**English 250: Cities on the Hill**

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**City on a Hill.** In 1630, as the ship *Arbella* was carrying the colonists of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to their new home in America, John Winthrop gave his famous sermon where he described this new future home and land as a “city on a hill.” While this phrase has resonated in American culture for almost 400 years, what it actually means hasn’t always been fully understood or appreciated. This course will consider the history of American literature and culture from the perspective of John Winthrop’s city—that is, of the cities “on the hill” (as utopian constructions) and cities in their grittier realities. Over the next few weeks, we will look at a variety of texts that emerge from, and help construct, the kinds of urban spaces that Americans have experienced. In each century, the city has played a key role in helping shape both the American psyche and American literature.

What is it like to live in a city? Jonathan Raban says that “living in cities is an art, and we need the vocabulary of art, of style to describe the peculiar relationship between man and material that exists in the continual creative play of urban living.” This course will be about the “arts” of urban living, both as literature depicts it and as we inhabitants experience it. We will consider the city from two perspectives. First, we will read a variety of literary texts that emerge from the city. These will be stories about the new meanings produced by the city (Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”), the new forms of urban literature (Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*), and the new ways that people interact there (Nella Larson’s *Passing* and Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*). Then there are the cities of safety (Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative*) and internment (Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor was Divine*). These narratives will be accompanied by readings about the city’s rise and its manifold meanings: Georg Simmel on the “stranger,” Michel Foucault on the power of panopticism, etc. This focus on the literary representations of the city will depend on what I consider to be the second aspect of the course, which will depend on the students’ own negotiations with, and understandings of, the city.

**English 250 in the Age of Pandemics**. This course, like most English courses, works best through discussion. That said, our current online reality makes discussion difficult, but not impossible. In fact, it opens up new possibilities and forums for conversation that I hope to use this quarter. It’s impossible for you and for me to spend two hours straight on Zoom, but I think it’s important that we all meet at regular times so I can create a context for our readings, to discuss the theories and novels, and to provide an opportunity for you to ask questions. The class meetings, therefore, will be organized around some full-class discussions followed by small group breakouts on Zoom. **If possible, I ask you all to keep your cameras on during discussions.** I will try to give each of you the opportunity to offer your own ideas and understandings, whether in general class discussion, small groups, through your essays, or in your various shorter online posts. My job, as I see it, is to help provide historical and intellectual backgrounds, to raise open-ended questions, and to offer some respectful, but pointed, resistance to some of your responses and ideas. Your job is to come prepared to discuss by having read *and thought about* the works.

**Learning Objectives.** Each course is different and takes on a personality of its own through the ups and downs of a quarter. That’s especially true when navigating the constraints of attending class online during Covid. However, there are several intellectual experiences I hope you will have in this course.Students of literature (that’s you, since you’re taking this course) need to have three related skills in order to succeed in their chosen field. Simply put (although not so simply done), they need to be good readers, good writers, and good critical thinkers. As a 200 level English course, Cities on a Hill will offer work to help develop and sharpen these skills. In particular, I expect the literary texts, secondary readings, and other assignments will provide some of the necessary experience and work to help you achieve all or some of the following objectives:

* To be attentive and careful observers of texts, particularly of the subtleties of figurative (and other) language, patterns of images, and the structures and forms of texts (from the micro to macro-levels).
* Through such close textual analysis and deployment of relevant quotations, you will be able to enunciate coherent claims and develop arguments about literary, theoretical, and critical texts.
* Understand and explore some of key theoretical and critical concepts of the course, particularly the ideas of **the stranger**, **space as socially constructed**, **the city** **as a theoretical, critical, and social concept**, and **practice** **as an individuated form of socially mediated know-how**.
* Write short essays able to set-up, deploy, and organize a dynamic argument, including implicit and explicit critical questions about texts and the use of relevant quotations as support.
* Be able to engage non-literary texts to help augment and deepen your own analysis of literature. This objective doesn’t mean working with abstractions or speaking in the jargon of a particular theorist. Rather, it means reflecting on the assumptions that drive our understanding, judgments, and arguments. It also means being intellectually generous enough to read and discuss difficult texts with openness and curiosity.
* Help to develop a community of inquiry. It is one of my strongest pedagogical beliefs that students teach each other at least as effectively as they learn from a professor. Sharing ideas and working in teams are necessary to push ideas and arguments further.

**Religious Accommodations.** “Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW’s policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at [Religious Accommodations Policy (https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/)](https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/). Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the [Religious Accommodations Request form (https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/)](https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/).”

If you require accommodation owing to a disability immediately contact the Disabilities Resources for Students Office (DRS) in Schmitz Hall 448 (206-548-8924; [uwdss@u.washington.edu](mailto:uwdss@u.washington.edu)) or the Disabilities Services Office (DSO) at [dso@u.washington.edu.](mailto:dso@u.washington.edu) *It is your responsibility to notify me in writing and in advance of any accommodations to be arranged by either the DSO or DRS office and—should forms be involved—to deliver those to me in person during office hours, with time enough to allow for us to arrive at a mutual understanding of the means by which those accommodations are best met.*

Do not plagiarize. Plagiarism includes lifting material from the web, collusion, and the use of sources without citation. If you have any questions regarding what constitutes plagiarism, consult me. All sources must be documented, and papers are to be the result of your own labor.

This syllabus is subject to change. You are responsible for keeping up with any modifications to schedule or assignments.

**Requirements.**

**Online Conversations (30% or 60 points).** Our course blog (on Canvas) is a way to initiate and continue classroom conversations. It’s a place where you can track your reading process and work through thoughts, reactions, and questions in informal, low- stakes writing. Because of the online nature of this course, I will not have a participation grade. Participation is assumed as part of your engagement in this course. If you’re not going to show up synchronously or do your assigned work asynchronously, then you shouldn’t take the course. See the assignment handout on Canvas for more information.

**Response Papers (60% or 120 points).** There will be three short response papers (due on two Fridays and on Monday of Finals Week on Canvas). These papers will be 1-2 pages, single-spaced, and function like the middle portions of essays with no introduction and no conclusion. Your job will be to ask a question in the response and try to work it out in reference to one of the texts. They will be submitted on Canvas. See the assignment handout on Canvas for more information.

**Small Group Facilitations (10% or 20 points)**. During the quarter I will meet with groups of 10 students for a discussion run by the students. Students will keep notes and post the discussion online for the benefit of the other class members. Students will receive a grade based on the group’s performance and the quality of the discussion notes.

**English 250: Cities on a Hill**

**Texts:**

Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Penguin) (Make sure you read the 1845 autobiography. He wrote two others: *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855, and *The Life and Times*, 1881 & 1892.)

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (Penguin)

Nella Larsen, *Passing* (Penguin)

Julie Otsuka, *When the Emperor was Divine* (Penguin)

Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (Penguin)

I’ve noted the course editions for our texts, but you can use other online editions if you prefer. All readings marked with an asterisk (\*) are available on Canvas under the weekly Course Module. Unless otherwise noted in the syllabus, all readings should be done by the day indicated.

**Week 1: Introduction: “We shall be as a , city on a hill”**

Tue. March 30 John Winthrop: The City as Utopia

John Winthrop, from “A Modell of Christian Charity”\*

Thur. April 1 Becoming a Stranger

Georg Simmel, “The Stranger”\*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”\*

**Week 2: The Early Nation: The City as a Collection of Strangers**

Tues. April 6 Hiding in the City

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Wakefield”\*

**Online Discussion Posts Due by Wednesday 5:00 pm.**

Thurs. April 8 The Double: The Stranger Self

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd”\*

**Week 3: Slavery in the Country and the City**

Tues. April 13 Slavery in America

Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life* (through Chapter IX)

**Online Discussion Posts Due by Wednesday 5:00 pm.**

Thurs. April 15 Freedom in America

Douglass, *The Narrative* (Chapter X through Appendix)

**Response Papers Due by Friday, 5:00 pm.**

**Week 4: New York Society**

Tues. April 20 Panopticism: Lily Bart under Surveillance

Edith Wharton, *House of Mirth* (Book I, chapter I-X)

Michel Foucault, “Panopticism” (handout)

**Online Discussion Posts Due by Wednesday, 5 pm.**

Thurs. April 22 Accident and Intention: Lily and Selden

Wharton, *House of Mirth* (Book I, chapters XI-XV)

**Week 5: Social, Geographical, and Moral Mobility**

Tues. April 27 Lily Bart’s Choices

Wharton, *House of Mirth* (Book II, chapters I-VII)

**Small Group A Facilitation**

Thurs. April 29 How Novels End

Wharton, *House of Mirth* (Book II, chapters VIII-XIV)

**Small Group B Facilitation**

**Week 6: The Modernist City**

Tues. May 4 A City in Fragments: Modernism

T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*\*

**Online Discussion Posts Due by Wednesday 5:00 pm.**

Thurs. May 6 Cosmopolitanism

Eliot, *The Wasteland*\*

**Response Paper Due on Canvas Friday by 5 pm.**

**Week 7: Passing in the City**

Tues. May 11 Race and the “One-Drop” Rule

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

**Online Discussion Posts due by Wednesday at 5:00 pm.**

Thurs. May 13 What Kind of Novel Is *Passing*?

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

**Week 8: Spaces of Japanese Internment**

Tues. May 18 Order 9066

Julie Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Thurs. May 20 Homecoming

Otsuka, *When the Emperor was Divine*

**Small Group C Facilitation**

**Week 9: The Postmodern City**

Tues. May 25 Detection: Criminals and Detectives

Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (chapters 1-3)

**Online Discussion Posts Due by Wednesday 5:00 pm.**

Thurs. May 27 The Language of the City

Auster, *City of Glass* (chapters 4-7)

**Week 10: The Postmodern City**

Tues. June 1 Walking in the City

Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (chapters 8-10)

**Small Group D Facilitation**

Thurs. June 3 What Happens to Daniel Quinn?

Auster, *City of Glass* (chapters 11-13)

**Response Paper Due Monday June 5th by 5:00 pm**