



## ENGL 212/WGS 221

### Special Topics: European Literature and Gender

Fall 2022

#### Course Description:

In this course we will examine a series of texts that present and focus on women protagonists from European authors female, male, and transsexual. I have specifically chosen texts that revisit and redefine historic and mythic figures in a contemporary key. We will read six novels, a collection of short stories, and a book of literary criticism, each one reappraising in its own way either a historical figure or the literary creations of others, each also invoking issues of gender and the psychological as well as sociological stakes of being gendered female. These texts will give us ample fodder to think about, discuss, and write about a bevy of literary strategies, as well as the history and politics of gender in a European context.

#### Course Objectives:

Our objectives will be two-fold: Primarily we will focus on expanding our knowledge of the literary reappraisals of the experience of being gendered female, gaining a familiarity with the literary themes of gender and female experience, the sociological and political issues that such texts bring up, as well as the various literary strategies that they employ. Secondly, beyond simply examining and interpreting this material in your written work, I would like to help students improve their essay-writing and general rhetorical skills as well by inviting you to re-write your essays based on my suggestions for improvement and revision. Combining these two-fold objectives, **the measurable objective of this course will be to allow students to write a coherent and knowledgeable critical essay on any aspect of literature, but particularly those dealing with gender issues.**

#### Course Requirements:

Beyond the completion of the requisite **reading and participation** in the class discussions, students will be asked to give a single **oral report** to the class (see topics in the calendar below to choose one) and to complete **two essays, 5-7 pages each**. The written work will consist of two interpretive literary essays that closely examine one or more of the texts that we study, isolate and interpret motifs, themes, or commonalities that you may find in two or more texts, apply a historical, sociological, or political context that expands the meaning of the text in context, explore and interpret an applicable text outside of our reading list, or isolate and examine a current of literary criticism, a sub-genre, or a historical, social, or political topic related to the issues of gender in literature. These essays will, ideally, spring directly from our class discussions and the first will be due no later than midterm time (insert date here) and the other on the last day of class. For those who want to work on their essay writing skills, any paper handed in before the final due date will be duly marked up with suggestions for revision and I will accept a rewrite (and consider altering the paper's grade) all the way up to the very last day of class, time permitting. All papers and re-writes are absolutely due no later than the last day of the course during our final exam session.

Grades will be based on the written work with positive or negative considerations for attendance and participation in the class discussions: roughly that's 35% for each paper and 10% for your oral report, 10% for your having completed the reading assignments, and 10% for general class participation and attendance. Note: A student who does not complete one of the written assignments or who is absent more than 4 times during the semester will not receive a passing grade regardless of the percent values of the individual assignments on the grounds that they have not completed all of the course requirements.

## Attendance Policy:

Both by school policy and Italian law attendance at all classes is required of all students. Even so, I will reward students (round a borderline grade up) for perfect or very good attendance, but I also have to penalize students who accrue more than two unexcused absences, so please do your very best to be here and to be engaged, participating, and “in the moment” when you are here. Students are expected to arrive at class on time, having completed the readings and written assignments due that day (see schedule below), in order to receive a passing or C grade.

Since our texts are provided in electronic form, you will probably have a laptop in front of you during our class sessions. Having lived for some years in a world free of such devices, I can tell you from experience that the laptop is not your friend, that it has already damaged your ability to concentrate and made it far more difficult for you to stay focused and benefit from classroom education than those of us lucky enough to have studied before this very tempting distraction-machine was invented and diffused. Serious psychological studies have demonstrated that the laptop (and the myth of “multi-tasking”) is seriously detrimental to human information retention, that taking notes on a computer are far less effective memory jog than notes written on paper, and that the distractions that they offer (social media, online shopping, games, etc.) are the greatest impediments to your education at the present moment. Please do your best to defeat these temptations and use the laptop only to refer to the text under discussion and, if you must, to take notes and jot down possible paper topics; for 1.5 hours twice a week leave the buzz of the cyber world behind and stay with us. This is your only hope.

## Contesting a Grade:

If students wish to contest a grade they must make an appointment to do so in person. The student will have to contact the instructor with any concerns within **one** week of receiving the grade that they feel is unjust. The student must demonstrate that they have read the comments accompanying the grade by presenting a brief written statement specifying why the grade does not reflect, in their opinion, the quality of the work. It is at the discretion of the instructor to decide whether the work and the student’s request warrant a change of grade. Students should retain a copy of all submitted assignments and feedback (in case of loss) and should also keep all of their marked assignments.

## Accommodation Policy:

In order to be eligible for accommodations (i.e. extended time on exams and tests) you are required to present an official letter from your home institution indicating that you may receive support. The letter which normally comes from one’s home campus Center for Academic Support must be presented to the administration prior to the drop/add deadline. A note provided by a home physician or counselor will not suffice. Any information provided will be treated as private and confidential.

## Academic Honesty Statement:

Academic dishonesty is NOT tolerated in this course. Academic honesty is not only an ethical issue but also the foundation of scholarship. Cheating and plagiarism are therefore serious breaches of academic as well as personal integrity. If you refer to someone else work, appropriate references and citations must be provided.

## Grading:

Both papers: 35% each

Oral Report: 10%

Reading: 10%

Participation and attendance: 10%

Detailed instructions/guidelines for writing a college level essay in the field of literary criticism will be distributed and discussed in class.

## Grading Scale:

|        |    |       |    |       |    |
|--------|----|-------|----|-------|----|
| 95-100 | A  | 80-82 | B- | 67-69 | D+ |
| 90-94  | A- | 77-79 | C+ | 63-66 | D  |
| 87-89  | B+ | 73-76 | C  | 60-62 | D- |
| 83-86  | B  | 70-72 | C- | 60-0  | F  |

## Participation:

*A-range:* Student has clearly read and thought about the texts under discussion and has contributed in nearly every discussion with thoughtful questions and comments that demonstrate an engagement with the readings, the presentations, and their classmates.

*B-range:* Student has clearly read and thought about the texts under discussion and has contributed regularly in discussion with thoughtful questions and comments that demonstrate an engagement with the readings, the presentations, and their classmates.

*C-range:* Student has read but has not demonstrated thoughtfulness towards the articles under discussion, or student has not clearly thoughtfully read on a regular basis. OR Student has thoughtfully read on a regular basis but has not contributed in discussion regularly with thoughtful questions and comments that demonstrate an engagement with the readings, the presentations, and their classmates.

*D-range:* Student has not regularly read the articles under discussion OR student has not contributed in discussion on an intermittent basis.

*F-range:* Student has not regularly read the articles AND student has not contributed in discussion on an intermittent basis.

## A Note on My Teaching Method:

I do not believe that I (or anyone else) can coerce or cajole anyone into “learning.” Rather I believe that intellectual progress is made through the sharing and discussion of reactions and interpretations. Therefore this course will be conducted as a seminar and be totally dependent upon your individual contributions and courtesy. Obviously, then, it is absolutely necessary that each of you take control of your own education not only for your own sakes, but also in accordance with your responsibility to the rest of those participating in this class. You must both keep up with the reading and begin the process of digesting the material by coming to class with something either to say or ask about it. **I strongly recommend that you take notes while reading with both questions and observations and that you come to class prepared to challenge and/or benefit from the group’s discussion.** You cannot depend on me to lecture on material that you have not read, nor will I accept the role of monitor for your reading or policeman for discourtesy to the class during the discussions. Concerns of this kind should be voiced and dealt with by the community during the class sessions. Remember that I am only one in a group of people here to explore and learn from this very interesting group of texts.

That said, I am extremely available both in class and out to offer my expertise and experience to help you digest and write about this material. (I also have a lot of experience living, studying, and now teaching here in Italy for many years and I offer a sympathetic ear to culture shock concerns as well!) I’m almost always available for private conferences and very open during the in-class discussions to address both our method and the material of our study if the group as a whole is in agreement as to the utility and feasibility of changing them. All of this is said and done to clarify from the start my particular approach—based on the assumption that we are each mutually dependent individuals demanding of respect as well as wholly responsible for our own intellectual progress—and to allow the greatest flexibility in our proceeding so that the most appropriate and useful materials and methods are addressed in this course.

## Required Texts (Provided in pdf format to students):

Christa Wolf, *Cassandra*

Anna Banti, *Artemisia*

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* & (Recommended) *The Sadeian Woman*

Either Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* or Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*

Alison Rumfitt, *Tell Me I’m Worthless*

## Course Schedule / Reading to be discussed:

- Sept. 1 **Introduction: Topic, Methods, and Expectations.**
- Sept. 5 **The Classical Woman**  
Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (1984) pp. 1-49  
Oral report: The figure of Cassandra in Ancient Greek Mythology and Literature
- Sept. 8  
Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (1984) pp. 49-95  
Oral report: Christa Wolf, a Writer from “The Other Europe”
- Sept. 12 Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (1984) pp. 95-138, all.
- Sept. 15 **Paper Writing Guidelines**
- Sept. 19 **The Renaissance Woman**  
Anna Banti, *Artemisia* (1953) Chapter 7, pp. 85-108  
Oral report: Artemisia Gentileschi, Female Painter
- Sept. 22  
Anna Banti, *Artemisia* (1953) Chapters 1-6, pp. 1-85  
Oral report: Anna Banti, Writer and Art Historian
- Sept. 26 Anna Banti, *Artemisia* (1953) Chapters 8-12, pp. 108-168  
Oral report: Renaissance Women
- Sept. 29 Anna Banti, *Artemisia* (1953) Chapters 12-17, pp. 168-214, all
- Oct. 3 **Fairytale and Gothic Heroines**  
Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*; “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” and  
“The Tiger’s Bride.”  
Oral report: Fairytale Heroines
- Oct. 6  
Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*; “Puss-in-Boots” and “The Erl-King”  
Oral report: Angela Carter
- Oct. 10  
Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*; “The Snow Child” and “The Lady of the House of Love”  
Oral report: Gothic Tropes in Literature
- Oct. 13  
Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*; “The Werewolf,” “The Company of Wolves,”  
and “Wolf-Alice.”  
Oral report: Lycanthropy in Literature and Film  
**First Essays due.**
- Semester Break, Oct 17-20**
- Oct 24 **Men Writing Women**  
Octave Mirbeau, *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1900) pp. 9-83  
Oral report: Octave Mirbeau
- Oct. 27  
Octave Mirbeau, *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1900) pp. 83-150  
Oral report: French Decadentism
- Oct. 31  
Octave Mirbeau, *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1900) pp. 150-227  
Oral report: Man Writes Women (Semi-open topic)
- Nov. 2  
Octave Mirbeau, *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1900) pp. 227-315 (all)
- Nov. 7 **Women Writing Men**  
Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) pp. 1-92  
Or Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) Vol I  
Oral report: Hadrian, Roman Emperor
- Nov. 10  
Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) pp. 95-149  
Or Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) Vol. II  
Oral report: Mary Shelley and the birth of Science Fiction
- Nov. 14  
Jeanette Winterson, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) pp.153-271

- Or Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) Vol III  
 Oral report: Marguerite Yourcenar
- Nov. 17 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) pp. 275-296 (All)  
 Or Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818) All  
 Oral report: Open Topic (surprise us!)
- Nov. 21 **A Genderless Voice**  
 Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (1992) pp. 1-52  
 Oral report: Jeanette Winterson
- Nov. 24 Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (1992) pp. 52-96  
 Oral report: Bisexuality and gender
- Nov. 28 Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (1992) pp. 96-139  
 Oral report: Open Topic (surprise us!)
- Dec. 1 Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (1992) pp. 141-190 (All)  
 Oral report: Open Topic (surprise us!)
- Dec. 5 **TERF Wars (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist)**  
 Alison Rumfitt, *Tell Me I'm Worthless* (2021) pp. 1-61  
 Oral report: Alison Rumfitt
- Dec. 8 Alison Rumfitt, *Tell Me I'm Worthless* (2021) pp. 62-115  
 Oral report: Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*
- Dec. 12 Alison Rumfitt, *Tell Me I'm Worthless* (2021) pp. 116-199  
 Oral Report: Trans Fiction
- Dec. 15 Alison Rumfitt, *Tell Me I'm Worthless* (2021) pp. 203-260 (All)  
**Second Essays Due**

**Friday Dec. 16<sup>th</sup>:** Absolute last chance for all papers and re-writes! **ALL ESSAYS DUE** in finalized form before midnight.

**Warning:** A few of the text assigned for this class deal quite frankly with sex, rape, and the biological facts of both the female and male genitalia. Therefore, I imagine also our class discussions will follow suit. If this makes you uncomfortable, this may not be the class for you. While I understand the delicate nature of such topics, we cannot, nor should we, pass over these issues invoked by the texts in our class discussions, nor can I control what others might have to say regarding these things. I hope, however, to create a safe and comfortable atmosphere in which we can deal with such issues as comfortably and respectfully as possible.