The City in American Culture

Instructor: Dr. Thomas D. Beal  
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Office Hours: MWF (10-11) and after class

Course Description: Building on the work of urban and cultural historians, this course is designed to analyze and describe the “city’s” contributions to American “culture.” The course thematically surveys several “cultural moments” from the late 18th to the late 20th century through the perspective of a wide range of urban artists, poets, writers, journalists, and musicians. The course explores how “city life” influenced a variety of urbanites (both men and women) who put pencil to paper, brush to canvas, and lyrics to music, and, in so doing, played significant roles in the “production” of American “culture.”

Teaching: This is a course in urban and cultural history. As such it approaches the history of cities thematically (in thematic units); in so doing, it attempts to provide students with a broader understanding of some of the contributions cities have made to American culture. Also, it attempts to provide an interpretive framework for understanding the various ways Americans have interpreted their cities.

Spring 2011 Theme: This term, History 208 students will explore the theme “Exploring the Role Class, Race, and Gender play in Urban Life.” The instructor has selected readings, discussion topics, and activities that provide students a window onto compelling aspects of city life that influenced / shaped American culture.

Required Texts: (available at the bookstore and Damascene):
- Alger, Horatio. Ragged Dick (Signet Classic).
- Crane, Stephen. The Open Boat (Dover Thrift Editions).
- Thompson, George. Venus in Boston (Univ of Mass Press).
- Weisberger, Lauren, The Devil Wears Prada (Anchor).
- Matheson, R. I am Legend (Tor Books).
- McLaughlin, Nanny Diaries (St. Martins).
- Ellis, Brett E. Less Than Zero (Random).

Library Reserve: The instructor has stored some material for the course on electronic reserve at the James Milne Library. Noted in the course outline as “Electronic Reserve.”

Evaluation:  
- Quizzes = 20%  
- Research Paper = 25%  
- Class Participation = 20%  
- Final Exam = 25%  
- Urban Music Paper = 10%

Quizzes (20%): Over the course of the semester, students will complete a number of essay quizzes. Students should view these quizzes as a means to demonstrate what they have learned from their Hist 208 readings. Taking place at the beginning of class, quizzes require students to interpret the required reading.

Class Participation (20%): This is a lecture/discussion course, with a primary emphasis on problem solving through discussions and in-class activities. Students must actively participate in class discussions, debates and activities. Students must complete the assigned reading before class, which will allow the student to actively participate in the learning process. Unprepared students will be excused from the classroom.

Attendance: This is an upper-division, lecture/discussion, college-level course. Students are expected to attend each class meeting.
Urban / City Music Paper (10%): Due 9 March 2011: Students will complete a four (4) page paper exploring a song, artist, or genre of music that was influenced by New York City or Boston. On 9 March 2011, students will submit there papers and the class will have an informal roundtable discussion exploring what music tells us about history and urban culture.

Research Paper (25%): Due 11 May 2011: Students will complete a research/analysis paper that explores the course theme: “Using Popular Literature and Film to Explore the Myths and Realities of Urban Life in America.” This project requires students to explore a work of urban literature that was made into a film (these are cultural products that tell us about how we have interpreted our cities). In their research paper, students will examine both “cultural products” with reference to the historical context in which they were produced. SPECIAL NOTE: The topic must approved by the instructor.

Final Exam (25%): Students will be required to complete a final exam. The final exam will challenge students with a number of essay questions. The instructor will provide a final exam prep-sheet. The final exam for this class is scheduled for and will be offered ONLY on Wednesday 18 May 2011 (5:00 to 7:30PM).

COURSE OUTLINE: SPRING 2011

Unit I: Course Introduction: The City in American Culture

19 January 2011: Introduction: The City in American Culture

Discussion: Introduction to The City in American Culture.

Unit II: Literature and the Idealistic / Mythical Middle Class City

26 January 2011: Mapping the City’s Class and Economic Divisions

Course Theme Readings/ Discussion: Print, Read and Bring to Class:
1. “Keywords” (Electronic Reserve).
2. Siegel, “The Image of the American City” (Electronic Reserve).

Discussion of Required Reading:
1. Horatio Alger, Ragged Dick (Signet Classic).

Unit III: The Dark Side of City Life in Boston and New York

2 February 2011: The Dark Side of City Life in Boston and New York

Discussion on Required Reading:
 Note: City Crimes is one of the novels included in the volume entitled Venus in Boston).

9 February 2011: Venus on the Street

Essay Quiz #1: Unit II and Unit III

Lecture: “Will the Real Maggie please step forward!”
Discussion of Required Reading:

**Unit IV: Race and the Myth of “Freedom” in the Northern City**

16 February 2011: The Myth and Realities of Moving “Up North”

**Required Reading for Discussion:**

23 February 2011: Spring Break # 1: No Class

2 March 2011: Race, Sexuality and Domestic Violence and a “Culture of Fear”

**Essay Quiz #2: Unit IV**

**Required Reading for Discussion:**
2. Watch the three part interview “James Baldwin on Malcolm X” on YouTube.

**Unit V: The City and American Music**

9 March 2011: The City and American Music – Paper Discussion

**Due:** Urban Music Paper (see handout on Angel)

**Discussion Topic:** Required Reading and the Urban Music Paper

**Required Reading:**
2. George Lipsitz, “We Know What Time It Is” (Electronic Reserve).

**Unit VI: Fear and the Modern City**

16 March 2011: Fear Expressed through Science Fiction and Popular Film

**Essay Quiz #3: Unit VI**

**Required Reading:**
1. R. Matheson, *I am Legend* [1954](Tor Books), pages 11-170.

**Required Activity:** Watch the movie *I am Legend* (2007).

**Unit VII: Sex, Drugs and the City**

23 March 2011: Drugs and Sex in the 1980s

**Essay Quiz # 4: Unit VII**

**Discussion Topic:** Drugs, Sex and Social Mobility in Urban Literature of the 1980s.

**Required Reading:**
Unit VII: The City, Class and Social Mobility in Literature and the Movies

30 April 2011: The City and Social Mobility

Discussion: “The Devil Wears Prada.” History 208 will discuss selections from “The Devil Wears Prada.” To prepare for the discussion, students need to have read the novel and the Prada Documents on Electronic Reserve.

Required Reading for Discussion:
1. Lauren Weisberger, The Devil Wears Prada (Anchor).
2. The Devil Wears Prada Documents (Electronic Reserve).

6 April 2011: The City and its Class Structure

Essay Quiz # 5: Unit VII

Discussion: The Urban Class Structure outlined in The Nanny Diaries.

Required Reading for Discussion:

13 April 2011: Individual Research Meetings:

Individual Research Meetings: During the week of 27 April 2011, students will schedule a meeting with the instructor. During the meeting, students will discuss the progress of their research paper.

20 April 2011: Spring Break # 2: No Class

Unit IX: The Research Paper

27 April 2011: Research Workshop: On 27 April 2011, students will meet in the Milne Library Computer Lab for a Research Workshop. This workshop offers students the opportunity to continue the research process.

4 May 2011:

Writing Workshop: Movies, Literature and Urban Life: On 4 May 2011, History 208 students will work on a draft of their “Myth/Realty of Urban Life Paper.” Students will bring to class and be prepared to discuss, with the instructor and members of their group, five (5) pages of their Research Paper. Students will bring copies for the other members of their assigned group and the instructor (one half letter grade will be deducted from the final grade if students do not complete this part of the assignment).

11 May 2011: Using Popular Literature and Film to Explore the Myths and Realities of Urban Life in America.

Research Papers Due: On 11 May 2011, History 208 students will discuss their research project and submit a final draft to the instructor.
Unit X: The Final Exam

18 May 2011: Final Exam: The Final Exam for History 208 will be offered 5:00 to 7:30pm.