

Joani Etskovitz  
jetskovitz@g.harvard.edu  
Barker Center, Room 105

**Sex and the Series:**  
**Gender, Form, and Feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Novel**

Can you imagine *Sex and the City* in Victorian England? William Makepeace Thackeray did. This seminar will investigate how the nineteenth-century novel made sexuality, scandals, gossip, and stereotypes into literary narratives, often in serial form. We will tease out the social norms—the codes and character types—in four of the nineteenth century’s most popular novels. As we shall see, the novel developed as a technology to flesh out, satirize, and challenge social stereotypes, particularly about young women attempting to make their ways in the world. Over a century later, serial shows are still thinking through these narratives, adapting the genre, form, and in some cases, plots of these novels to explore topics central to young adult life: sexuality, gender, education, employment, marriage(?), ambition, and what it means to find your community. For each serial novel we read, we’ll sample a TV series that reinvents that novel’s central themes and formal techniques. Throughout the semester, to better understand our primary sources, we’ll dive into feminist and gender theory, novel theory, and book history, among other critical approaches.

Tutorial Learning Goals

Subject-Area Expertise

- To explore formal and thematic connections between the serial novel and series today.
- To identify and close-read cultural codes, made and broken by 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels.
- To question gendered representations, especially of women, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and today.
- To understand how 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels and today’s series create narratives that allow us to critique and satirize the gendered and sexual dynamics of our world.
- To ask if, when, and according to whom “trashy” pop-culture counts as “art.”
- To learn how to read, take notes on, remember, and interpret long works of fiction.

Critical Writing Skills

- Design a research question.
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints.
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism.
- Write with greater clarity and precision.
- Learn to budget your time and ultimately write a 20-25 page paper.

Methodologies & Critical Readings

Please find PDFs of all the following readings on Canvas. Note: there is a significant overlap between the “Novel Theory” and “Feminist & Gender Theory” categories below. Many of our texts would fit into either category—and several of these texts are also examples of “New Historicism” and Cultural Criticism.

**Novel Theory** – *Gendered interventions: narrative discourse in the Victorian novel*, Robyn Warhol; Introduction to *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*, Caroline Levine; “Longing for Sleeve Buttons” in *Novels Behind Glass*, Andrew Miller; “Introduction” and excerpts from Chapter 1 in Alex Woloch’s “The One VS. the Many”; Virginia Woolf’s review of Eliot in *On Fiction*; “Theories of Community” in *Communities in Fiction*, Hillis Miller

**Feminist & Gender Theory** – “What Feminism Did to Novel Studies,” Nancy Armstrong; “Beyond the Family: Idyll and Inferno” in *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, Nina Auerbach; “Affairs of the Alphabet: The Novel, the Train, and the Woman Writer in *Cranford*” in *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, Hilary Schor; “‘Women’ as the Subject of Feminism” in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990); “Sexuality and the Victorian Novel,” Jeff Nunokawa; “Vibrations in the Memory: *Bleak House*’s Response to Illustrations of Becky in *Vanity Fair*,” Deborah Thomas; “One Round of a Long Ladder: Gender, Profession, and the Production of *Middlemarch*” in *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels*, N.N. Feltes

**Television Theory** – *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams; “Women’s Genres and Female Agency” in *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera*, Charlotte Brunson; “Television and Serial Fictions,” John Caughie; “Adapting Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* after #MeToo,” Rebecca Richardson

**Post-Colonial Theory** – “Introduction: Reading Noncollusively” in *Reaches of Empire*, Suwendrini Perera; “Imperial Vanities” in *Framing Empire*, Jerod Ra’Del Hollyfield

**Queer Theory** – “‘When I Kissed Her Cheek’: Theatrics of Sexuality and the Framed Gaze in Esther’s Narration of *Bleak House*,” Kimberle Brown

**Book History** – “The business of Victorian publishing,” Simon Eliot; “Seriality,” Lauren Goodlad; “Self-Conscious Serial Forms” and “Reading the (Boring) Victorian Serial” in *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*, Robyn Warhol

## Schedule

### Unit 1: The “Agency” & “Economy” of Serial, Female Storytellers

#### 1. Introduction: Silly Novels?

##### Primary Reading:

- “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” George Eliot. First published in Westminster Review, 1856.
- [“Are the New ‘Golden Age’ TV Shows the New Novels?”](#), Adam Kirsch and Mohsin Hamid for *The New York Times*, 2014.

Critical Reading: Handout with excerpts from...

- “What Feminism Did to Novel Studies,” Nancy Armstrong.
- “Women’s Genres and Female Agency” in *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera*, Charlotte Brunsdon
- “Television and Serial Fictions,” John Caughie
- *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams

## 2. “Elegant Economy”

Primary Reading: *Cranford*, Elizabeth Gaskell (1853).

Critical Reading:

- “Beyond the Family: Idyll and Inferno” in *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, Nina Auerbach
- “Affairs of the Alphabet: The Novel, the Train, and the Woman Writer in *Cranford*” in *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*, Hilary Schor

Viewing: *Grace and Frankie* Episodes 1-3

Assignment: *Cranford* and *Grace and Frankie* both chronicle the lives of middle-aged female friends who are living together, despite their annoying differences. The women of *Cranford* mostly choose to live without men—albeit, with gossip about past romances and men—while Gracie and Frankie seek refuge in a shared house after their husbands divorce them to marry each other. Despite these different origin stories, both sets of older women find themselves in analogous economic and social situations, suddenly at odds with the cultural scripts that their communities expect older women to follow. In your Canvas post, reflect on how *Cranford* and *Grace and Frankie* depict older women’s financial independence, friendships, and mixed feelings about the men (not) in their lives. Consider the role of humor in these depictions. Are these feminist or empowering series, and if so, in what respects? Two paragraphs.

## 3. *Bleak House* 1: Female Friendships, Family, & Finances

Primary Reading: Chapters 1-23 inclusive (read to the end of “Esther’s Narrative”)

Critical Reading:

- “‘Women’ as the Subject of Feminism” in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.
- Excerpts on Dickens from *Gendered interventions: narrative discourse in the Victorian novel*, Robyn Warhol.

Viewing: *Gilmore Girls*, Episodes 1 & 2.

Assignment: Finances, female friendships, and new family connections begin *Bleak House* and *Gilmore Girls*. Rory, Lorelai, Esther, and Ada—unlike the ladies of *Cranford*—are able to lean on new and renewed family bonds when they are in financial

trouble. But they're not the only women in *Bleak House* or *Gilmore Girls* who are thinking about economy and questions of class. For this week's Canvas post, write about how one character or a pair of friends in *Bleak House* helps you think about intersections between class and gender in the novel. What does it mean to be a woman or a girl in Dickens's London? You may wish to compare this character or pair of friends to an analog in *Gilmore Girls*. Two paragraphs.

4. *Bleak House* 2: Introduction to Serial Form at the Houghton

Primary Reading: Chapters 24-43 inclusive (read to the end of "Esther's Narrative").

Critical Reading:

- "Seriality," Lauren Goodlad.
- "The business of Victorian publishing," Simon Eliot.
- "Self-Conscious Serial Forms" and "Reading the (Boring) Victorian Serial" in *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*, Robyn Warhol

Class Activity: **This class will convene in the Houghton Library**, where you will experience firsthand what a "serial" novel is and how it differs from a three-volume and single-volume novel. Kristine Greives, Head of Teaching and Learning, will show us editions of serial novels that are in their original paper wrappings, series that have been rebound into single volumes, and later editions of serial novels that were sold in single volumes. Although you'll be interacting with versions of every novel that we are reading this semester, we'll be thinking about how our interpretation of *Bleak House* in particular changes when we consider the book as a material object. Get excited!

**WEEK 4 Due Date:** Please remember to submit your close reading paper to Canvas by 5 PM on Friday.

5. *Bleak House* 3: The Close [Serial Relationships] of Esther's Narrative

Primary Reading: Finish the novel.

Critical Reading:

- "Introduction" from *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*, Caroline Levine
- "'When I Kissed Her Cheek': Theatrics of Sexuality and the Framed Gaze in Esther's Narration of *Bleak House*," Kimberle Brown

Viewing: *Gilmore Girls*, Episode 3.

Assignment: *Bleak House* is as much about the emotional fallout of growing up and discovering one's family as it is a detective story, a city novel, a tale of female friendship, a collection of traditional marriage plots, etc. The novel's serial form creates space and time for all these genres and their emotional dynamics. But you haven't had much time with *Bleak House* at all, especially as compared to its original readers from March 1852-September 1853. For this post, close read one scene from a chapter that helped you

understand the internal life—the motivations, emotions, internal conflicts, and/or sense of agency—of any character. Then, imagine that you had a month to sit with that chapter before reading the next. How might this experience have changed your readerly relationship with the character in question? Two paragraphs.

### Unit 2: Sex & Stereotypes in the Serial Form

#### 6. *Vanity Fair* 1: Marriage, “a black Mrs. Sedley,” & “the rich West India heiress”

Primary Reading: From Ch 1 to the end of Ch 22 of *Vanity Fair*.

Critical Reading:

- “Introduction: Reading Noncollusively” in *Reaches of Empire*, Suvendrini Perera
- “Longing for Sleeve Buttons” in *Novels Behind Glass*, Andrew Miller
  - Note: if you are writing your paper on *Cranford*, you may also wish to read “The fragments and small opportunities of *Cranford*” in this book.

Viewing: *Bridgerton* Episodes 1 and 2

Assignment: *Bridgerton* reimagines Regency England, borrowing from late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century novels to question norms related to gender, class, and race that these novels interrogated and sometimes reinforced. While *Bridgerton* fans tend to applaud the show’s Austen-ish tendencies—and we are not reading Austen in this class—*Vanity Fair* is set in the same period that Austen was writing. Its first 22 chapters begin with “a black servant,” consider the possibility of Jos Sedley marrying in India, and conclude with the explosive controversy that comes of Mr. Osborne’s attempt to seize control of Miss Swartz’s fortune from “West India” through his son’s marriage. For all that these chapters center domestic femininity and marital drama in London, they also document the racism and mercenary economics that underpinned these phenomena. As you watch *Bridgerton*, consider how this show’s alternative fantasy of courtship in Regency London helps you think about stereotypes related to class, race, and gender in *Vanity Fair*. Two paragraphs.

#### 7. Library Fun Times: Research and Training with Odile Harter

Readings: There is no assigned reading for this class, so I recommend that you read ahead for our next couple classes.

Class Activity: We will spend the first half learning about Harvard’s research resources with the fabulous Odile Harter. In the second half of class, we will discuss your next major assignment: the prospectus and bibliography for your Junior Paper. Then, I will meet with each of you individually to discuss your close reading papers. While I am meeting with one student, I would like the rest of you to please use this time to brainstorm and jump-start your prospectus and bibliography!

#### 8. *Vanity Fair* 2: Sex and the *Fair*

Primary Reading:

- From Ch. 23 through the end of Ch 46 of *Vanity Fair*.
- Please review the illustrations in [this scan of Thackeray's 1848 edition](#), which we saw in person, last week at the Houghton.

Critical Reading:

- “Sexuality and the Victorian Novel,” Jeff Nunokawa
- “Vibrations in the Memory: *Bleak House's* Response to Illustrations of Becky in *Vanity Fair*,” Deborah Thomas

Viewing: *Sex and the City*, Episodes 1 and 2.

Assignment: How did watching *Sex and the City* help you think about the stereotypes, interiority (or lack thereof), gender, and sexuality of characters in *Vanity Fair*? Do any characters in *Sex and the City* seem analogous to those in *Vanity Fair*? If so, how? In this post, please feel free to refer to any of the illustrations or the form of the serial publications that we have considered. You should also feel free to include memes from *Sex and the City* alongside any of the illustrations. 1-2 paragraphs.

**WEEK 8 Due Date:** Please remember to submit your prospectus and annotated bibliography by 5 PM on Friday. You should also sign up for a draft conference with me by this time.

9. *Vanity Fair* 3: Adapting Thackeray's Serial Novel for the Screen

Primary Reading: Finish *Vanity Fair*.

Critical Reading:

- “Adapting Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* after #MeToo,” Rebecca Richardson
- “Imperial Vanities” in *Framing Empire*, Jerod Ra'Del Hollyfield

Viewing: Mira Nair's *Vanity Fair* (2004)—yes, this is a film.

- Note: Mira Nair's papers are at the Schlesinger library on campus!

**WEEK 9 Draft Conferences:** I will be meeting with each of you individually this week, outside of class time, to discuss your prospectus and bibliography.

Unit 3: Gossip, Community, Class, and Scandal in *Middlemarch*

10. The Communities of *Middlemarch* and the Upper East Side

Primary Reading: *Middlemarch*, Prelude through the end of Book 3.

Critical Reading:

- Handout: “Introduction” and “Chapter One: Narrative Asymmetry in *Pride and Prejudice*” in Alex Woloch’s “The One VS. the Many” (excerpts from pages 43-62).
- “One Round of a Long Ladder: Gender, Profession, and the Production of *Middlemarch*” in *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels*, N.N. Feltes

Viewing: *Gossip Girl*, Episode 1.

Assignment: Please write two paragraphs answering either of the following questions:

- *Gossip Girl* makes New York feel very small—at times, too small for the drama and relationships of the homogenous, insular social group that it depicts. *Middlemarch*, too, is surprisingly full and bustling, for a small town. In your post, consider how these series use gossip, class divisions, and gendered rivalries to fill and tighten their fictional communities. How are these series satirizing or critiquing these phenomena?
- How does the form of community in *Middlemarch* differ from the form of community that Woloch is identifying in *Pride and Prejudice*? Relatedly, how can Woloch’s theories of “character space” and “character system” help us understand (and keep track of characters and their respective scandals in) Eliot’s fictional communities?

#### 11. The Middle: “the disasters of courtship and marriage among the gentry”

Primary Reading: *Middlemarch*, Books 4 through 6.

Critical Reading: “Theories of Community” in *Communities in Fiction*, Hillis Miller.

Viewing: *Gossip Girl*, Episode 2.

**WEEK 11 Due Date:** Please submit your Junior Paper draft and cover letter by 5 PM on Friday. You should also email your workshopping partner your draft and sign up for a draft by this time.

#### 12. Final Project Workshop.

Reading: For this class, please read your workshop partner’s draft and offer marginal comments, using the “workshopping adventures” worksheet that I distributed last class.

Class Activity: This class will be dedicated to your pair workshop discussions. I will set aside the time to sit with each of your groups and answer your questions. Then, we will convene as a class and discuss best-practices for your revisions. At the end of the class, I will return your drafts with my comments. I invite you to reach out to me for office hours later this week or next to discuss your next steps!

#### 13. XOXO, G.E.

Primary Reading:

- Finish *Middlemarch*.
- Peruse Eliot's manuscript "[Quarry for Middlemarch](#)," in which she drafted her initial ideas and research, based on her lived experiences in 1820's and 30's Coventry, England.

Critical Reading: Virginia Woolf's review of Eliot in *On Fiction*.

Watch: *Gossip Girl*, Episodes 3 & 4.

Assignment: Episodes 3 and 4 of *Gossip Girl* and the end of *Middlemarch* have a lot in common: they depict fierce social competition and reveal scandalous secrets. For this final Canvas post, choose a scene related to one of the scandals in *Middlemarch* and identify at 21<sup>st</sup>-century analog to that scandal: in *Gossip Girl*, another fictional work, or real life. Think about how gendered scripts and the gender identities of the people / characters involved in these scandals makes them... well, scandalous. 1-2 paragraphs.

### Our Epilogue: Junior Tutorial Conference

All Junior Tutorial students are required to attend a joint conference to present your final papers. Date, location, details TBA by Matthew Ocheltree, director of the Junior Tutorial Program.

### Assignments & Grading:

Participation: 25% of final grade.

This seminar will only succeed if you bring your energy to it, so please come to class having completed all the required readings, with questions and interests to share. Your draft conference, workshop, and Junior Tutorial Conference participation all count towards this grade—as do your Canvas posts. Please remember to complete your Canvas post assignments by 5 PM the day before class.

Close Reading Paper: 10%, due 5 PM on Friday Class 4.

Write a close reading (5-7 pages) of a scene from one of the books that we have encountered thus far. Please do not cite secondary sources to inform your interpretation—this is all about your literary critical take, and we will practice close reading together in class.

Junior Paper: 40%, choose one of the following, due two weeks after Class 13.

Your Junior Paper will be a 20-25 page research project on a major literary work that we read in this class. If you wish to write about a film or show (even if only in comparison to a literary work) please schedule a meeting with me by Class 7 to discuss your idea. Your final paper must include at least two methodological perspectives and ten secondary sources. Ideally, it will also feature a primary source from the nineteenth century. We will discuss this project at length in class,



beginning in Class 6; there will be two assignments and two in-class workshops to help you plan in advance and succeed on this paper.

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography: 10%, due 5 PM on Friday, Class 8.

I will ask you to submit a prospectus and annotated bibliography to me by Class 8. These documents should identify your research question, propose a thesis, and outline the scope of your argument. They should also identify your two methodologies of interest and at least ten potential secondary sources.

Junior Paper Draft: 15%, due 5 PM on Friday, the week of Class 11.

Your Junior Paper Draft is your chance to debut your ideas and receive thoughtful feedback from your peers and instructor, so please give it your all. This draft should be at least 20 pages long, including your bibliography. Ultimately, your Junior Paper revision will be graded in part upon how well you have adapted and grown as a writer in reply to my and your peers' comments on this work. If you submit an incomplete or careworn draft, that will make your revision process more challenging. On the other hand, if you put thought and effort into this work, then you'll be in a fabulous place for your revision process.

#### Required Texts:

**Primary Texts:** The following primary texts are on reserve in the Child Library. I advise you to purchase your own copies of the editions below as e-books or paperbacks, but you are welcome to select comparable texts from the library. I have chosen these editions with attention to their critical essays and appendices, as well as their source editions.

*Cranford* by Elizabeth Gaskell, Ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson. Oxford World's Classics.  
Based on the 1853 version of the full text. ISBN: 9780199558308

*Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, Ed. George Ford, Sylvere Monod. W.W. Norton & Co.  
Comparative survey of all editions, with illustrations and details from Dickens's manuscript notes and edited proofs. ISBN: 978-0-393-09332-2

*Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray, Ed. Peter L. Shillingsburg. W.W. Norton & Co. Based on the 1848 Garland edition. ISBN: 978-0-393-96595-7.

*Middlemarch* by George Eliot, Ed. Bert G. Ed. Hornback. W.W. Norton & Co, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.  
Based on the 1874 edition. ISBN: 978-0-393-97452-2.

**Critical Texts:** All the required critical readings for this course will be posted to Canvas. If you are interested in reading additional chapters from any of the books on our syllabus, they will be on reserve for you in the Child Library.

**Viewings:** I am working with Odile Harter and the Child Library to get DVD editions of our shows, and we may arrange for optional watch parties. If you already have a Netflix and/or Amazon Prime account, accessing these shows on your own should be less expensive than purchasing your books.

**Financial Support:** If you need financial support in order to purchase your course materials, please contact me, and I will do my best to help you find funding for your books through Harvard.

### University Policies

**Academic Honesty:** Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*"

**Collaboration:** I encourage you to talk with other students about the course and its readings. In individual assignments (e.g., short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, your final paper, your prospectus), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

**Attendance:** Your attendance in tutorial is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole. If you need to miss a class for a reason other than illness, please email me a week in advance. In the event of a medical emergency, simply send me an email—you will, of course, be excused. Any unexcused absences will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late disrupts the work we're doing together: Two lates = one absence. If you have extenuating circumstances, please communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can ensure that you are fully supported.

**Due Dates & Late Grades:** Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

**Email:** I'll use our course listserv to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you'd like to use a non-Harvard email address.

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:** "*Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the*

*Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”*