

English 5650 Sec. 090 The Imagination of Commercial Life in Fiction and Film
Online course Spring 2019
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Office hours: TTh: 10:45-12:30, or by appt.

This course is the first capstone seminar offered by the English Department in an online format. We will see how it works. The course is an American Studies capstone offering. We will examine representations of commercial life in fiction, film, journalism, economic theory, and a memoir by the first great oil magnate, John D. Rockefeller. We will consider the sorts of narratives that appear in these different genres. We will ask how characters and persons in these texts experience commercial life in different settings. To what extent do persons and fictional characters identify themselves through commercial relations? How does economic life affect our sense of ourselves?

Course materials. No books are on order at the University Bookstore. We will read short literature by Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Don DeLillo, and a few others, and study a few films, like *Margin Call* (2011), which we will view when we consider materials about the global financial crisis @2008. We will read recent newspaper articles about economic life and read excerpts by economic theorists like Adam Smith, Milton Friedman, John Maynard Keynes, Thorstein Veblen, Karl Marx, and Joseph Stiglitz. We will examine the economic materials as narratives, recounting the progress of economies but also the aspirations of individuals and populations. Generally, we will attend carefully to the language and strategies of all the course materials, so that we can learn how to interpret them. The range of materials will give us a broader view of the issues than reading fewer, longer texts. If any of the films we study are not available for streaming through the Marriott Library (*It's a Wonderful Life*, for example, is too valuable a property to be available for streaming), they are available on Netflix or YouTube or other websites.

Public figures frequently speak of the need to spur economic growth. When public figures discuss economic growth, education, climate change, and so forth, they appeal, although not always explicitly, to people's assumptions about the relation between commercial life and identity. Bear in mind that an important factor in the outcome of the 2016 presidential election (including the primary campaigns) was people's sense of their relation to trends in manufacturing, evolving global markets, and individual debt. The fiction and films we will study manifestly dramatize ways we form our sense of ourselves in commercial contexts. Benjamin Franklin's 1757 short story "The Way to Wealth," for example, concerns shopping and debt. I hope students will become adept at discovering similar dramas in journalism and excerpts from economic theory. Non-fiction involves narratives of the self as much as fiction does.

Most of the selections from economic theory are accessible to a general audience. The excerpts from John Locke and Adam Smith and the essays by John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman—all very famous figures—are straightforward as well as brief. Each author tells a lively story. Thorstein Veblen wrote more difficult prose (he did

so deliberately, for reasons I will explain when we study him), but the excerpt is not that long and not that hard, and Veblen introduces a crucial concept, “pecuniary emulation,” as well as the better known “conspicuous consumption.” The 20-page excerpt we will study from Karl Marx’s *Capital*, on the inevitable concentration of capital, is hard to read, a result of his writing style, quirks of German, and problems of translation. But this excerpt, I think, explains a key element of modern economic activity. (Consider the frequency of mergers nowadays. Google and Amazon, for example, constantly seek means to expand their footprint, as in Google’s acquisition of YouTube or Amazon’s recent acquisition of Whole Foods and the online pharmacy PillPack. Globalization was well underway in the 19th century.) Marx thinks people desire the concentration of capital (and thus the huge growth of a few firms at the expense of smaller firms and at the expense of labor), even as we protest many of the effects of these increases in economies of scale. The Marx is difficult, but you will forever think differently about large scale capitalization and consumer demand.

The course materials largely concern the American context. American colonials rebelled against the British monarchy under the auspices of commerce, upset that British rule unduly restricted American commerce and hopeful that the new nation could survive because of its commerce. Yet Americans have often been ambivalent about commerce. While Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*, announced that commerce would provide a basis for a “common bond,” Thomas Jefferson worried that individuals’ pursuit of commerce would dissolve the social fabric. The course materials reveal a wide range of responses to commercial life. The extremely popular, 1923 silent film *Safety Last*, for example—and at the time its star and creative force, Harold Lloyd, equaled Charlie Chaplin as a box office draw—illustrates both the enthusiasm and anxiety that commercial life stimulates.

This course is an online course. A week or so before we arrive at each text in the syllabus, I will post a video lecture on the Canvas site, in the page titled Lessons. (I will post PDFs of the Lessons as well, for students who prefer just to read text. I myself would prefer to watch the video and follow along, as the text scrolls down.) These Lessons contain some biographical material about authors’ careers and some historical context, but we want students in English classes to attend to the language and structure of texts, and the Lessons will focus on specific passages in the primary texts and on passages in ancillary materials. While the class is studying each text, students will participate in Canvas Discussions of the materials. Generally, two Canvas Discussions will take place each week. I will distribute study questions for the texts we discuss, and two or so students will select study questions to initiate discussions. Students are welcome to develop their own study questions. For each Discussion, the other students will respond to each of the initial posts. As the semester proceeds, I will try to devise a format for students to collaborate in initiating group discussions. Students do not need to be online at the same time.

Contributions to the Discussions on Canvas will be worth 10% of the final grade. If you submit responses to all the Canvas Discussions, you automatically receive an “A” for this portion of the final grade. Otherwise, your grade for the Discussions will reflect the percentage of posts you submit during the semester, evaluated on a curve.

In addition, as I do for traditional class discussion, I will add a bonus to some students' grade for the Discussions, if their Discussion posts are particularly helpful.

Writing assignments: One 2-page, **optional**, ungraded, diagnostic essay, to begin a conversation about writing with individual students; two formal, 4-5 page essays on assigned questions; a seminar length essay, whose topic students develop themselves. The shorter essays will help students prepare to develop a longer essay. The two shorter essays can be revised, the grade on the revision replacing the old grade. Regular, brief exercises (@ 75 words. **No exams.** (The exercises in part replace exams.)

In the closing weeks of the semester, students will either record or post in writing a 10 minute presentation on their seminar essay projects, on which other students will comment. We will discuss the mechanics of these presentations.

The two shorter, graded essays are worth together 35% percent of the final grade (equally weighted). The seminar essay is worth 40% of the final grade. The brief exercises total 15% of the final grade (and submitting them regularly can only help a student's grade). The brief exercises enable me to gauge whether students are keeping up with assignments and understanding the material as we proceed. The exercises help students gain practice articulating ideas about the course materials. The stakes are low for any single exercise, and so you can try out ideas. As I comment on the exercises, I can often identify the germ of an argument for the formal essays. Submitting the exercises regularly can only help a student's grade; if you don't submit the exercises, your grade by definition will suffer.

In a traditional classroom setting, we discuss matters of composition for 5-10 minutes each class meeting. About once a week I will post discussions of some element of composition, but students should read and review the file Matters of Composition posted on Canvas. Some of the brief exercises may ask students to revise a sentence that in present form is ineffective. I try to help students learn to organize essays around a concrete thesis, with every stage of the essay developing this core argument. I try to help students learn to organize sentences around concrete, active verbs.

You will likely have questions about any number of the matters I have outlined above. For example, how do I evaluate the Exercises? What does the optional, diagnostic essay involve? Or, what do I expect on revisions of essays? In ordinary classroom settings, we regularly discuss such issues during class meetings. You will find on the course Canvas site explanations of these and other matters in the pages General Instructions and Writing Assignments. As specific issues or questions arise, I can communicate with individual students or the entire class via email or in a Canvas Discussion or by posting a video or PDF.

University Writing Center:

The University Writing Center offers one-on-one assistance with writing. Tutors can help you understand your writing assignments, work through the writing process,

and/or polish your drafts for all the courses in which you are enrolled. Sessions are free of charge, and you can meet as often as you need. To make an appointment, call 801.587.9122. The Writing Center is located on the second floor of the Marriott Library. Visit the website at writingcenter.utah.edu. Let me suggest that before you visit the Writing Center, come to my office, and certainly show me outlines and drafts of the formal essays. I myself have helped train some of the tutors at the University Writing Center, and these tutors are well trained and experienced. But bring me your writing first. Discussing with me your exercises, on which the stakes are low, might be useful as preparation for longer writing assignments.

Disabilities:

The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in the class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability Services, 162 Olpin Union Building, 581-5020 (V/TDD). CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations.

University Accommodations Policy:

Students should visit <http://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-100.php> to review the university's Accommodations Policy (Policy 6-100-Q., especially Q1.-Q3, and in particular Q3a.-Q3d). Students should notify me if they seek any scheduling accommodations under the terms of Policy 6-100-Q. Also in accord with this policy, please note that the content of course materials and consequently of class discussions may conflict with some students' deeply held core beliefs. Any student has the right to petition the instructor in writing for a content accommodation. Please review the syllabus carefully, and if you have a concern about the content of any course materials, please discuss it with me immediately. If you wish to petition for an accommodation, I recommend that you submit it as soon as possible.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is one form of "academic misconduct" (see Policy 6-400 (Student Code), Section 1.B. 2., at <http://regulations.utah.edu/academics/6-400.php>). University Policy 6-400, Section 1.B. 2.c., defines plagiarism as "the intentional unacknowledged use or incorporation of any other person's work in, or as a basis for, one's own work offered for academic consideration or credit for public presentation. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, representing as one's own, without attribution, any individual's words, phrasing, ideas, sequence of ideas, information or any other mode or content of expression." You must cite any material you have consulted on the web or in a library; otherwise you have plagiarized the material, whether you quote (or copy) passages or just allude to concepts discussed on a website. Do not adapt other students' work nor collaborate with others on your essays. The work you submit must be your own.

Student plagiarism is often easy to detect, because plagiarized passages do not sound like student writing and often depart from a thesis you have developed for this course. Google and other digital tools make plagiarism increasingly easy to document. Faculty are required to report for disciplinary action all instances of plagiarism to the

Offices of the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. The Eccles School of Business has its own reporting requirements. Students who plagiarize have not learned the skills any discipline tries to cultivate, and professors are authorized to fail plagiarized work or even fail for the course students guilty of plagiarism. Plagiarized work is generally not high quality anyway, so better to discuss with your instructor any difficulties you encounter while crafting essays. Learn from these difficulties; do not try to disguise them. In general, do not use sources you find on the web to help you fulfill assignments for this course, because you will be unable to evaluate the quality of the source. The questions we discuss in class are specific to this course, and websites will provide only general information.