

“Besties”
or Narratives of Female Friendship from *Emma* to *NW*



Thelma and Louise dir. Ridley Scott (1991)

There is a particular romance to the language of female friendship. Leslie Knope in *Parks and Recreation* calls her beloved friend Anne, a “beautiful poetic land-mermaid” and a “[beautiful tropical fish](#).” This isn’t that dissimilar in tone from Anne Shirley asking Diana to be her one and only “bosom friend” a century earlier.¹ *Thelma and Louise*, on their outlaw, revenge-fueled, drive through the West are perhaps the most romantic friends of all: taking on a world full of cops and bad husbands and boring jobs in matching jeans and rolled up t-shirts, their chemistry with each other is palpable. We have a language and an iconography for female friendship and we are, according to many critics, novelists, television shows, poets, and best friends, in the middle of, as Alyssa Rosenberg [claimed in 2015](#), “the golden age of female friendship.” Friends – besties, frenemies, rivals, and almost-lovers – dominate the small screen. Teen Vogue even has a [whole list of best friendships](#) with the tagline “Because your girls are forever.”

Yet, while we may be in the golden age, it is still hard to find books and movies that pass the [Bechdel test](#). In Elena Ferrante’s novel *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, the main character, a writer, believes that most of the female characters in novels are mere caricatures, written by men, and imagines what would have happened if her friend had stayed in school: “we would have written together, we would have been authors together, we would have drawn power from each other.”² What, we will ask, happens when the two girls write together? When female friendship is the central concern, or central romance, or central plot of a book? Ferrante writes that “the solitude of women’s minds is regrettable ... it’s a waste to be separated from each other, without procedures, without tradition.” In this class we will be examining the procedures and traditions of female friendship and female literary production that do exist, as well as marking the spaces where they do not.

¹ Lucy Maude Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (New York: Puffin Books, 2008), p.183.

² Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (New York: Penguin, 2014)

In order to think these questions through thoroughly, students will become comfortable talking about narrative theory – theories of plot, time, structure – as well as feminist and queer theory. In order to consider the many ways in which women – as writers, critics, and characters and collaborators – have come to interrupt, shape, and recreate particular genres such as the bildungsroman or the marriage plot we will have to explore both in their most classical as well as their most radical forms. We will also trouble the very categories that we are working within: what do we mean by “female friendship”? What is the difference between friendship and desire? What changes when friendship moves from the page to the screen to the song? While we will base our study mostly in the novel, we will also pay attention to narrative poetry, letters, essays, movies, political tracts, and television.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING:

As this is a junior tutorial, the course will be focused on the writing of a major research paper (20-25 pages). Each week there will be a small writing assignment before section, all of which will build towards your final paper. More specific assignments will occur throughout the term (an abstract, an annotated bibliography, a full draft). While the final paper has to be related to the central themes of the course, it will be written on a text not currently on the syllabus.

Attendance and Participation: 25% - Attendance is mandatory and participation in the discussion is expected. In order to aid our discussion we will have small, pre-class assignments before each meeting (except on days when you have other things due for this class). They will mostly be one to two paragraphs of reflection on a text we are discussing in class that day. This class will only be exciting, and worthwhile, if you participate. Please come to class ready to talk about the readings and listen thoughtfully to your fellow classmates.

Short Paper: 10% - 5-6 pages. This will be a short close-reading paper due within the first few weeks of class.

Short Presentation: 5% A brief presentation on a movie, tv show, or children’s book that deals with female friendship. Consider its relationship to works and criticism that we have already read. I will hand out a list with recommended titles on it at the beginning of class, but of course you can present on anything.

Short Assignments: 15% - There will be several assignments to keep you on track with your paper. 1) A list of possible topics 2) A one page abstract and an annotated bibliography for your final essay, with a minimum of 8-10 sources 3) A conference to check-in between the abstract and the first full draft

Full Draft: 20 % - One full, 20 page draft of your final paper, due three weeks before the final draft is due. Post to Dropbox by 5PM

Final Paper: 35% - 20-25 pages double-spaced. Please note that the most important requirement of this course is the completion of the junior essay. If you do not complete the junior essay, you will not receive a passing grade for this tutorial.

You will also be required to meet with Eliza three times throughout the semester.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Feel free to find any copy of these books (in the library, from a bookstore, borrowed from your mom), but please do bring a copy to class. There will also be some room for revising the syllabus in the first week of class, so if there are any friendships, poems, or novels that you think should not be ignored, please bring them with you.

Jane Austen, *Emma*
Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*
Daniel Clowes, *Ghostworld*
Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*
Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*
Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
Nella Larsen, *Passing*
Toni Morrison, *Sula*
Zadie Smith, *NW*
Brian K Vaughn, *Papergirls*

All of the other works that we read or watch this semester (short stories, poems, articles, reviews, movies, tv shows) will be on the course website.

Week Readings

Section 1: Thinking about Genre

1 Introduction: What does female friendship look like today? How do we define it? where do we see it?

 Selections from some of our upcoming works; Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, 2 Dope Queens, *Broad City*; reviews of *My Brilliant Friend* and *NW*; the Bechdel Test; Adrienne Rich's statement to the National Book Award (all in class)

- 2 Friendship and the Marriage Plot: What is the marriage plot? What is the Friendship Plot?

Jane Austen, *Emma* (this is a long book! Start reading it early!!)

Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market* (handed out in class)

-- Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (selections)

-- Sharon Marcus, "Just Reading: Female Friendship and the Marriage Plot" from *Between Women*

Mandatory Tutorial Meeting

Movie Screening: Amy Heckerling, *Clueless* (1995)

- 3 Friendship and the Artist As a Young Woman: What is the Bildungsroman?

Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (selections)

Margaret Fuller, *19th Century American Women* (selections)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*

Emily Dickinson, selections from her *Letters*

-- Franco Moretti, "The Comfort of Civilization" from *The Way of the World*

Assignment: First Short Paper Due

Section 2: Doubles, Lovers, Collaborators.

- 4 Contemporary Epic Friendship

Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*

- Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision"

- Ursula K. LeGuin, review of *My Brilliant Friend* (on her blog)

- Selections from Ferrante's *Frantumaglia*

Mandatory Tutorial Meeting

Library Tutorial (the second half of class will be spent with Odile in the library)

- 5 Modern(ist) Friendship

Katherine Mansfield, "Bliss", "Prelude", "The Garden Party"

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

- Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering"

- Barbara Johnson, "Lesbian Spectacles: Reading *Sula*, *Passing*, *Thelma and Louise* and *The Accused*" from *The Feminist Difference*

Assignment: presentation on a tv show or movie of your choice

Movie Screening: Ridley Scott, *Thelma and Louise* (1991)

6 Literary Friendship

Dorothy West, selected stories from *The Richer, the Poorer* (handout)

Helene Johnson, selected poems (handout)

Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

-- Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis, "Russian Interlude, Literary

Salons, and Challenge" from *Literary Sisters: Dorothy West and Her*

Circle, A Biography of the Harlem Renaissance

Assignment: Abstract with Bibliography Due

Mandatory Tutorial Meeting

7 Queering Friendship

Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*

-- Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're
So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You"

-- Selections from Maggie Smith, *The Argonauts*

Trip to the Houghton (to be scheduled at a time that works for all)

Section 3: Friendship and the Group

8 Friendship and Family

Toni Morrison, *Sula*

-- Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"

Assignment: Full Draft Due - 5pm in Dropbox

9 Friendship in the City

Zadie Smith, *NW*

Watch *Insecure* (Season 1, Episode 2)

- Judith Smith, "Beyond "Obligatory Camaraderie": Girls' Friendship in

Zadie Smith's *NW* and Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim*"

Movie Screening: Celine Sciamma, *Girlhood* (2014)

10 Girl Groups//Teenagers

Daniel Crewes, *Ghost World*
Brian K Vaughn, *Papergirls*
Selections from *Nancy Drew and the Secret of the Old Clock*
Listen to songs by Bikini Kill (selected)
Destiny's Child (selected)
Spice Girls (selected)
-- Catherine Driscoll, "Distraction: Girls and Mass Culture" from *Girls*

11 Week open for students to choose a text

12 Final Presentations

Final Paper Due (to the department and the tutor). Submit to the dropbox and my mailbox (2nd floor Barker) by 5pm

COURSE POLICIES

Extensions and late assignments

I will grant extensions, which have been asked for at least 48 hours in advance, as long as I feel it will not hurt the student's ability to complete later assignments. **No extensions for the final paper.** Any late work without an extension will lose a full letter grade per day that it is late.

Electronic Devices

Laptops may only be used for taking notes and accessing electronic resources directly related to the class (assigned readings, research questions that come up in class etc.) If you are using it to go on Facebook or waste your (and our) time in any way you will be noticed and it will result in a lower participation grade and the loss of your electronic privileges.

Academic Integrity

You are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic.

It is very important that in all your assignments you properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work and that you distinguish your own analyses from analysis you've derived from printed or electronic sources. (For guidance on how best to engage with other people's thinking and writing, see the Harvard Guide to Using Sources, <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>). Plagiarism—the appropriation without acknowledgment of writing and ideas that are not your own—is a serious academic offence and will be reported to the Honor Council of the College.

