

City Fiction

Emily Balch Seminar section 27, fall 2026

Class meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:40-4:00 pm in Taylor Hall Seminar Room

Instructor: Sara Bryant, slbryant@brynmawr.edu

Office hours: by appointment, English House 200

Course Description

Urban life is a definitive feature of modernity. As people moved into increasingly massive cities, basic ways of life changed: how people earned a living, what kinds of communities they formed, the gendered and sexual identities that became possible and legible, and the spaces people inhabited. Urban life inevitably shaped narrative exploration in literature and film. This course will examine modern and contemporary works about metropolitan experience, by writers and filmmakers such as Charles Baudelaire, Virginia Woolf, Nella Larsen, Alfred Hitchcock, Mohsin Hamid, and N. K. Jemisin. Topics will include anonymity, *flânerie*, vision and surveillance, loneliness and connection, and migrations. We will develop scholarly questions and analysis through close readings, engaged discussions, short essays, and the revision process.

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

- Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Mariner, ISBN: 9780156628709)
- Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (Rutgers University Press, ISBN: 9780813511702)
- Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (Riverhead, ISBN: 9780735212206)
- *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 editions noted above, which are available at the Bryn Mawr College Bookstore

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.

Week 1: Introduction

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

Thur 9/3: Bryn Mawr College's Honor Code
Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd"

Weeks 2-3: The Flâneur

Tues 9/8: Kathryn Kramer, "Person of the Crowd"
Charles Baudelaire, from "The Painter of Modern Life"
Charles Baudelaire, "Crowds," "To a Woman Passing By," "Windows"

Thur 9/10: Griselda Pollock, from "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity"
Doreen St. Felix, "The Peril of Black Mobility"
N. K. Jemisin, "The City Born Great"

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

Tues 9/15: *Rear Window* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)
Gordon Harvey, from *Writing with Sources*

Thur 9/17: Dana Brand, "Rear-View Mirror: Hitchcock, Poe, and the Flâneur"
Sample Student Essay

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

Weeks 4-6: Moving through the Modern Metropolis

Tues 9/22: Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life"

Thur 9/24: Virginia Woolf, from "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown"
begin Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

Tues 9/29: continue *Mrs. Dalloway*

Thur 10/1: continue *Mrs. Dalloway*

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

Tues 10/6: continue *Mrs. Dalloway*

Thur 10/8: Sara Ahmed, from *Feminist Killjoys*
Paul K. Saint-Amour, from "*Mrs. Dalloway* and the Gaze of Total War"

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

Weeks 7-11: Migrations

Tues 10/20: John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity"
George Chauncey, from *Gay New York*

Thur 10/22: Willa Cather, "Paul's Case"
Scott Herring, from *Queering the Underworld*

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

Tues 10/27: Cheryl A. Wall, from *The Harlem Renaissance*
begin Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

Thur 10/29: continue *Quicksand*
Sianne Ngai, from *Ugly Feelings*

Tues 11/3: continue *Quicksand*

Thur 11/5: your choice of scholarly analysis of *Quicksand* (options on Moodle)

Tues 11/10: begin Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*

Thur 11/12: Sara Ahmed, "Home & Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement"

Tues 11/17: continue *Exit West*

Thur 11/19: continue *Exit West*

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: students' choice of film about city life (we'll keep a running list on Moodle
& select a concluding film as a class)

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