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ENLT 521.02: Women Writing About Women Writing

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The University Of Montana

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English 521: Women Writing About Women Writing

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Class meetings: Wednesdays, 7:10 – 10:00 p.m. in LA 233

Office hours: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays 1:00 – 2:00 and by appointment

Course Description:

This course explores the relationship between authorship and authority and the related quest for a “voice” in women’s writing. We’ll pursue this question through a selection of belletristic texts – novels, poetry, short story, and film – that foreground the conflicts faced by the woman artist, and several theoretical texts that treat the subject of women’s writing and a gendered voice. Some of the questions we’ll consider are: What factors – social, economic, psychological – have discouraged and continue to discourage women from writing, and how do women writers respond to those forces? Is there a distinctly female voice? A female aesthetic? Are certain literary forms more or less accessible for women? (Why, for example, have there been relatively few women writing Naturalist or postmodern texts, and so many writing regionalism and romance novels? Or has this been a misconception informed by our gender expectations?) We’ll spend one evening discussing these questions in an open forum with some of our local women writers.

Required Texts:

Fern, *Ruth Hall* (1855)

Phelps, *The Story of Avis* (1877)

Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896)

Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929)

Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933)

Laurence, *The Diviners* (1974)

Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (1976)

Allende, *Eva Luna* (1988)

Byatt, *Possession* (1990)

Selected readings available at Reserve Desk or on ERes

Optional Texts:

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, Ed. Thomas H. Johnson

Woolf, *Orlando* (1929)

Warhol and Herndl, *Feminisms* (on reserve)

Course Requirements:

1. In keeping with the seminar format of this course, all students should come to class having done the day's reading and having prepared some questions or points for discussion. Bring three of these ideas written on a 3x5 card to turn in at the end of class. Much of our discussion will focus on portrayals of women's writing and women writers, notions of a female aesthetic, etc., but your discussion ideas need not be limited to this.
2. Each student will make a 20-30 minute presentation on one of the course's texts. Students will research the historical or theoretical context for some aspect of the text and report those findings to the class, along with a reading of a portion of the text in light of that information. The focus of your research and presentation should relate to the overall concerns of this course. Prepare a handout for the class, including such information as key terms, relevant illustrations, quotes, and an outline of your presentation's key points. Students are not responsible to lead the whole class session, but should end their presentation with some questions for discussion that grow out of the presentation material.
3. Each student will write a 15+ page essay that analyzes or critiques one of the course's primary texts. Essays should engage with the historical and/or theoretical sources read in the course. A prospectus for this paper is due the week before the Thanksgiving break. Essays are due at the end of the semester.

Syllabus:

- 9/6 Introduction and Semester Plan
- 9/13 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*
Gilbert and Gubar, "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" in *Feminisms* (on reserve)
Flynn, "Composing as a Woman" (on reserve)
- 9/20 Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall*
Recommended: Coultrap-McQuin, "Why Try a Writing Career?: The Ambiguous Cultural Context for Women Writers of the Mid-Nineteenth Century" (on reserve)
- 9/27 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" pp. 347-362 in *Feminisms* (on reserve)
Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One" pp. 363-369 in *Feminisms* (on reserve)
Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'Écriture féminine*" pp. 370-383 in *Feminisms* (on reserve)
Film: Potter, *Tango Lesson*
- 10/4 Phelps, *The Story of Avis*

- 10/11 Jewett, *Country of the Pointed Firs*
Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (on reserve)
- 10/18 Dickinson, selected poems
Joanne Feit Diehl, "Come Slowly – Eden: An Exploration of Women Poets and
Their Muse" (on reserve)
Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" (on reserve)
- 10/25 Women Writers on Women's Writing: Panel Discussion featuring local writers
Debra Earling, Patricia Goedicke, Deirdre McNamer, and Jenny Siler
Donovan, "Toward a Women's Poetics" pp. 98-109 in Benstock (on reserve)
Goedicke, "Entering the Garden" (on reserve)
- Patricia's book/essay
- 11/1 Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*
- 11/8 Laurence, *The Diviners*
- 11/15 Atwood, *Lady Oracle*
PROSPECTUS FOR PAPER DUE
- 11/22 No Class: Thanksgiving Break
- 11/29 Allende, *Eva Luna*
- 12/6 Byatt, *Possession*
- 12/13 Byatt, *Possession*
- 12/20 PAPERS DUE