-services>

Title IX and Bias Reporting. Bryn Mawr is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment, as of course am I. Information and resources about sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and other forms of bias: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/policies-guidelines-handbooks/sex-discrimination>; <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/policies-guidelines-handbooks/college-policies-guidelines/bias-response>

ChatGPT and similar AI tools. You **may** use these the way you use search engines or talk to friends: by posing questions to help increase your understanding of things. You **may not** cut and paste ChatGPT responses into your papers. You **may not** quote or cite ChatGPT as a source. You **may not** slightly change the wording of a ChatGPT response and then put that in your paper. You **may not** rely on ChatGPT's factual claims.

Class Citizenship. Our goal is a lively, relaxed, discussion-based environment where everyone feels safe, heard, and able to explore ideas. Please listen actively and respectfully while others are speaking. It is helpful to refer to others' points when you make your own. Please stay alert in class, and do **not** have frequent, extended private conversations. You are welcome to use your phone, tablet, or laptop **for class-related activities. You are not permitted to text, email, browse the web, use social media, or otherwise use a device for purposes not directly relevant to our class. Ringtones and notifications should be turned off or set to silent.**

Cheating. There are no exams or simple "right answers" in this course, but it is possible to cheat through plagiarism, and to receive penalties including a failing grade or separation from the College. Plagiarism means copying the writing or ideas of a classmate, an AI, or the author of any published or unpublished work without quoting or otherwise giving proper credit. Plagiarism also includes re-using papers or portions of papers in multiple assignments or courses without getting permission to do so from both professors. **You can avoid plagiarism easily**, by citing and quoting sources. We will discuss this in class.

Course Schedule
(as of September 10; unchanged from Aug 20 version)

- **You are to complete each reading before the listed day, and bring it to class** •

Week 1

- Sep 1: Introduction to the class; structure and aims of the course
- Sep 3: **“Getting Started” Writing Assignment due in class and on Moodle**
Benjamin Franklin, “The Way to Wealth”
Jill Lepore, “Poor Jane’s Almanac”
Malcolm X, “Coming to an Awareness of Language”

Week 2

- Sep 8: William Lawrence, “The Relation of Wealth to Morals”
Henry Ward Beecher, “Tendencies in American Progress”
Russell Conwell, “Acres of Diamonds”
- Sep 10: **Paper #1 draft-in-progress due in class**
American time periods – one-page reference document
Frederick Douglass, “The Accumulation of Wealth” and “The Land Reformer”
Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (two versions)
- Sep 12: **Paper #1 draft due on Moodle, 11:59PM**

Week 3 ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS (Round 1 of 5)

- Sep 15: Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*, Chapters 1-14
- Sep 17: Alger, Chapter 15-end
Frederick Douglass, “Apprenticeship Life”
Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say*

Week 4

- Sep 22: Andrew Carnegie, “The Gospel of Wealth”
Eugene Debs, “Unity and Victory”
Walter Rauschenbusch, “The Law of Tooth and Nail”
- Sep 24: *Continued discussion of Sep 18 and 23 readings*
- Sep 26: **Paper #1 revision due on Moodle, 11:59PM**

Week 5 ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS (Round 2 of 5)

- Sep 29: Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*
M. Carey Thomas, “Address at the Opening of the College”
Emily Greene Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*
- Oct 1: Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* – see Moodle for required parts to read

Week 6

- Oct 6: Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*
Riis, additional sections – see Moodle for required parts to read
- Oct 8: James Truslow Adams, “Epilogue,” *The Epic of America*
Huey Long, “Every Man a King”

Oct 9: **Paper #2 draft due on Moodle, 11:59PM**

- FALL BREAK -

Week 7 ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS (Round 3 of 5)

Oct 20+22 *Matewan* – background document and in-class screening of *Matewan*

Week 8

Oct 27: Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* – see Moodle for required parts to read

Oct 29: Michael Harrington, *The Other America*

Week 9

Nov 3: Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty”

Nov 5: Paper #2 revision due on Moodle, 11:59PM

Judith Goode, “How Urban Ethnography Counters Myths about the Poor”

Thomas Pynchon, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts”

Week 10 ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS (Round 4 of 5)

Nov 10: Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980*

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*

Nov 12: Ronald Reagan, 1981 Inauguration speech

Ronald Reagan, 1986 radio address on welfare

Jesse Jackson, 1988 speech to the Democratic National Convention

Week 11

Nov 17: Victor Rios, “Stealing a Bag of Potato Chips”

Angela Davis, “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison-Industrial Complex”

Nov 19: Paper #3 Topic Summary and Share-out Due in Class

Documentary screening and beginning of discussion: *Waging a Living*

Week 12

Nov 24: Documentary screening and discussion: *Waging a Living*

Nov 26: **NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING**

Week 13 ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS (Round 5 of 5)

Nov 30: **Paper #3 draft due on Moodle, 11:59PM**

Dec 1: David Brooks, “Marshmallows and Public Policy”

Roberto Ferdman, “The Big Problem with One of the Most Popular Assumptions about the Poor”

Dec 3: Matthew Desmond, “Why Poverty Persists in America”

Week 14

Dec 8: TBD

Dec 10: Wrap up, conclusions

Dec 18: **Paper #3 revision due Friday, December 19, 11:59PM, on Moodle**