

Gender, Theory, and Modernism: The Androgynous Vision

"She [Shakespeare's sister] was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog
to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school."
—Virginia Woolf

"For many women, moreover. . . the war facilitated not just a liberation
from the constricting trivia of parlors and petticoats but an unprecedented
transcendence of the profounder constraints imposed by traditional sex roles"
—Gilbert and Gubar

"No, let it grow a little longer and I could cut mine and we'd be just alike
only one of us blonde and one of us dark."
—Catherine to Frederick in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

DESCRIPTION:

World War I brought about a reimagining of the relationship between the sexes. The trauma of the war disrupted traditional performances of gender and this disruption was nowhere more thoroughly explored than in the literature of the modernist movement. Even writers like Hemingway, who spent much of his life constructing a hyper-masculine image, moved from the simple binary of man/woman toward a more androgynous vision. I am using the term androgyny in the title of this course because it specifically addresses the way many modernists attempted to understand identity beyond gender. Modernism was marked by its belief that the seeming destruction of culture implied in WWI and the radical restructuring of thought in the early 20th century could be controlled, analyzed, and from this destruction a new synthesis could be found. Androgyny implies a mixing of "man" and "woman," some place beyond gender, a hopeful subversion of the oppressive restrictions placed on the sexes, yet also an intellectual position that rests upon the very essential categorizations it wishes to resist.

In this class we will explore the great writers of modernism, analyzing ways in which they construct gender in their texts. To build a foundation for this exploration, we will briefly review the major movements in 20th century theory. Using this foundation, we will apply theorists like Butler, Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous to both canonical writers like Woolf, Stein, and Hemingway, and to less well-known writers like Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, and Nella Larsen. We will have two research essays, a reflective paper, and a take-home final exam.

OBJECTIVES:

This course aims to introduce students to advanced critical concepts in gender theory using modernism as a field of investigation. As students of literature this represents a fundamental and

necessary reimagining of the modernist movement. Rather than thinking of this period as a male-centered reinvention of form defined by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, we will explore the way this movement was actually centrally concerned with exploding boundaries and resisting a narrow understanding of literature. There is no better way to do this than to return to the key texts from this era that push on the outer margins of the movement. Using contemporary theory will help us return to these texts and examine how they can serve to deepen our understanding of this movement. For example, traditional interpretations of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* frame it as a woman using the High Modernists' experiments in form. Rather than reading the work as derivative, we will approach it as a case of an experimental writer exploring alternative notions of sexuality through *écriture féminine*. In this approach, experimental formalism in modernism can be interpreted as a way of exploring the radical rethinking of sexuality that was taking place in this period.

As students of gender studies, a literary approach encourages us to do two things simultaneously: first, we are encouraged to take these foundational theoretical concepts and to use them in close textual analyses that will challenge us to raise the level of our intellectual interaction with the theories themselves; second, as literature is a reflection of society, studying texts opens a door into discussions about gender and its changing role in our society. Because modernism has been such an influential movement and still shapes our understanding of literature and gender today, using it as a field upon which to exercise our theoretical muscles will prove both intellectually productive and worthwhile as we ask what it means to be human beings in the 21st century. We will be reading some of the key texts and theories in gender studies, from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler. By the end of the class, students will have a general fluency in gender theory and will have established one major influence.

TEXTS:

The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism
Virginia Woolf. *Orlando*.
Sally Potter. *Orlando*.
Mina Loy. *Lunar Baedeker*
Nella Larsen. *Quicksand and Passing*
Djuna Barnes. *Nightwood*.
H.D. *Hermione*.
Ernest Hemingway. *A Farewell to Arms*.

Assorted readings on Moodle.

A NOTE ON RESPECTFUL DISCUSSION:

In this class we will be discussing serious and sensitive issues. This means we will all be responsible for creating an atmosphere where we feel confident and safe sharing our arguments and ideas with the class. It is important that we all encourage each other to voice our opinions and that we listen closely and thoughtfully to each other.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS

Midterm Essay: an argumentative research paper based on a close reading of one of our primary texts. The primary goal is to present the arguments of expert sources and then to make your own argument using specific references (quotes) from the text.

Final Essay: an argumentative research paper based on an investigation of one of our theorists and an application of his/her theories to multiple texts from our class.

Take-Home Final: an essay exam that will cover the content of our course. Yes, it is on the exam.

Performative Investigation: short reflective paper detailing your ongoing investigation of “doing” and “undoing” gender. Within safe limits, you will be asked perform outside your socially assigned gender role and to reflect upon this experience.

READING SEQUENCE

Note:

This list represents the readings we will discuss each day. Be sure to read all assigned materials BEFORE the day we discuss them. Also, this sequence is subject to change as I think is necessary for our class.

Please read all weekly readings by Monday’s class.

Week 1 (Jan 22): **Intro to Theory**

Reading: Norton Introduction (1-28), Poetry Packet 1, bell hooks’ “Toward a Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy

Week 2 (Jan 27): **Foundations in Gender**

Reading: Claire Colebrook’s “Gender Before Modernity,” *Norton*: Simone de Beauvoir (1403-1414), Start reading *Orlando*.

Week 3 (Feb 3): **Woolf’s *Orlando I*: Remaking Gender**

Reading: *Orlando* (first third), Anne Fausto-Sterling’s “Dueling Dualisms” from *Sexing the Body*, Norton: Foucault: Intro and *The History of Sexuality* (excerpt).

Week 4 (Feb 10): **Woolf’s *Orlando II*: Queering The Temporal**

Reading: *Orlando* (second third), Melanie Macir's "The Queer Timing of Orlando: A Biography"

Friday Feb 14: No Class (Professor at Conference)

Week 4 (Feb 17): **Woolf's *Orlando III: Feminist Historiography***

Reading: *Orlando* (third third), Jane de Gay's "Virginia Woolf's Feminist Historiography in *Orlando*"

Week 5 (Feb 24): **Woolf's *Orlando IV: Performing Gender***

Reading: *Norton*: Judith Butler, Sally Potter's *Orlando*, start reading *HERmione*

Week 6 (March 3): **H.D.'s *HERmione I: The Myth of Origins***

Reading: *HERmione* (first half), *Norton*: Freud

Week 7 (March 10): **H.D.'s *HERmione II: Reframing Desire***

Reading: *HERmione* (second half), Luce Irigaray's "Psychoanalytic Theory: Another Look," and "Women on the Market" from *This Sex Which is Not One*

March 17-24: Spring Break!

Week 8 (March 24): **Mina Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker I: Rewriting the Body***

Reading: *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (first half), *Norton*: Julia Kristeva's "The Semiotic and the Symbolic"

Midterm Essay Due Friday by midnight on Moodle

Week 10 (March 31): **Mina Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker II: A Feminist Futurism***

Reading: *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (second half), start reading *Nightwood*.

Wednesday: Presentation of Your Essay 1 Argument

Week 11 (April 7): **Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood I: Écriture Feminine***

Reading: Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (first half), *Norton*: Hélène Cixous "The Laugh of

the Medusa”

Week 12 (April 14): **Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood II: The Feminine as Disruption/Liberation***

Reading: Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (second half), Frann Michel’s “Displacing Castration: “Nightwood, Ladies Almanack,” and Feminine Writing

Week 12 (April 21): **Nella Larsen’s *Passing*: Postmodern Passing**

Reading: Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Harriet Bradley’s “Gender and Postmodernity” from *Gender*, Norton: bell hooks

Week 13 (April 28): **Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms I*: Homosocial Desire**

Reading: Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (first half), Norton: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Kimmel’s “A Room of His Own,” from *Manhood in America*

Final Essay Due: Friday midnight on Moodle

Week 14 (May 5): **Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms II*: Women as a Class**

Reading: Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (second half), Norton: Monique Wittig “One is not Born a Woman,” Butler “Variations on Sex and Gender”

Wed May 7: Last Day of Class

Final Paper Due on Moodle