

Reading and Writing the American City: Literature, History, Urban Planning
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Lead-in

- What are your impressions of cities in the USA compared to cities in Finland or cities in Europe?
- Have you ever visited the USA? Which places have you visited there?
- What do you know from books, films or TV series about American cities? Share some examples of what you have read or seen.

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The task today and key points from the slides

- Making sense of diverse materials: documentary film (2011, recalling 1955–72); memoirs appearing in the form of a modernist poem (1941 recalling the 1890s) and celebrity autobiography (1956 recalling 1918); city planning texts (example from 1928, affecting the ninety years since)
- **City personality**, neglected by academic urban theorists but central to literary views of cities, plus popular writing and marketing of cities (and talk: ‘you’ve been to Berlin: what’s it like?’)
- Purpose **reconciliatory** (Roger D. Sell, *Mediating Criticism*, 2001). Bringing people together

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‘The City of St. Louis has affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done, I consider myself fortunate to have been born here, rather than in Boston, or New York, or London.’

-- T.S. Eliot (1888–1965; Nobel Prize in Literature, 1948)

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I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. (T.S. Eliot, ‘The Dry Salvages’, 1941, opening lines)

Questions: why is the river ‘a strong brown god’? What do bridges do to rivers and the way people think about them?

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Individuals’ Stories and the Stories of This City

- Literary urban studies: more than the city novel
- Ancient settlement site (Mound City, confluence of Mississippi and Missouri, Eliot’s ‘bridges’)
- One of several ‘regional French villages’ (Winn 2012); reliant on the fur trade
- Roman Catholic city?
- First [everything] west of the Mississippi
- 1949 Housing Act, public housing authorities and construction of Pruitt-Igoe
- City boundaries and collapse of tax base

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Focus on the water

- Mark Twain to the great Mississippi flood; transport and destruction
- What did the rivers really mean to St Louis 1874-1972?
- Eliot’s ‘brown god’ forgotten after bridges

- Eads Bridge, opened 1874
- City of vice? brewing, Stagger Lee and Scott Joplin (music)
- 'During the last quarter of the nineteenth century many significant changes took place. River traffic declined because of the advent of the railroads; mechanical transportation was introduced and improved forms of street surfacing were experimented with. The river was losing its influence upon the life of the City. Broadway began to develop as the City's main thoroughfare because it paralleled the river for twenty miles, was located upon the higher level uplands, was generally of commodious width and possessed through street car service.' (city planner Harland Bartholomew, 1928)

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Reading the film

- The view of myth, a composite myth: architects, Federal government, residents, idea of public housing all blamed; sense of doom
- Archive-led (Missouri Historical Society and other archives' pictures)
- Trust in academic research (of a sort aligned with DLC and LUS)
- Speakers' heads on screen
- Former residents (five of them)
- Three disparate 'experts'

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Tasks:

1. choose a speaker from The Pruitt-Igoe Myth. Describe what you think their experience of living there was. What do you think happened to this person after the Pruitt-Igoe buildings were demolished?
2. Find a picture on the Missouri Historical Society picture archive page that interests you. Explain as much as you can about what is in the picture and its context (historical; in the city). Explore the search function: <http://mohistory.org/search>

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Henry Armstrong from *Gloves, Glory and God* (1956)

'All out for St. Louis!

So this was the end of the long ride.

With a lot of other people and all their bags and suitcases, they got off the car and into the biggest hall Henry and his sister had ever seen. It was so much bigger than any barn or church or courthouse around Columbus, that several barns could have been piled right into it without crowding the half-dozen or more engines that stood in a row like fire-breathing horses at a kind of trough, snorting and spewing steam and dripping water, while their tails of cars rested without a move behind them.'

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Primary Materials

St Louis, Missouri, the Pruitt-Igoe housing development

Film: *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (Chad Freidrichs, 2011)

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), Henry Armstrong (1912-1988), Harland Bartholomew (1889-1989)

Photographs taken in April 2018 by me:

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Teaching this material

Language: US English; African-American Vernacular English (AAVE):

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Vernacular_English

Literature and Society: Jason Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism: Imaginative Place in Literary Research and Teaching*, Chapter 2, pp. 63-73 (<https://benjamins.com/catalog/film.3>). The imaginative place project.