

Capitalist Selves

Emily Balch Seminar section 13, fall 2026

Class meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:40am-1:00pm in Dalton Hall 2

Instructor: Sara Bryant, slbryant@brynmawr.edu

Office hours: by appointment, English House 200

Course Description

Proponents of capitalism argue that it fosters autonomy, freedom, and possibilities for self-advancement. Yet many artists, creative writers, filmmakers, and scholars highlight capitalism's cruelties and constraints. For better and for worse (sometimes much worse), capitalism produces distinctive character types and modes of being. These figures include the sell-out, the celebrity, the assembly-line cog, the zany service-worker, the clone, the thief, and the parasite. This course will explore how we understand and inhabit notions of the self within capitalism. We will analyze and engage with creative and scholarly work that depicts, questions, and at times thinks beyond the economic systems that shape our lives. Texts and films may include Henry James's "The Real Thing," the 1952 film *Singin' in the Rain*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Sianne Ngai's scholarship on zaniness, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short stories, and Hirokazu Koreeda's *Shoplifters*.

Learning Goals of Emily Balch Seminars

1. To teach critical thinking about broad intellectual questions within and/or across disciplines through close reading, re-reading, and interpretation of substantial written, visual and material texts.
2. To give students instruction and practice in writing as a flexible tool of inquiry and interpretation; and to introduce students to college-level writing, moving them beyond the formulaic writing they learn in high school. To teach them:
 - to respond thoughtfully in writing to course texts;
 - to construct clear, convincing written arguments based on non-obvious claims;
 - to develop these arguments through reasoning and evidence;
 - to communicate in clear, readable prose.
3. To make students conscious of writing as a process: to help them develop effective writing habits; to teach them to assess strengths and weaknesses of their writing in the draft stage; to guide them to rethink and revise in response to faculty and peer feedback; and to teach them to copy-edit carefully.
4. To teach students to use sources fairly and effectively; to teach the logic and practice of citation and documentation; and to ensure that students understand how to avoid misusing sources.
5. To model effective discussion strategies and to create a dynamic learning community, teaching students to participate effectively in small-group conversation.
6. To inspire and delight students through intellectual inquiry; to invite students into the academic community; and to affirm their agency as learners and the value of their perspectives in creating knowledge and shaping discourse.

Required Texts

- 1) *A Pocket Style Manual*, 10th edition, by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers (Bedford/St. Martin's, ISBN: 9781319413019). This is a resource on citation and writing that we will use in our seminar *and* that you will want to consult beyond your first semester. Please make sure to obtain the 10th edition (available from the Bryn Mawr College Bookstore).
- 2) *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro (Vintage, ISBN: 9781400078776). In our unit on clones, we'll be annotating and referring to specific passages in the novel frequently. For this reason, it's important to have the edition noted above (available from the Bryn Mawr College Bookstore).
- 3) All other assigned materials (including films to be streamed) will be available on our course Moodle site or accessible online from Bryn Mawr's library system.

Course Requirements

Participation	25%
Essay 1 (5 pp.)	15%
Essay 2 (6-7 pp.)	30%
Essay 3 (6-7 pp.)	30%

Participation: The participation grade includes classroom discussions and workshops; short writing assignments; two writing-resource & revision exercises over the course of the semester; a group presentation, in which your group explores and opens up discussion of the day's readings; and four conferences with me.

Classroom discussions and workshops: Merely being present is not enough to merit a high participation grade. Students will be expected to have read and prepared thoughtfully and to contribute actively. Your active engagement is crucial to the ESem experience. We will discuss our participation expectations as a seminar group.

Conferences: You and I will have four one-on-one conferences over the course of the semester to discuss your writing and ideas. These conferences are required, and I will provide information in our class meetings about scheduling and preparing for conferences.

Course Policies and Information

Attendance: Your active engagement is crucial to the ESEM experience. If you need to miss more than two class meetings across the semester for legitimate reasons, please consult with me individually and as promptly as possible.

Tardiness: Please arrive to class on time. A pattern of tardiness is disruptive to the class and will affect your participation grade.

This syllabus and Moodle: This syllabus provides a guide for our semester, but the readings and viewings listed in the weekly schedule below are subject to occasional revision. Any updates will be announced in class and reflected on our Moodle site.

Email Availability: I check email regularly throughout the week, and it is the best way to get in touch with me. Please allow 24 hours response time during weekdays. Emails received over the weekend may not be answered until Monday. Sometimes questions or

concerns raised via email can be addressed much more effectively in real-time conversation—when that is the case, I will let you know and suggest that we set up an appointment.

Academic Integrity: The Honor Code, Plagiarism, AI Use

- The Honor Code: You are expected to be familiar with Bryn Mawr College's Honor Code, which can be read here: <https://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/honor-code/>.
- Plagiarism: This course will help you understand how to use sources fairly and cite and document properly. Failing to credit a source (written, visual, electronic) that you quote or paraphrase—even course texts—constitutes plagiarism, a serious academic offense and an honor code violation. If ever in doubt about whether you are using a source fairly, please ask me. All Bryn Mawr professors will be happy to explain citation practices in their classes as well.
- AI Use: See the Honor Code's policy on generative AI use (section 4.2.f). In this course, I expect your essays and other written assignments to be developed and written by you. This means: your analytical and creative mind responds to and analyzes primary and scholarly sources; your overall essay structure is developed by you; and syntax and sentence creation are your own. Writing that uses AI for these purposes is not permitted in this course. We will review and discuss all of this in class.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center offers free, individual consultations on writing assignments of any kind. Trained peer writing tutors are available six days a week, Sunday-Friday. Book an appointment through the online schedule (brynmawr.mywconline.com) or walk into the Writing Center on the first floor of Canaday library and ask for a conference.

Access Services

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first speak with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to request an appointment to begin this confidential process. If eligible for accommodations as per Access Services, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share their verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>)

Bryn Mawr's Title IX Policy

Bryn Mawr College is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive living and learning environment where all can feel secure and free from harassment. All forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence, and dating violence are violations of Bryn Mawr's policies, whether they occur on or off campus. Bryn Mawr faculty are committed to helping to create a safe learning environment for all students and for the College community as a whole. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or violence, know that help and support are available. Staff members are trained to support

students in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more.

The College strongly encourages all students to report any incidents of sexual misconduct. Please be aware that all Bryn Mawr employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors, clergy, and healthcare providers) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to Associate Director of Civil Rights and Title IX Coordinator Cary Carr. Information about the College's [Sexual Misconduct policy](#), reporting options, and a list of campus and local resources can be found on the College's website.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE: Readings and screenings must be completed before the class meeting on the day for which they are listed, unless otherwise specified.

Weeks 1-3: Introduction

Tues 9/1: Introduction (no reading assigned in advance of class)

Thur 9/3: Bryn Mawr College's Honor Code
David F. Ruccio, "Capitalism"
Sven Beckert, excerpt from *Capitalism: A Global History*
Sarwat Jahan and Ahmed Saber Mahmud, "What Is Capitalism?" (IMF)

Tues 9/8: Henry James, "The Real Thing"

Thur 9/10: begin Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

short writing assignment (2 pp.) due Sun 9/13 at 5 pm

Tues 9/15: continue Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*
Gordon Harvey, from *Writing with Sources*

Thur 9/17: Richard Sennett, from *The Culture of New Capitalism* (2006)
Sample Student Essay

"From Theme to Thesis" short writing exercise due Sun 9/20 at 5 pm

Weeks 4-6: Clones

Tues 9/22: Louis Althusser, from "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"

Thur 9/24: begin Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005)

Tues 9/29: continue Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*

Thur 10/1: continue Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*

essay #1 due by Fri 10/2 at 5 pm

Tues 10/6: continue Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*

Thur 10/8: Kristofer J. Petersen-Overton, "'What We're Supposed to Be Doing'"
Chris Holmes, excerpts from "Ishiguro at the Limit"

fall break: from Saturday 10/10 through Sunday 10/18

weeks 7-9: Labor and Flexibility

Tues 10/20: *Modern Times* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1936, 87 mins.)
André Bazin, from "Charlie Chaplin"

Thur 10/22: Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah: "Friday Black," "How to Sell a Jacket as Told by Iceking," "In Retail" (2018)

draft of essay #2 due by Sun 10/25 at 5 pm

Tues 10/27: Sianne Ngai, from "The Zany Science"
I Love Lucy episodes

Thur 10/29: continue Ngai, from "The Zany Science"
in class: *Animaniacs* "Hooked on a Ceiling"

Tues 11/3: Annie McClanahan, from *Beneath the Wage*

Thur 11/5: continue McClanahan, from *Beneath the Wage*

Weeks 10-11: Celebrity

Tues 11/10: Joshua Gamson, "The Great and the Gifted"
Singin' in the Rain (dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952, 103 mins.)

Thur 11/12: Carol Clover, "Dancin' in the Rain"
Illusions (dir. Julie Dash, 1982, 34 mins.)

Tues 11/17: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"

Thur 11/19: continue Benjamin, "The Work of Art"

essay #2 revision due by no later than Fri 11/20 at 5 pm

Weeks 12-14: Conclusion

Tues 11/24: *proposal for final essay due at the start of class*

Thanksgiving break: from Thursday 11/26 through Sunday 11/29

Tues 12/1: *Shoplifters* (dir. Hirokazu Koreeda, 2018, 121 min.)
Mark Yamada, from *Kore-eda Hirokazu*

Thur 12/3: in-class writing workshops

Tues 12/8: in-class writing workshops

essay #3 due by Wed 12/9 at 10 pm

Thur 12/10: wrap-up and reflection