

English 385
American Women Writers

West Virginia University
Fall 2022

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-11:15am
Hodges Hall 133

Instructor Professor Johanna Winant

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- Office hours: Wednesdays, 10-11:30am, on zoom (sign-up and meeting links on eCampus)

Description This course includes women writers who may not have thought of themselves as feminists, such as Emily Dickinson, and it includes the later writers who claimed them for a feminist tradition, as Adrienne Rich did for Emily Dickinson. We will trace the emergence of a feminist literary tradition by reading the work of women writers from the United States, beginning before America had that name with work by Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley Peters, and continuing to the present with Edith Wharton, Zora Neale Hurston, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, and more. We will also develop an understanding of feminist theory, and how it helps us read texts better as well as understand the world better. We will use these literary texts to theorize gender, and use gender to theorize literature. We will ask: How women are represented in literature that they write? What's the relationship between theoretical arguments about gender and the literary devices used? And ultimately, what does it mean to be a woman, a writer, and an American?

Goals Through your work in this course:

- You will become familiar with significant texts by American women writers
- You will become familiar some fundamental texts and practices of feminist theory
- You will practice your skills of literary analysis and interpretation
- You will practice your skills of speaking and presenting in front of other people.
- You will practice your skills in developing and writing original arguments.

Texts You must buy or borrow the following books in the listed edition:

- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (2nd Norton Critical Edition)
- *Quicksand and Passing* by Nella Larsen (edited by Deborah McDowell, UCP)
- *Sula* by Toni Morrison (Vintage Edition)

Assignments You will be responsible for

- A number of very short assignments (ungraded but required as part of your contributions to the community)
- Three response essays of 2 pages each
- A midterm essay of 5-7 pages

- A final essay of 7-9 pages

Evaluation

Your grade will be determined according to the following rubric:

- 40 percent for your support of a good classroom community (including the ungraded writing assignments)
- 15 percent for your response essays (5 points each)
- 20 percent for your midterm essay
- 25 percent for your final essay

Possible extra credit of up to 2 points: I will award up to one point of extra credit for each poem (with a limit of two poems) of 14 lines or longer that you memorize and recite to me in office hours. Please speak with me for more information if you are interested in this option.

Note that your support of and contribution to a good classroom community is more than just attendance, and even more than a traditional idea of class participation. Doing well for your “community” grade means appropriate, frequent, thoughtful, collaborative, inquisitive conversation with your instructor and your fellow students. Needless to say, you will have to be present, on time, with your texts in hand, and well-prepared, in order to support our community here and contribute to it. It also means having questions, observations, and ideas ready to share when you walk in the classroom. This course is a collaboration, and I am grading you on whether you do your part.

It’s easier to create a community if you know each other’s names. To that end: you must pass a test in which you correctly identify the names of at least 75% of your classmates in the first weeks of the semester. Your grade will not be affected by this test, but passing this test is a prerequisite for passing the class. You will have three tries.

Policies

You are expected to understand and follow the following basic ground rules:

- I am suspending my normal policy for absences—if you are sick or think you might have been exposed to covid, stay home and *be in touch with me*.
- Plagiarism is a form of theft and has very serious consequences at WVU. If you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism, please see me before turning in an essay.
- You are not permitted to use any technology in class. If you need to use a laptop because of a disability, please discuss it with me first. And remember that I can see you check your smartphone, and I will ask you to leave class, which will count as one of your absences.
- If you need to contact me, email is best, but do not expect a reply immediately; it may take 24-48 hours for me to respond. And remember that emails are a piece of writing that you are sending to your professor; be professional, polite, and grammatically-correct. Email is suitable for questions requiring brief answers that are not found on the syllabus, for example, to arrange an appointment for office hours if you can’t make the regularly scheduled times. I do not give feedback on drafts of essays over email or respond to open-ended questions; I am happy to do both in office hours.

- If you would like someone to work with you on any stage of the writing process, I encourage you to visit the Writing Studio. Make an appointment by calling 304.293.5788 or on their website (<http://speakwrite.wvu.edu/writing-studio>).
- WVU is committed to social justice, as am I. That means you can expect a learning environment that is based on mutual respect and non-discrimination.
- Any student with a disability who needs an accommodation or other assistance in this course should make an appointment to speak with me as soon as possible, and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (304-293-6700 or Voice/TDD 304-293-7740).
- The calendar of readings may be revised as our discussion develops, if it becomes apparent that different assignments will be more productive than those I've chosen in advance.

Good faith An unenforceable requirement of this course is that you undertake your reading, our discussions, and your writing in good faith. That means: Assume there is a purpose behind every text we study. When you seek to understand our texts, presume to see them in their strongest, most persuasive, most interesting, most valid, and most true form. Philosophy calls this “the principle of charity,” and it is not a posture of stupid cheerfulness. Rather, it is the rigorous core of all successful interpretation.

The material in this course can be challenging. The difficulty of the literature we will be reading makes it more, rather than less, important that you learn to work your own way through it. I urge you to eschew online study guides such as Sparknotes. Instead, trust yourselves – be patient when you feel alienated and frustrated, be calm when you feel afraid – and also trust one another.

Calendar

Thursday, August 18: What Is Feminism?

Tuesday, August 23: Anne Bradstreet

- Read “The Author to Her Book,” “Before the Birth of One of Her Children,” “Verses upon the Burning of our House, July 10, 1666” (eCampus)
- Write one sentence in which you point to something specific that you noticed in the texts.

Thursday, August 25: Phillis Wheatley Peters and Sojourner Truth

- Read “On Being Brought from Africa to America” by Wheatley Peters and “Ain’t I A Woman?” by Truth (eCampus)
- Read “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America” by June Jordan (eCampus)
- Write one sentence in which you point to something specific that you noticed in the texts and a second sentence about why you noticed it. (Pay attention to surprising word choices, unexpected formal details, etc.).
- **First try for the name test**

Tuesday, August 30: Harriet Jacobs

- Read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
- Write one sentence in which you point to something specific that you noticed in the texts and a second sentence about why you noticed it. Then add a third sentence about what effect it has.
- **Second try for the name test**

Thursday, September 1:

- Read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
- Write one sentence in which you point to something specific that you noticed in the texts and a second sentence about why you noticed it. Then add a third sentence about what effect it has.
- **Last try for the name test**

Tuesday, September 6: Theory Day!

- Read the excerpt from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and "Authors" from *Literature After Feminism* by Rita Felski (eCampus)
- Come to class with a 2-4 sentence abstract of the argument of each text written down and ready to hand in.
- **First response essay due in class**

Thursday, September 8: Emily Dickinson

- Read 124 ("Safe in their Alabaster Chambers), 213 ("Did the Harebell loose her girdle"), 292 ("I got so I could take his name"), 359 ("A bird came down the walk"), and 445 ("They shut me up in Prose") (eCampus)
- Write one sentence in which you point to something specific that you noticed in the texts, a second sentence about why you noticed it, and a third sentence about what effect it has.

Tuesday, September 13: Emily Dickinson

- Read 601 ("A Still – Volcano – Life"), 613 ("Don't put up my Thread and Needle"), 656 ("I started early, took my dog), and 1705 ("Volcanos be in Sicily") and 764 ("My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun")
- Write one sentence in which you point to something specific that you noticed in the texts, a second sentence about why you noticed it, and a third sentence about what effect it has.

Thursday, September 15: Theory Day! About Emily Dickinson

- Read "Vesuvius at Home" by Adrienne Rich
- Come to class with a 2-4 sentence abstract of the argument of the text written down and ready to hand in.

Tuesday, September 20: More Theory Day! About Emily Dickinson

- Read Susan Stewart's two essays (eCampus)

Thursday, September 22: Charlotte Perkins Gilman

- Read “The Yellow Wallpaper” (eCampus)
- **Second response essay due in class**

Tuesday, September 27: Edith Wharton

- Read “Roman Fever” (eCampus)

Thursday, September 29: Zora Neale Hurston

- Read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Tuesday, October 4: Zora Neale Hurston

- Read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Thursday, October 6: Theory Day! About Zora Neale Hurston

- Read Barbara Johnson and Alice Walker on Zora Neale Hurston

Tuesday, October 11: Theory Day!

- Read “The Problem that Has No Name” by Betty Friedan, “I Want a Wife” by Judy Sypfers, and “A Defense of Abortion” by Judith Jarvis Thomson (eCampus)

Thursday, October 13: Sylvia Plath

Read “Ode for Ted,” “The Disquieting Muses,” “You’re,” “Nick and the Candlestick,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Daddy” (eCampus)

- **Midterm essay due**

Tuesday, October 18: Sylvia Plath

- Read “The Bee Meeting,” “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” “Stings,” “The Swarm,” and “Wintering” (eCampus)

Thursday, October 20: Adrienne Rich

- Read “Storm Warnings,” “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” and “Diving into the Wreck” (eCampus)

Tuesday, October 25: Theory by Adrienne Rich Day!

- Read “What is Found There,” “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” and “When We Dead Awaken” (eCampus)
- Come to class with a 2-4 sentence abstract of the argument of the text written down and ready to hand in.

Thursday, October 27: Gwendolyn Brooks

- Read “kitchenette building,” “the rites for Cousin Vit,” “We Real Cool,” “Sadie and Maud,” and “the mother” (eCampus)

Tuesday, November 1: Theory Day!

- Read Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (eCampus)
- **Third response essay due in class**

Thursday, November 3: Theory Day!

- Read “A Black Feminist Statement” by the Combahee River Collective, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” by Audre Lorde, and listen to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Ted Talk (eCampus)
- Come to class with a 2-4 sentence abstract of the arguments written down and ready to hand in.

Thursday, November 10: Toni Morrison

- Read *Sula*

Tuesday, November 15: Toni Morrison

- Read *Sula*

Thursday, November 17: Current feminist writing

- Read a selection of essays from writers including: Irin Carmon, Moira Donegan, Michele Goodwin, Sophie Lewis, Kate Manne, Jennifer L. Morgan, Amia Srinivasan, Dayna Tortorici, and Rebecca Traister.

Tuesday, November 29: Presentations

Thursday, December 1: Presentations

Tuesday, December 6: Presentations

Thursday, December 8: Presentations

Monday, December 12: Final essay due