

William Degenaro: Working-Class Literature

Dr. Bill DeGenaro

Objectives:

- To analyze literary and pop culture representations of the lives/labors of working people in the U.S.
- To explore various meanings of "work" and "social class" and contextualize those concepts historically, politically, and culturally
- To think critically about the cultural myths of equality, upward mobility, and the classless society
- To reflect on personal ties to course concepts
- To formulate analytical ideas about the literary texts and cultural concepts the class discusses and articulate those ideas in writing

Course Description:

The name of this course raises more questions than it answers. Who is the working class? How does the working class differ from the middle class? Is working-class literature written *by*, *for*, or *about* the working class? What characteristics distinguish this literature? The answers to all these questions are complex and you will spend the semester engaged in critical conversation and reflective and analytical writing in order to begin formulating thoughtful and examined responses.

I believe we can only understand textual representations through conversations in which we ask questions and challenge ideas. For this reason, the bulk of class time will be spent engaged in the critical discussion of our primary texts. I will deliver mini-lectures that provide biographical and historical context for the texts, but we will work together to interpret the cultural significance of songs, poems, stories, novels, television shows, and films. I expect all members of the class-community to complete assigned readings and writings and contribute to our conversations. Please know that English 162 is reading, writing, and speaking intensive. If you do not wish to take such a course, I would urge you to drop right away.

Texts:

Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

Jim Daniels, *Punching Out*

Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills*

Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

Tillie Olsen, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

Packet of poems, stories, articles, and song lyrics I'll distribute in class.

Films:

Martin Scorsese, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974)

Ken Loach, *Bread and Roses* (2001) <note: both films on reserve in library>

Grading:

Three Reader-Responses (about 2 pp. each)	30%
Class Participation	10%
Discussion Leader	10%
Group Project/Poster Presentation	15%
Prospectus for Text-in-Context Essay	5%
Text-in-Context Essay (about 6-8 pp.)	30%

Attendance:

Because the class depends upon participation from all members of the community, attendance is required. I will allow two unexcused absences. After that I reserve the right to lower your final grade by a half-letter for each day you miss. At five absences you can be dropped from the course for non attendance.

Respect in the Classroom:



Since you will spend class time sharing ideas in written and oral form, respect is crucial. Every member of the class has the right to participate in conversations. Nobody should feel silenced. This is a class where you can (and should) speak your mind. The idea is for us to challenge each other and push each other to think more carefully and critically. It is okay to disagree, but you should disagree respectfully. Let the other person finish his or her thought, for example, before you express disagreement. Finally, do not belittle any member of the class - especially on the basis of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, or physical

appearance. College is a place where you should feel challenged. In fact, the ideas and values you hold dear ought to be interrogated and questioned. However, you also have the right to feel free and safe. Let's maintain an open environment.

Written Work:

All written work for English 162 should be typed on a computer in a font no larger than 12" and with standard margins. Pages should be numbered in the upper right-hand corner of the page and stapled in the upper left-hand corner. You should provide a title that captures the central point of your paper. I fully expect that written work will be completed by the appropriate due dates; late work can receive a grade no higher than a C. Save your work on a disk and on the hard drive (if you

are using your own computer), e-mail the document to yourself as an attachment, and print out a copy for me and an extra copy for your records.

Screening Films:

Notice on the daily schedule that we will screen two full-length films on two separate evenings. Below you will find the dates of the two film screenings. I expect all members of the class to attend the evening screenings unless you have a work or family commitment that makes your evening attendance impossible. You are still responsible to watch the film before the class period after the official screening. The films are on reserve in our library and you may check out the film long enough to watch it on one of the viewing stations right in the library. Work out your schedule in advance so that you watch the film before class. The films that we watch clips of in class are also on reserve in case you wish to watch the entire film and/or write one of your reader responses about, for example, *Clerks*.

Schedule:

CP=Course Packet

Tuesday January 7 Introduction to course. Begin to define "class" and "working class."

Thursday January 9 Read Tess Gallagher, "I Stop Writing the Poem" and Gregory Mantsios,

"Class in America: Myths and Realities" (CP). Discuss our own work experiences. Discuss myths, ideology, and "working class" as a cultural identity.

Tuesday January 14 Read Jim Daniels, *Punching Out* pp. 1-52. Discuss poetry, poetic devices, and how to analyze literary texts. Work on defining "working-class literature."

Thursday January 16 Read Jim Daniels, *Punching Out* pp. 53-93 and Tim Ross, "A Conversation with Jim Daniels" (CP). Discuss literature as a form of resistance. More on writing about literature.

Tuesday January 21 Read Tillie Olsen, "I Want You Women Up North To Know" and Janet Zandy, ed., "The Fire Poems" (CP). Discuss the Triangle Shirtwaist Fires and sweatshop labor. Discuss "working-class poetry" as "documentary poetry."

Evening of January 21 Screen the film *Bread and Roses* (time and location tba)

Thursday January 23 Read James Oppenheim, "Bread and Roses" (CP). Discuss the film *Bread and Roses*. Continue discussion of sweatshops.

Tuesday January 28 Read Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* chs. 1-11. Discuss labor unions and labor movement. Watch clips from the film *Roger and Me*.

Thursday January 30 Read Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* chs. 12-21. Discuss/define class consciousness.

Tuesday February 4 Read Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* chs. 22-31. Discuss labor laws. Guest lecture: Nicole Smithson.

Thursday February 6 Read Dead Kennedys, Tracy Chapman, and White Stripes lyrics (CP). Discuss punk music, folk music, and art as a class weapon. Listen to select songs.

Tuesday February 11 Read Tillie Olsen, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. Discuss gender and social class. Watch clips from the film *Nine to Five*.

Thursday February 13 Read Lisa Orr, "People Who Might Have Been You: Agency and the Damaged Self in Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*," Tillie Olsen, "I Stand Here Ironing" (CP). Discuss glass ceiling concept and sexual harassment.

Tuesday February 18 NO CLASS TODAY

Evening of February 18 Screen the film *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (time and location tba)

Thursday February 20 Discuss the film *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. More on gender and representations of alienation.

Tuesday February 25 Group Projects/Poster Presentations this week.

Thursday February 27 Group Projects/Poster Presentations this week.

Tuesday March 4 Read Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* pp. 1-46. Discuss Carver and short fiction as a genre.

Thursday March 6 Read Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* pp. 47-106. More on the elements of fiction and defining the "working-class story." **Discuss the Text-In-Context Essay and expectations for formal literary research papers.**

March 11/13-NO CLASS

Tuesday March 18 Read Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* pp. 107-159, Dorothy Allison, "Mama" (CP). More on working-class fiction.

Thursday March 20 Read Jim Daniels, "Movie Stars" (CP). Discuss representations of the working class on television. Screen some sit-com excerpts. **Prospectus for Text-In-Context Essay due today.**

Tuesday March 25 Read excerpts from Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (CP). Discuss Marxism and class conflict. Watch clips from the film *Clerks*.

Thursday March 27 Read Rebecca Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron Mills" (11-65). Discuss the preservation of working-class voices.

Tuesday April 1 Read Rebecca Harding Davis, "The Wife's Story" and "Anne" (177- 242). Discuss comparisons between nineteenth and twentieth century working-class representations.

Thursday April 3 Read Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Paycheck, and Johnny Cash lyrics (CP). Discuss the ethics of representation, image/persona/ethos, and who has the "right" to speak for the working class. Listen to select songs. Discuss country music and "blue-collar rock."

Tuesday April 8 Read Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* chs. 1-11. Discuss race and social class and Himes' career.

Thursday April 10 Read Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* chs. 12-22. Discuss the relationship between genre fiction and working-class literature.

<By Friday April 11> By 5:00 p.m. today, I should have received a rough draft of your Text- In-Context Essay (via email, my mailbox, or in person in my office).

Tuesday April 15 Classes canceled for one-on-one conferences to discuss final paper.

Thursday April 17 Classes canceled for one-on-one conferences to discuss final paper.

Tuesday April 22 Course Evaluations. Discuss the semester.

Thursday April 24 **Final Draft of Text-in-Context Essay due.** End-of-semester party.