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The City in Black and White and Color: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Life in the City

Robert Johnson Moore

"The City in American Literature and Culture" was one of the interesting seminars offered in the 1981 Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. Fascinated by Professor Alan Trachtenberg's earlier Institute presentation of photographs on the American city by such noted pioneers as Lewis Hine and Walker Evans, I hoped the seminar to follow would allow me to combine the literary perspective on the American city with that of photography.

The seminar reading list, copious and demanding, gave a kaleidoscopic view of the American city. Three years of experience with the Institute had taught me that frugality and practicality were crucial in planning a unit. Some discussions of works, though helpful in gaining insights on the subject, for obvious pedagogical reasons could not be as successfully replicated in the high school classroom. The seminar reading list, therefore, divided into some things for reference and some things for teaching. Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* and Henry Miller's *Black Spring* provoked some intriguing discussions, but were thoughtfully shelved; they were either too philosophical or too graphic for a public school audience. Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me A Riddle*, though an excellent novel for teenagers, was not a regular part of the school system's reading list. My unit consciously and conscientiously would contain works that were readily available in school book closets. Short works of Blake, Wordsworth, Whitman, and Sandburg appear in many anthologies. The works of Crane, Poe, Baldwin, Fitzgerald, and Eliot are similarly accessible.

Our seminar, structured around selected readings, was fruitful and provocative. The most helpful discussions were those directed by teachers on the problems and strategies of teaching literature to city students. One such discussion emphasized the importance of "personalizing" the reading

material. A work must relate to the students' own lives. In the university community, literature can be successfully taught as a thing-in-itself, as a representation of philosophical trends; to most public school students, this approach has doubtful value. Books must mean something immediate, or they are useless.

I tried earnestly to tie much of the reading and the flavor of the seminar discussions into my final unit for the sake of enrichment, as well as economy. Teachers should always have the flexibility to delete or substitute works they deem appropriate, and I inserted more familiar works with which I had already experienced ample success. The seminar provided a framework on which to build.

The city conjures up a variety of images in the mind of even the most jaded observer. The artist, however, has a sharper vision of what the city represents. The images reflected in art, music, photography, and literature range from positive to negative, often lingering in blurred areas of neutral gray. The blaring sounds of radios carried by urban youths echo the vibrant spirit of a new musical age in contrast to the Blues, which still haunts storefront honky-tonks. Photographs of urban scenes reflect themes of alienation and brotherhood. Isolated characters with mute faces are foiled by casual scenes of smiling lovers strolling through scented parks. The subway provides one of many poetic images of closeness and intimacy juxtaposed with snobbery and fear. In the words of Langston Hughes, blacks and whites, rich and poor, travel meshed together in a space where there is "no room for fear." Similarly, bold murals on the sides of buildings startle us with images of joy and hope amid pain and despair.

A study of artistic and literary images of the city revolts against any stereotyping of today's city as being all black or all white, all rich or all poor, all rock or all blues, island of isolation or "happening," all good or all bad. The purpose, then, of this unit of study is to direct students to compose an artistic and literary collage of contemporary urban life that seeks to *interpret*, *analyze*, and *evaluate* its mettle. Students are given an opportunity to integrate their impressions of urban life with established views, thereby enriching their understanding of their own present and future. The unit culminates in a student production of a room-size scrapbook depicting the full range of complexities in urban living.

The Montage: A Tool for Interdisciplinary Studies

The montage will take the form of a large display in an oversize classroom featuring student work on related topics. The display becomes a teaching tool for the class, providing a focal point for activities and lectures as well as an incentive for students to compete for space to show off their work.

Students who are not academically talented are given an opportunity to show their artistic side. The use of the classroom project or the display is a technique usually dropped at the middle-school level. High school students show that they can still profit from this method. The unit on the city may also be adapted for middle-school students as well as for students in a small high school structured for interdisciplinary studies.

The montage is particularly suited for a study of the city. Students are prone to stereotype the city based on their own narrow experiences. New Haven students, particularly, view their own neighborhoods and others through the wrong end of the telescope. They see their city as fragmented, consisting of pocket "good" neighborhoods, where those rich people live, or "bad" neighborhoods, where those poor people lurk: a city split along jagged lines of ethnicity, class, and race. Closer analysis reveals that their perceptions are not wholly accurate. New Haven, like other American cities, is ever-changing; there is room for growth. As members of the future city, theirs is the responsibility to become more aware of the potential for greatness.

The montage can visually show the contrasts of city life. At the beginning of the course of study, teachers will announce that the class project will begin as soon as students begin to write, draw, and create various assignments for the marking period. Written reports will be typed or neatly rewritten and mounted on construction paper before being taped to one of the four walls of the classroom. Art work and photographs will be mounted and displayed as they arrive. The walls will slowly become a living scrapbook of the classroom's activities and will provide a constant incentive for expansion of major topics. Student work can be rearranged on a daily basis to make room for other work, or to highlight comparative and contrasting elements in poetry, prose, photography, and art.

The responsibility of teaching this unit should not be solely that of the English teacher, but should be shared with the social studies teacher who has a more solid background in teaching social theory. Art and photography teachers should be deployed to direct students in the artistic aspects of the montage. A tremendous amount of time is required for students to draw, mount, and construct the display.

Social Theory on the Origins of Cities

"The origins of cities go back to the very dawn of civilization." The word, city, comes from the Latin "civitas," from which the word civilization also stems. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations citizens were the property owners and the taxpayers. The first cities known to Western man began to appear in the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates in ancient

Mesopotamia, the Nile in ancient Egypt, the Ganges in India, and the Yangtze in China. Mankind learned to live in established communities where the duties of food gathering and growing, hunting, and manufacturing tools and weapons were shared and structured to meet the needs of the entire community. These early communities became the first cities. Anthropologists trace the role of cities from places of social gathering for food distribution to fortresses to repel attacks, as in the case of Medieval cities of Europe. Later, the city became an industrial center, a focal point for the buying and selling and the shipping of goods. Farmers began to become increasingly dependent on industrialization for the production and distribution of produce.[1]

In modern times industrialization made it possible for fewer farmers to produce enough food for larger portions of the population. In the United States particularly, industrialization forced many small farmers out of business and compelled them to seek other jobs in the central city. To anthropologists, cities are a fact of life for man. Men did not consciously form cities; cities grew out of man's need for sharing food and other necessities as well as his need for communication and recreation. Cities were formed to serve those needs and, in turn, the cities molded men and women to serve their needs. Lewis Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* states, "Urban forms condition mind." Cities cause men and women to behave in various patterns, not always to their betterment. For this reason, people have long been suspicious of the city.[2]

This suspicion of the city is well represented in the poem "Chicago" by Carl Sandburg. The poet describes the city as "wicked" and "brutal," full of "painted women under gas lamps luring the farm boys," "gunmen who kill" and are "free to kill again," and hungry faces of women and children. Yet he defends the city. In spite of the negative aspects, the city is proud and brawling with strong men building a future, "flinging majestic courses amid the toil of piling job on job," a city laughing through the dust, "half naked, sweating/proud to be a Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with/Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation." The tension between the destructive and generative powers of the city in this poem reverberates throughout American literature.

Images of the City in American Literature

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the American poet Walt Whitman joyously embraces the duplicities and complexities of city life. The images paraded before him from the ferry present a lusty challenge to the human spirit. He challenges all: "Flow-tide below me! I see you face to face!" Locomotion dominates the poem; everything moves. Images float, swim, flow

with the ceaseless tide. Whitman's city does not sleep. The speaker identifies with the multitude. The spectacle of the fire from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaring into the night (abhorrent to Wordsworth and Blake) is witnessed as part of the fabric and vitality of the nation. "These and all else were to me the same as they are to you/I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river." The multitude of riddles and paradoxes of urban life perplex the reader also. "I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me." But like others, the poet has no answers. The city is a fact of life to be experienced, tasted, and enjoyed. The nation is growing, must grow, and we with it: "Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers/ Expand, bring that which none else is perhaps more spiritual." Whitman's city possesses a soul with a certain, yet unknown, destiny which must be recognized. "We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also/ You furnish your parts toward eternity/ Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul." "The implications [of many of Whitman's poems] are based upon a paradox: The larger mysteries of life remain unsolved, and it is in the realization of our profound ignorance that we approach truth and wisdom."[3]

The Man of the Crowd by Edgar Allan Poe, a contemporary of Whitman, hauntingly echoes the feeling that the city portrays realities that will remain a mystery. The quotation beneath the title warns us of the great evil of not being able to be alone in the city. The setting is London, that is, the London of Poe's imagination. Beginning as a casual observer of the "principal thoroughfares of the city," the speaker becomes gradually fixated on a dark figure "of a decrepid old man," some sixty-five or seventy years of age "who evokes confused and paradoxical feelings" of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of extreme—despair." Compelled to follow him, the observer is led through the labyrinth of London's underworld. He is led to "the most noisome quarter of London, where everything wore the worst impress of the most deplorable poverty, and the most desperate crime." The old man is crime and poverty incarnate. He is the man of the crowd, a product of the city, an enigma. Perhaps there is some solace in not fully understanding his existence. "Perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that 'es lässt sich nicht lessen' "—it does not permit itself to be read. We are better off not knowing. Poe's image of this urban phenomenon is in sharp contrast to the openness with which Whitman embraces every aspect of urban living without question.

Stephen Crane's *The Bowery Tales* thrusts us into realism. The city becomes the suitable setting for this pervasive literary movement spirited

by Zola and Dreiser. Crane is the American disciple. The Bowery provided Crane with his artistic education. The characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *George's Mother* are representative urban prototypes to be more carefully developed by James Farrell and Richard Wright decades later.[4] Rich with symbolism, Crane's tales combine irony with pity for the lowly, poverty stricken creatures who have little or no control over their lives. The snow that beats down on the heads of the wretches in *The Men in the Storm* represents those forces that shape men's lives. Whisky, poverty, and hunger plague George and his mother. The church, religion, offers little hope of salvation and is overpowered by the cold, hard city. "In a dark street the little church sat humbly between two towering apartment-houses." The church is bathed in the red lights of the street lamp. In the struggle between George and his mother, between the city and the church, the city will win. "The roar of wheels and the clangor of bells . . . interwoven into a sound emblematic of the life of the city" symbolically pierce the little church and all those who would believe in it.[5]

The theme that man, as he continues to live in cities, becomes increasingly alienated from traditional forms of emotional support, explodes full force in the literature of the Lost Generation of the 1920s. The most important single poem of the decade was "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot, an American expatriate.[6] This theme appears again in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited" and continues into the next decade in Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The titles of these two works point directly to a loss of innocence or fall from God's grace. Charles Wales, the protagonist of Fitzgerald's work, repudiates the traditional ethics and morals America once held sacred, and surrenders to the extravagant, lavish, and reckless life of the new Babylon, Paris of the twenties. The false sense of security engendered by the business boom that quickly plunges the Western world into the Depression takes Charles as one of its casualties. Ironically, during the "boom" Charles loses everything: wife, child, all. The loss, however, has a sobering effect on Charles's character. Recovering from the depravities of alcohol and poverty, Charles regains much of his former state of rectitude.[7]

The protagonist in *Miss Lonelyhearts* has a more dismal end. In an attempt to offer salvation to the crippling throng of humanity that writes him daily in the advice column of a big city newspaper, Miss Lonelyhearts becomes a self-anointed crucifixion figure who dies tragically at the hands of someone he tried so desperately to help. Seeing "that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering," Miss Lonelyhearts transposes himself into the ivory Jesus he has spiked to his wall.

To him, the world has become "a world of door knobs." The gray sky "looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine." To West, the newspaper has replaced traditional modes of seeking solace and compassion. Weighed in the balance of human suffering, the newspaper is found wanting. Religion that once provided man with some sense of security has been replaced by a hollow media.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* James Baldwin further develops this theme of the conflict between religion and the city. The best known writer of the contemporary generation of city dwellers, Baldwin explores how the city-born child is affected by the problems his parents faced in the rural South. The scene in which John, the main character, stands in the middle of Central Park forms the center of the book itself. To John, the city offers new possibilities that his parents cannot fathom. "These glories were unimaginable—but the city was real." On top of the hill, his favorite spot, John's imagination dazzles with the lights that illuminate the skyline. The city is his for the taking. "He did not know why, but there rose in him an exultation and a sense of power, and he ran up the hill like an engine, or a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him." To John, "the people and the avenue underwent a change, and he feared them and knew that one day he could hate them if God did not change his heart." Like the fallen London woman in the movie, "Of Human Bondage," that he sees after the experience in the park, John foresees a time when he too would learn to tell the world, "You can kiss my ass." To John the city presents a multitude of paradoxes. John cherishes the possibility that a better life, a life of books and school where he had found some success, would open to him despite the gloomy web of poverty, ignorance and ugliness that surrounds him.

This struggle against lost dreams and the hypocrisy of city life also appears in the works of modern black writers such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Lorraine Hansberry, and Gwendolyn Brooks and continues to dominate all aspects of contemporary American Literature.

The City in Black and White/Color Photography

The purpose of this section is not so much to give a historical account of the development of the use of the camera as an art form or as a documentary of American life, it is to justify the use of photography as a means of providing students another perspective in studying certain themes of man's relationship to the city. Once regarded by some artists as a threat, the invention of the camera has gradually opened new horizons, permitting

man to reflect on himself and his relationship to his environment. As Moholy-Nagy, a noted pioneer in photography, points out: "Thanks to the photographer, humanity has acquired the power of perceiving its surroundings, and its very existence, with new eyes."[8]

Contrary to what many people believe, the camera does not take pictures of reality or only what it sees. The resulting photograph must be interpreted just as any novel, poem, or story. Sandburg's poem, "Fog," describes a catlike form "on silent haunches" that moves elusively through the city and harbor. The poem suggests truths about the impersonality of urban life; however, it cannot be taken more literally than the viewing of a photograph that attempts to show the same scene.[9]

Lewis Hine, an early photographer, clearly understood the power of the photograph in revealing certain realities about the city. Hine saw the value of social photography and exhibited countless photographs that exposed violations of child labor regulations and poor working conditions for immigrants in the 1900s. Fully aware that photographs could be faked, Hine nevertheless lectured that the photograph could serve as a metaphor for certain urban realities. Supported with other documentation, Hine had little trouble substantiating that child labor was abused in New England. His photograph, "Newsies, Brooklyn Bridge, 1908," a startling image of six newsboys frozen in expectation of making a sale one snowy morning, is a moving illustration of the power of the photograph.[10]

Walker Evans' subway series entitled *Many Are Called* (1966), taken in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and Robert Frank's "The Bus Photographs of New York City, 1958," illustrate the variety of interpretations in viewing single images framed by different photographers. The plight of mankind in the American city has been a major topic of many photographers even before Hine. Jacob Riis, a descendant of Dutch immigrants, dedicated much of his work "to provide believable, indeed, deliberately shocking pictures of the slums of the Lower East Side of New York and of their poverty-stricken inhabitants." "Baxter Street in Mulberry Bend, N.Y., 1888," "Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters at Night, 1888," and "The Short Tail Gang under Pier at Fort Jackson Street," are carefully framed to show the stark, harsh realities of poverty, hunger, and despair.[11] In contrast, Max Yavno's photos of New York of the 1950s reveal a sense of humor and irony in the lives of the poor people of New York. "High Fashion," "Delancey Street," "West 14th Street," and "Canal Street" show a wider range of emotions for the city and its people.[12] The people in the Riis collection are defeated victims imprisoned by their environment, much like the characters in Crane's works; the people in the Yavno series are alive and functioning, despite the looming menace of towering

stone buildings, gigantic artifacts of industrialization that dwarf their importance.

The traditions of the early pioneers of photography have been continued through the years by other noted photographers such as Helen Levitt, Robert Wilcox, Sally Stein, Alfred Stieglitz, John Szarkowski, and Jerome Liebling. An examination of a variety of photographs from these artists will enrich the discussion of urban life.

Murals

Black photographers such as James Vanderzee contributed to the development of photography as a chronicle of black life in the Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s.[13] A unique contribution of black artists in depicting urban life, however, has recently been the use of the mural. This particular genre of folk art began in the summer of 1967 when a group of black artists in Chicago created the "Wall of Respect," an outdoor wall covered with portraits of black leaders and with the inscription: "This wall was created to honor our black heroes and to beautify our community." Four similar murals were painted in Boston. The purpose of the Boston murals was beyond beautification. Dana Chandler, one of the artists, wanted his murals "to awaken a feeling for the cultural heritage of the Negro race, to strike a chord of blackness." The muralists were seeking social purpose as well as aesthetic excellence. The mural of Roy Cato depicts in stark primary colors a black man and woman looking steadfastly into the sky. Beside them a human head expands in concentric circles, a graphic symbol of a growing black consciousness.[14]

These murals bring art and a political message to empty lots. The exuberant murals of the Pocock collection of the New York Cityarts Workshop contrast with the reality of the urban ghetto. "These images are both pictures in themselves and documents of ephemeral gestures made in brick," surrealistic renderings of scenes that do not exist in the urban environment. In one mural a single lion majestically rests in the cool shade beneath an actual circus poster. In another an enchanted tree spreads out in a silhouetted corner. In yet another a fiery city skyline lies over haunted catacombs where ghostly figures stumble along tomblike cells. Jungle motifs, entangled in lush vegetation, amble above to mock the black asphalt below. Muscular forearms of sable drummers beat pulsating tom-toms, protesting the displacement of a tropical people. The mural depicting a white middle-class couple enjoying a sip of wine in a pleasant backyard setting sharply contrasts with that of the ragged pair of youths—one black, one white—playing a cheerful game of basketball

against a bright blue sky. Viewed together, these two murals reveal the range of experiences in city life of middle age versus youth, of wealth versus poverty, of white versus black, of camaraderie between racial groups versus group isolation.[15]

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The lesson plans prepared for this unit reflect an interdisciplinary approach to learning. While the major emphasis of the above narration is literature, there is considerable room for further development in the area of social studies. The intent of this unit is to have the English teacher share his responsibilities for teaching the city through literature with other disciplines, mainly social studies, for historical perspective and to a supportive degree, art and photography, particularly but not exclusively for those students who are more easily motivated by the visual.

Photographs of urban life present single images suspended in time whose total significance cannot be grasped until studied by the viewer. The photographer's use of light and shadow, framing, and perspective serves to guide the attention of the observer. It is in the act of observation and study that the true power of the photograph is revealed.

As a result of my work in the "City" seminar, I was able to blend my own literary perspective and background on the American city with Professor Trachtenberg's visual analysis through photography of the urban environment. The combination of such different modes of artistic expression has produced a unit that directly addresses the needs of a varied urban student population.

Notes

1. Gerald Leinwand, ed., *The City as a Community* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 28.

2. Ibid., 33–34.

3. Edwin C. Custer, *Adventures in Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1964), 52.

4. Robert J. Moore, "Parallel Studies in American/Afro-American Literature" *20th Century Afro-American Culture: Curriculum Unit Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*, II (1978), 125–128. Features comparative study of the works of James Farrell and Richard Wright.

5. Robert Wooster Stallman, ed., *Stephen Crane: Stories and Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 18.

6. Robert J. Moore, "Black and White Images in Alienation," *The Stranger and Modern Fiction: A Portrait in Black and White: Curriculum Unit Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*, I (1979), 151–158. Features a detailed discussion of "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot and its influence on modern literature.

7. Winifred Lynskey, ed., *Reading Modern Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 205.

8. Alan Trachtenberg, "Camera Work: Notes Toward An Investigation," *Massachusetts Review*, XIX, 4 (1978), 835.

9. Tod Papageorge, "Aesthetics or Truth," *The Connecticut Scholar*, 4 (1981), 19–20.

10. Trachtenberg, 829–830.

11. Jacob Riis, "Flashes from the Slum: Pictures Taken in Dark Places by the Lighting Process" (1888), in Beaumont Newhall, ed., *Photography: Essays and Images* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 155–157.

12. Ben Maddows, *The Photography of Max Yavno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 56–59.

13. Allon Schoener, ed., *Harlem on My Mind* (New York: Random House, 1968).

14. Victor Rosewall, "The Black Murals of Boston," *The Harvard Art Review*, Winter III (1968–9), 29–32.

15. Philip Pocock, "The Obvious Illusion-Murals from the Lower East Side," *Photography Annual* (1981), 66–72.