

Fall 2016 – 01:090:293:04

# Truth, Fiction and Inequality: The New Gilded Age?

Class Meetings T/Th 4 (1:10-2:30), HC – S120

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Office Hours: Thursdays 10 to noon—and anytime by appointment  
English Annex, 43 Mine Street

## Course Goals:

SAS Core, WCr: Respond effectively to editorial feedback from peers, instructors, and/or supervisors through successive drafts and revision.

## Course Description:

Corporate capitalism and realist fiction came of age together in the nineteenth century. It thus seems fitting that, today, when commentators are looking to describe the inequality of twenty-first century capitalism, they often say that we have entered “a new gilded age,” a term originally coined by the American realist writer Mark Twain. However, instead of realist novels, the favored modality of political discourse is now statistical, with graphs and datasets taking the place of plot lines and character studies. Most conspicuously, the “Occupy Wall Street” movement popularized the growing wealth gap by telling a story about the 1%, while a recent article in *The Economist* assures us that it’s not the 1% we need to worry about, but rather the .01%. Gone are the great realist novels exploring the psychological and sociological complexities governing the distribution of wealth and power. This course is motivated by the statistical turn in the contemporary story of inequality to reconsider of the older story told about inequality by nineteenth-century realism.

What happens when we go back to realism to tell the story of inequality? Perversely, we find ourselves in a world deeply scarred by irreality, by the fictiveness of evident social truths. Can a painting or a story can ever be real? Does anyone really think there is such thing as truth in fiction? Isn’t the definition of fiction dependent on something like a lie? After all, we are talking about made-up novels and images on a canvas, not journalism, not history, not documentary. And then, what about the irreality of corporate capitalism and consumer culture? Doesn’t the very idea of a commodity entail a fiction, the consumption of a feeling or a mood as much as real thing? What is a corporation if not a kind of fiction, a legal entity standing in place of an owner?

Our exploration will be both historical and theoretical. Given the variety of ways to address inequality, and the many different ways to write a novel, why would socially engaged authors in the nineteenth century make the improbable decision to organize under the banner of realism? What made them think that they had something to say about major contemporary issues—such as economic, gender and racial inequality—that couldn’t be better said by a statistical measure or a

political essay? And why did they think that “realist” art could get them closer to the truth than the lyric self-searching of romantic poetry, the emotive force of sentimentalism, or the spiritual purchase of a sermon?

Students will also be introduced to the long academic pedigree of this question about the relation between realism and capitalism. We will read accounts of it from Marx and Veblen to Lucacs and Jameson. We will also consider some key moments in the intellectual history of the period, especially with regard to the development of pragmatist philosophy. Issues of race and gender will be situated alongside that of wealth. These will help students gain an understanding of the kind of debates literary scholars are still having about how to read the fiction of the period.

### Required Books:

- Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard) 978-0-674-43000-6
- William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Penguin) 978-0140439236
- Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (Penguin) 9780140187298
- Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Penguin) 978-0140186864

??? Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Norton) 978-0-393-92773-3 **OR** Lionel Shriver, *The Mandibles* (Harper) 978-06-232824-3 **OR** Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (Penguin) 978-0-14-303971-6 **OR** Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick and Struggling Upwards* (Penguin) 978-0140390339

### Reading Schedule:

\*\*\* Note that additional reading, mostly of literary criticism about the novels up for discussion, will be scheduled for Thursdays. I have not listed it here, since it will be determined by the direction our conversation takes, but will announce it in class.

### Part 1. “The New Gilded Age”

- Sept. 6 Introduction  
 Sept. 8 Thomas Piketty, from *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014)  
 Introduction and Chapter One (pp 1-71)

#### Suggestions for further reading:

The World Top Incomes Database: <http://www.wid.world>

- Sept. 13 Thomas Piketty, from *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014)  
 Chapters 7 - 9 (pp 237-335)  
 Sept. 15 Doreen Massey, “Vocabularies of the Economy,” from *After Neoliberalism* (2015)  
 James Livingston, “How to Explain a Crisis: The Revenge of the Populists,” from *Against Thrift* (2011)

#### Suggestions for further reading:

Reviews of Piketty can be found here: <http://tcf.org/content/commentary/piketty-review-roundup-capital-in-the-21st-century>. A few I’d suggest:

- Paul Krugman, “Why We’re in a New Gilded Age,” *New York Review of Books* (5/8/14)
- John Cassidy, “Forces of Divergence,” *The New Yorker* (3/31/14)
- Martin Feldstein, “Piketty’s Numbers Don’t Add Up,” *The Wall Street Journal* (5/14/14)
- editorial, “Forget the 1%: It is the 0.01% who are really getting ahead in America,” *The Economist* (11/8/2014)
- Deirdre McCloskey, “The Formula for a Richer World? Equality, Liberty, Justice,” *New York Times* (9/2/2016)

## Part 2. The Labor Movement: Agitation, Suppression, and the Art of Realism

Sept. 20 William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Parts One and Two  
 Sept. 22

Sept. 27 Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Parts Three and Four  
 Sept. 29

Oct. 4 Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Part Five  
 Oct. 6

### Suggestions for further reading:

- Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Therof,” from *Capital, Vol. 1* (1867)
- Roman Jakobson, “On Realism and Art” (1921)
- Georg Lukacs, “Narrate or Describe,” from *Studies in European Realism* (1950)
- Alan Trachtenberg, “Fictions of the Real” from *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982)
- Michael Rifaterre, *Fictional Truth* (1993)
- James Green, *Death in the Haymarket* (2006), Prologue (pp 3-14) and Chapters 11 to 15 (pp 174-273)
- Jacques Rancière, “The Politics of Literature” from *The Politics of Literature* (2004/2011)
- Rita Felski, “Context Stinks!” *New Literary History* 42:4 (2011)

Oct. 11 TUTORIALS: 8am to 2:30 pm, one-on-one, 20-minute meetings, sign up on SAKAI  
 Oct. 13 TUTORIALS: 8am to 2:30 pm, one-on-one, 20-minute meetings, sign up on SAKAI  
 Oct. 14 **ESSAY #1 DUE @ 9AM. SUBMIT AS ATTACHMENT TO SAKAI**

**Part 3. The Leisure Class, Poverty, and the Status of Women**

Oct. 18 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905), Book 1

Oct. 20

\* Possible Field Trip to The Mount

Oct. 25 Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, Book 2

Oct. 27

Suggestions for further reading:

- Walter Benn Michaels, “‘Sister Carrie’s Popular Economy,’” *Critical Inquiry* 7:2 (1980)
- Jennifer Fleissner, from *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004), “Sentimentality and ‘Drift’ in Dreiser and Wharton”

**Part 4. Inequality and Freedom, Race and Neoliberalism**

Nov. 1 Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Chapters 1-15

Nov. 3

Nov. 8 Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chapters 16-End

Nov. 10

Nov. 15 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 2014)

Nov. 17 NO CLASS MEETING TODAY

Nov. 22 (note: Thursday classes)

The Visual Art of Excess: No reading assignment. In class, we will survey realist painting and photography from Gustave Courbet to John Singer Sargent (including Eakins, Homer, Riis, and others)

Nov. 24 **THANKSGIVING**

**Part 5. Relays to the Present: The Story of Inequality**

??? Reading TBD: *Sister Carrie*, *The Iron Heel*, *Ragged Dick*, “Bartleby the Scrivener” or *The Mandibles*

Nov. 29

Dec. 1

Dec. 6

Dec. 8

Dec. 13 **ESSAY #2 DUE IN CLASS**

**REQUIREMENTS:**

Attendance is required; preparation and participation is expected. You should come to class having attentively prepared the reading. You should expect to read around 150 pages per week. The seminar will be based on discussion.

If absolutely necessary, you may take up to two personal absences from this class. After that, each absence will drop your overall grade for the semester (i.e. if you are absent three times, the best grade you could receive is a B+; if you are absent four times, the best grade you could receive is a B; etc...). Arriving late to class will be counted as an absence. Please note this policy: there are no exceptions, and your grade will be dropped for excessive absences or tardiness.

The classroom will be computer, tablet, and phone free.

Weekly Writing: Every Thursday, you will have a writing assignment due. The nature of these assignments will evolve over the course of the semester, such that by the end you will be handing in drafts of your final essay. You must bring hard copies of your writing to class.

First Essay: The first essay will be in the range of 5-7 pages on a topic provided for you.

Final Essay: Your final essay will be in the range of 7-10 pages in length. Your topic will be developed in consultation with me over the first 8-10 weeks of the course. It will involve secondary reading in addition to that found on the syllabus.

You should follow Chicago Manual of Style citation rules for your papers as described here: [owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/).

Rutgers University standards regarding plagiarism and academic integrity will be strictly enforced. Please review the guidelines here: [academicintegrity.rutgers.edu](http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu).

**EVALUATION:**

Final Grades will be calculated as follows:

Participation:	20%
Weekly Writing:	20%
Essay One:	30%
Essay Two:	30%

For the first few Thursdays, starting September 15, you are to pose a question. Length should be around a page, single-spaced, or 400-500 words.

Put your question at the top of the page, but then elaborate upon it following the format suggested below.

What's a question? A series of observations. Some connections. And the naming of a gap.

Start with some observations from your reading, typically something you've noticed that gets repeated, like a stylistic trait, thematic characteristic, or other curiosity. It can be something that immediately raises a question for you—something that you are curious about, don't understand, or would like to know more about. But it could also be something interesting that you noticed—something that caught your eye because it reminds you of something you read elsewhere in secondary criticism criticism, or that you talked about in this class or others. It could as easily be an “aha” moment that makes sense of the whole thing as a “huh” moment that leaves you baffled. Either of these could work.

Then make some connections. Here, you are elaborating the observation, doing a little work in spelling it out by way of explaining your curiosity about whatever it is in terms of things you have read elsewhere in the novel. What you are doing is the work done whenever we process new knowledge: we set it in place for ourselves by relating it to things we already know. We draw lines of comparison between it and other things, linking observations together in new ways. And we try to make it meaningful by imagining the stakes of the observation, and the difference it makes to have noticed whatever it is we noticed.

And finally, you develop your question. In a way, this part is the hardest because you are trying to put some words to things you don't know—to the stuff just beyond the things you were able to connect in the second part. You know it's like x and y and z, but maybe you don't know what those things mean and would like someone to say a bit more about the connections. You may want clarification of a hunch you have about your observation, or to know more about something suggested by the connections you have been making. You might want to understand how to relate something that seems contradictory to what you observed. The question is not always asking for more information, although that's OK; more often than not, and more interestingly, it is asking for clarification about the nature of possible connections.

The goal of the exercise is not only to develop a question, but to begin to understand why it matters.

What I've typed here, by the way, is 460 words in length.