

**CLCS 242, Poor Relations: Representations of Poverty in Literature, Film and Media**  
**Department of Languages, Literature, and Cultures, Fall 2018**



**Walker Evans, Bud Fields and his family. Alabama, 1935 or 1936**

**Professor**  
**Office**  
**Office Hours**

**E-mail**  
**Telephone**

**Meeting time & place**  
**Moodle password**

**Caroline Wiedmer**  
North Campus 6  
M, 15:45-16:15; Th 12-13:00 and 15:45-16:15, and by  
appointment on Wednesdays  
[cwiedmer@fc.edu](mailto:cwiedmer@fc.edu)  
091/ 986 36 53, extension 653

Tuesday/Friday, 13:00-14:15; LAC 7  
poverty

**Course Description**

As the global middle class is coming under pressure from the Economic Crisis, relative poverty--defined by the World Bank Institute as the "poorest segment of any given society"--is a term which is shifting to encompass not only those stereotypically marginalized in rich

societies, but also people who look uncomfortably like us. Against the backdrop of these shifting parameters, this course looks at poverty in rich Western countries as it is portrayed in literature, film, media, and art. We will explore how such representations, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> and moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, compare to economic and social indices such as income, welfare statistics, poverty indexes and poverty determinants. For these latter determinants we will take Switzerland--a country in which the extremes of poverty and riches are quite subtle--as our case study and ask how these narratives and movies and performances inform the political and discursive responses to poverty. The overall goals of this course are 1) to compare different forms of representation and to recognize, and be able to distinguish among, the many faces and facets of poverty in a wealthy nation, and 2) to critically explore the ideologies underlying mainstream representations of “the poor” or “the marginalized” and to ask in what ways such representations trigger social change, or maintain the status quo. We will be viewing and analyzing five films in this course; this course therefore also counts towards the film studies minor.

### **Required Texts (available at the College Bookstore)**

- Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in US Literature*
- Jeanette Walls, *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*
- Texts on Moodle will be added throughout the semester

### **Course Goals**

The goals of this course include the following:

- to develop critical thinking about forms and representations of, and reasons for, relative poverty;
- to further analytical thinking and writing in the field of film studies;
- to practice synthesizing information from classroom discussions, viewings, excursions and readings;
- to present this information in a variety of formats, including class discussion, oral presentation, a class newspaper or a video essay, and in short essays and homework assignments;
- and to demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively and use technology effectively in group work and as an individual.

### **Student Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this class, students should:

- be acquainted with a differentiated understanding of forms and representations of, and reasons for, relative poverty
- understand how representations of poverty are used in different films genres
- be familiar with basic models and determinants of poverty measurement
- be able to reflect on ways to handle poverty
- develop a critical understanding of a number of theoretical and narrative approaches to poverty

- be able to analyze the way in which poverty expresses itself in at least 2 different countries
- be able to differentiate between, and produce, scholarly and creative writing
- be able to use media, library and university resources to complete papers and presentations

### **Class Requirements:**

- one short critical essay of 4 to 6 pages in which you compare one film to another mode of representation
- one final comparative essay that includes at least one film of 8 to 10 pages
- participation in the class conference with a 20 minute group presentations
- 5 one-page protocols
- Presentation (15 minutes)

### **Protocols**

The protocols are reactions of one to two pages in length to the assigned reading or to the film on the syllabus. They are designed to get you to start thinking critically and taking notes while you read. They should be informal commentaries that vary in format and objective: sometimes I will ask you to generate questions on a text, or to find one intriguing, discreet aspect of one of the stories or films and analyze it. Whatever the content, I will expect the protocol on any given story uploaded to Moodle before the beginning of the class. On occasion, ask you to read from your protocol to the whole class, so bring it with you with you either in hard copy or on your computer. I will grade all of them with a check, check plus, or check minus before travel, so that they, along with the short essay, will be the basis for your mid-term grade. The checks will be used to slant your grade: thus, if you have written good, original protocols throughout the semester, your B+/A- will turn into an A-. The logic of the protocols is to prepare you for in-class discussion. Therefore **I will not accept late protocols unless you have a good, documented reason for the lateness. Protocols that are not handed in before class on the day they are due will receive a zero.**

### **Conference round tables**

After academic travel the class will split up into three groups of three to four students and each of these groups will pick a country it will represent during the class conference. The task of the presentation will be to research poverty in the assigned country along a number of set parameters, such as demographics, income, impact of gender on poverty, social systems, medial, literary or filmic representations of poverty, etc. and to come up with tenable suggestions on how to combat poverty in your country. The conference will take place on Wednesday, November 14 from 19:00-22:00; it is mandatory, so please make sure you are free then. I will give you two days off to make up for the time. More on the conference round tables as the time draws closer.

### **Presentation**

One 15-minute presentation on the film or reading of the day that ties in with contemporary news and ends with three questions. This presentation should help tie the topic to events outside the class room and kick off the class room discussion or activities of the day.

### **Grading**

Short essay	20%
Presentation	20%
Conference round table	20%
Protocols and participation	15%
Final project	25%

### **Attendance Policy**

This is a class that lives from regular reading and writing, stringent thinking, regular scholarly risk-taking, and ongoing, open-minded conversation. It is yours to take responsibility for and to shape and mould with engaged presence. You will do well if you hand in your assignments on time, come regularly and participate avidly. That said, I do understand that sometimes attendance is impossible. For this reason you can miss two classes, no questions asked. Save these freebies for your parents' or friends' visits, for that extra-long week-end or for staying home with a cold. For a third and fourth absence to be excused, I require a doctor's note. All absences after that will result in automatic withdrawal from the course.

### **Statement on Cheating and Plagiarism**

Do not cheat and do not plagiarize—I have a zero tolerance policy on this issue. You do either and you're out with an F. If you are unsure what constitutes cheating or plagiarizing, please come and see me. For the rest, please refer to the College Handbook's Statement on Cheating and Plagiarism.

### **Course Calendar (subject to change in accordance with class needs)**

#### **PART I: REPRESENTING POVERTY IN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES AND MEDIA**

M August 27

ECONOMY

Introductions, logistics, definitions

What is poverty? How does it intersect with gender and race in America?

Emily Badger et al, "Extensive Data Shows Punishing Reach of Racism for Boys

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/19/upshot/race-class-white-and-black-men.html>

#### **Assignment for first short essay**

Please choose two distinct representations of poverty (for instance a film, an article or book chapter, literary text, statistics, etc) and write an essay of 4 to 6 pages on the difference in the representation of poverty. Rough draft due: October 8; final version: October 15.

Begin reading Jeannette Walls, *Crystal Palace*

T August 30

#### EDUCATIONAL MEDIA

Assignment: Please make your own mobility animation and get ready to explain your findings using the instrument in Emily Badger et al, "Income Mobility Charts for Girls, Asian-Americans and Other Groups. Or Make Your Own." (March 2018)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/27/upshot/make-your-own-mobility-animation.html>

Relative vs Absolute Poverty: Why and How to Measure Poverty:

<https://www.poverties.org/blog/relative-vs-absolute-poverty>

Screening- Khan Academy: Relative versus Absolute Poverty: <https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/social-inequality/social-class/v/absolute-and-relative-poverty>.

M Sept 3

#### POVERTY AND GLOBAL AID SYSTEM

Screening- Beginning of *Poverty Inc.* (Michael Matheson Miller, USA, 2014). Please finish the film on your own.

T Sept 6

Discussion, *Poverty Inc.*

profit

**Protocol I-** considering the video screening on relative versus absolute poverty, and *Poverty Inc* on charity and please, discuss one or two of the following questions: What is the difference between absolute and relative poverty? What sorts of parameters are used to measure poverty in rich countries? What kinds of social networks exist to assuage poverty? How does charity work? Why is the global aid system not successful according to the documentary *Poverty Inc*? Who profits from it?

Presentation:

M Sept 10

LITERARY DEPICTION OF RELATIVE POVERTY  
Gavin Jones, Introduction to *American Hungers*

T Sept 13

*The Glass Castle* –to p. 100

Gavin Jones- Chapter One: Paradigms of Poverty and Pauperism and Literary Uses and Abuses of Poverty

Presentation:

M Sept 17

*The Glass Castle*, to end  
Roxanne Rimstead, “Introduction” and chapter  
1, *Remnants of Nation* (on Moodle)

**Protocol II:** How do the representations in *The Glass Castle* and *A Place at the Table* differ from one another? Do they contradict one another? What does Rimstead add to Jones’ ideas about literature and poverty? How do they differ? What is her point about gender and poverty?

T Sept 20

DOCUMENTARY ON US FOOD INSECURITY

Screening- Beginning of *A Place at the Table* (Kristi Jacobson and Lori Silverbush, USA, 2012). Please watch end on your own by Thursday.

M Sept 24

Discussion-*A Place at the Table*

Presentation:

T Sept 27

POVERTY AND THE STATE APPARATUS  
Screening- Beginning of *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, UK, 2016)

M Oct 1

Discussion- *I, Daniel Blake*

**Discussion-** peer reading and writing: what works what doesn’t? Sign up for peer reading and writing

Presentation:

T Oct 4

POVERTY IN SWITZERLAND

Task I: Do research into the situation in Switzerland and your hometown: who is most threatened by poverty? Why? Is there a gender component involved? How does it express itself?

Be ready to present your findings in short 5-minute presentations.

**Protocol III:** Do a poverty walk in Lugano and take pictures: where is poverty visible? What makes it invisible? What do the city spaces tell you about poverty? How does Lugano reflect the national statistics on poverty?

M Oct 8                    **Due-** draft of first essay  
Peer session (don't come to class without 2 copies  
of your paper or your computer!)

T Oct 11                    POVERTY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Jones: Chapter 3, The Depression in Black and White

**Protocol IV:** Please research photographic and media presentations of poverty (for instance Dorothea Lang's images taken during the depression in the US, or during the ongoing economic crisis) and bring at least 2 photographs to class. Using Jones work, discuss the images in conjunction with Angela's Ashes and The Glass Castle. How are these images different/the same as the literary works? What ideology do they seem to carry? Is there a gender aspect? How do they draw their viewer in?

**Discussion-** peer reading and writing: what works what doesn't? Sign up for peer reading and writing

Presentation:

M Oct 15                    Screening- Begin *City of God*, (Fernando Meirelles, Brasil, 2002)

**Due-** final copy of first essay PART

II: CONFERENCE ROUNDTABLE: THE FACES OF POVERTY

T Oct 18                    Discussion- *City of God*

Assignment Conference Round Table: In three groups of 3, students will pick a country to represent and present on during the class conference on November 12<sup>th</sup>. The task of the presentation will be to research poverty in the country chosen by each group along a number of set parameters, such as demographics, income, impact of gender on poverty, social systems, medial representations of poverty, etc. and to come up with tenable solutions to poverty. You are also encouraged to use filmic, literary and artistic materials to make your point or to show up discrepancies and tensions in the presentation of poverty. The conference will take place on November 12, from

19:00 to 22:30. Each group will be given 45 minutes to present and discuss finding. There will be no set classes on November 8 and Nov 15 to make up for the long evening. The conference is mandatory.

**Protocol V-** bring draft outlines of poverty parameters of the country you will discuss to meetings. Consider which representations you want to use in your presentation and upload the final outline for your presentation (1-2 pages) onto Moodle by midnight.

Presentation:

*Academic Travel, October 22 – Nov 2 (Happy Trails!)*

M Nov 5	Presentation workshop: Please bring ideas for presentations and a list of questions to solve for the presentation to brainstorm in assigned groups.
T Nov 8	no class ( to make up for long evening of conference on Nov 14)
M Nov 12	Presentation workshop: please bring first drafts of your presentation papers (ca 3-4 pages per person). Peer review in groups.
W Nov 14	Class Conference Faces of Poverty 19:00-22:00
T Nov 15	Optional individual meeting: where do I stand in this class?
M Nov 19	Screening- begin <i>Die schwarzen Brüder</i> (Xavier Koller , Switzerland, 2013)
T Nov 22	Discussion <i>Die schwarzen Brüder</i>
	Presentation
M Nov 26	<b>Due-</b> topic for final project. Please come prepared to present briefly to class (5 minutes each)
T Nov 29	Thanksgiving—no class!
M Dec 3	<b>Due-</b> rough draft of final paper Peer review session

T Dec 6

Final discussion: poverty today and how we might move forward

Presentation:

M, Dec 10, 13:30

Presentations of final project & fare-wells!

**Due on Moodle by midnight-** final copy of final project