

Syllabus for Honors 131

Contemporary Society in Multiple Perspectives: Wealth and Poverty Spring, 2017

**Tuesday and Thursdays, 10:30-11:45 a.m.
D-001 Mason Hall**

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Office Hours: Mondays and Tuesdays, 3-4:15 PM, or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION: In this seminar we will explore wealth and poverty through the lens of different disciplines (literature, economics, politics, sociology, philosophy), different media (biography, journalism, novels, plays, movies) and the experience of different countries (England, Russia, India and the United States). How are the wealthy different from the rest of us? Why are the poor poor? How do we explain the persistence of poverty even in wealthy societies? How do the poor view the rich and the rich view the poor? What is the moral justification for great differences in wealth?

CLASS SESSIONS. This is a discussion seminar, which may be a new experience for some of you. What you get from it will depend in part on your own participation in the discussions. These are not meant to be discussions between professor and students. They are meant to be discussions among students, moderated by a professor. Among the “multiple perspectives” that this course seeks to explore are yours.

In order to participate in the discussion, of course, students are expected to come to each class session having read or watched the assigned material.

For each session, one of you will lead off the discussion with a 15-minute presentation on that day's reading or movie. The presentation should provide background and context that give the rest of the class a fuller appreciation of the work under discussion: historical background, biographical information on the writer or filmmaker, the public and critical reaction to the work after it was released. You are encouraged to use audio-visual materials as part of your presentation, **but do not simply use slides with bullet points**. Assignments for these presentations will be made during the first class session, based as much as possible on your preferences. You should meet with me at least a week before your presentation to talk about the approach you intend to take and the research that will be necessary.

PAPERS: Your presentation will provide a foundation—but only that—for a 6-8 page paper that will be due a week following the presentation. The paper should focus on one or more important and interesting insights into wealth and/or poverty offered by the assigned work. The essay also should incorporate your own views on the work and how effective it is.

One way to think of the paper is as a book or film review that you are writing for the New Yorker or the New York Times (you might want to read a few to get the idea). At some point in this essay, you will need to (1) summarize what is in the work for a reasonably intelligent person who hasn't read or seen it; (2) present a bit of background on the work and the author; and (3) offer your opinion about how effective it is, or not, and why. **But the most important feature, and the one requiring the bulk of the essay, is (4) identify one important or interesting theme of the work or an analytical view you have about the work.** The challenge will be to organize the essay around the last of those – the big theme or analytic conclusion—and then find ways to weave in the other things as you bring readers in and bring them along to your focused conclusion.

This is not meant to be a research paper written for a professor-- it is an essay written for someone like your parents. Good essays don't follow the formula of telling the reader what you're going to say, saying it, then summarizing what you just said. Your challenge is to (1) entice the reader in with an interesting beginning and introduce the work (2) lay a factual foundation summarizing the work that the reader needs to understand and appreciate what you are about to say, (3) in a logical

way, lay out and develop your theme or argument, at each step drawing on specifics from the work or other research until (4) you bring the reader to a satisfying conclusion. Save some good stuff – maybe even the best stuff—for last.

Here’s another hint: First, figure out what is the one big analytical point you want to make about the work—your theme, your argument. Then make a list of all the smaller points you want or need to make in support of that theme. Once you’ve done that, make an outline that puts all those smaller elements in a logical order, backs them up with specific references to the work, and brings the reader to your conclusion. Only then should you sit down to write. You will probably have to tweak the outline as you proceed through the writing. But don’t fall into the common trap of hoping the structure will magically emerge as you write. Unless you are an experienced essayist, it won’t. Get the thinking and structure straight first—that’s the hard part—and the writing will be much easier.

Unlike most professors, I don’t just read and grade papers. I edit them and hand them back to be rewritten as many times as necessary, until we are both satisfied with the result. It usually requires several drafts, which is why I’m going to be somewhat insistent about getting the first one in to me a week after your presentation. The process won’t work if everyone waits until the end of the semester.

GRADING/COURSE EVALUATION:

Presentation	20 percent
Final Paper	30 percent
Class Participation	25 percent
Final Exam	25 percent

READINGS/VIEWINGS:

There is a lot of reading in this course. A few of the books are quite long—much longer than is usual for a course at Mason (sometimes very good things come in large packages). These longer books are spaced out throughout the semester giving you several weeks to get through each one. But you will have to plan your time carefully and

begin reading things well in advance. **It will not be possible to read and absorb these books at the last minute.**

The works we will read and view are:

Brideshead Revisited, novel by Evelyn Waugh

“Remains of the Day,” film by Merchant Ivory based on novel by Kazuo Ishiguro

“Gosford Park,” film by Robert Altman

“The Cherry Orchard,” film by Michael Cacoyannis, based on play by Anton Chekov

“Dr. Zhivago,” two-part British TV miniseries by Giacomo Campiotti, based on novel by Boris Pasternak

Andrew Carnegie, biography by Andrew Nasaw, Chapters 1-28, 31-33, 42 (600 pages!)

“There Will Be Blood,” film by Paul Thomas Anderson based on 1927 novel by Upton Sinclair

Citizen Kane, film by Orson Welles

Behind the Beautiful Forevers, Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity, by Kate Boo, non-fiction narrative/journalism

“Slumdog Millionaire,” film by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan

Nickel and Dimed, On (Not) Getting By in America, journalistic sketches by Barbara Ehrenreich

Scratch Beginnings, Me, \$25 and the Search for the American Dream, by Adam Shepard, autobiographical account

“Do the Right Thing,” film by Spike Lee

Hillbilly Elegy, by J.D. Vance

“The Grapes of Wrath,” film by John Ford based on novel by John Steinbeck

“Wall Street,” film by Oliver Stone

Bonfire of the Vanities, novel by Tom Wolfe (650 pages!)

“Queen of Versailles,” documentary film by Laura Greenfield

CLASS SCHEDULE

Jan. 24	Introductions, Assignments
Jan. 26	Thinking About Wealth and Poverty, I
Jan. 31	Thinking About Wealth and Poverty, II
Feb. 2	Brideshead Revisited (Book I)
Feb. 7	Brideshead Revisited (Books II & III)
Feb. 9	Remains of the Day
Feb. 14	Gosford Park
Feb. 16	The Cherry Orchard
Feb. 21	Dr. Zhivago, Part I
Feb. 23	Dr. Zhivago, Part II
Feb. 28	Carnegie, I (Rags to Riches)
Mar. 2	Carnegie, II (Business Baron, Philanthropist)
Mar. 7	Citizen Kane
Mar. 9	There Will Be Blood
Mar. 13-17	Spring Break
Mar. 21	Behind the Beautiful Forevers, I
Mar. 23	Behind the Beautiful Forevers, II
Mar. 28	Slumdog Millionaire

Mar. 30	Nickel and Dimed
April 4	Scratch Beginnings
April 6	Do the Right Thing
April 11	Hillbilly Elegy
April 13	Grapes of Wrath
April 18	Wall Street
April 20	Bonfire of the Vanities, I
April 25	Bonfire of the Vanities, II
April 27	Queen of Versailles
May 2	Summing Up: Thinking About Wealth & Poverty
May 4	Class Evaluation
May 16	Final Exam

ELECTRONIC DEVICES: All cell phones and communications devices should be shut off during class. You may bring computers to class to look things up as we are talking, but mostly they should remain closed. If you are caught checking text messages or emails, you will be asked to leave.

COMMUNICATION: All students should check university e-mail accounts for class updates. I will access e-mail through Blackboard. If you cannot attend a class session, please let me know in advance.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodation, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center at 703-993-2474.

ENROLLMENT: Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in the class. Last day to add or drop classes without penalty is Monday, January 30. Please let me know if you drop the class before or after that date.

HONOR CODE:

1. No help may be given or received by students when taking quizzes, tests or examinations, whatever the type or wherever taken, unless the instructor specifically permits deviation from this standard.
2. All work submitted to fulfill course requirements is to be solely the product of the individual(s) whose name(s) appear on it. Except with permission of the instructor, there should be no reliance on projects, papers, lab reports or any other written work previously prepared by another student, and except with permission of the instructor, no paper or work of any type submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of another course may be used a second time to satisfy a requirement of any course. No assistance is to be obtained from commercial organizations that sell or lease research help or written papers. With respect to all written work, proper footnotes and attribution are required.