

English 98R: American Girls: Representations of Girlhood in the 20th-Century American Novel

Instructor: Elinor Hitt

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Meeting time & room: TBD

Tutorial Description

This tutorial will examine the representation of girlhood and the American girl in major 20th-century American novels from Henry James to Joan Didion. Young and teenage girls are central to the American literary canon and popular culture more broadly: Think of Dolores Haze, the protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, who embodies American art itself—young and uninitiated, endlessly enamored of Hollywood films and fashion magazines. Or Philip Roth's Brenda Patimkin in *Goodbye, Columbus*, who exemplifies the Jewish suburban bourgeois and American prep style, just like actress Ali McGraw, who played her in the film adaptation. The American girl is expected at once to be precocious and naïve, innocent and experienced—like a young Shirley Temple in clean adult trousers, or a nubile adult Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

In addition to novels by James, Nabokov, Didion, and Roth, we will read works by Toni Morrison, J.D. Salinger, Sandra Cisneros, Marilynne Robinson, Jamaica Kincaid, and Willa Cather. We will ask: Why is the figure of the girl so ubiquitous in 20th-century American novels? How does she haunt literature and the arts today? How do we organize narratives around sisterhood and female friendship, rather than heteronormative relationships like marriage?

Alongside our novels, we will watch and learn to analyze films, contemporary television shows, and dance. Topics of discussion will include puberty, female friendship, mid-century fashion and style, class, gender and sexuality, abortion, and race. We will begin the tutorial by considering the narrative function of child and young adult narrators in the novel. We will cover novelistic depictions of girlhood by male authors, before turning to such representations by women. Lastly, we will consider novels about girls moving into womanhood—past their “first bloom of youth” as James might say—facing the pressures of American society to maintain the physical and psychological features of girlhood.

We will gain a mastery over a wide range of 20th century novels and read major works of novel, queer, and feminist criticism.

Learning Goals

- To write an academic paper of substantial length on a research topic of interest
- To engage deeply with 20th-century American literature, novels, and the criticism thereof
- To better understand our own identity as readers in America today, and the gender-based power dynamics that undergird our social relationships

Required Texts

(Available on Project Gutenberg if needed)

Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (1897/1907)
Edith Wharton, *House of Mirth* (1905)
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)
Willa Cather, *Lucy Gayheart* (1934)
Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955)
Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959)
J.D. Salinger, *Franny & Zooey* (1961)
Joan Didion, *Play it As it Lays* (1970)
Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973)
Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1980)
Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (1983)
Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (1990)

All other readings be provided in PDF form on Canvas.

Assignments

Short paper 3-5 pages, week 5, 10%:

This paper should be a close reading of one paragraph of one novel we've read so far through the lens of one assigned critical text. More details to come.

Proposal & Annotated Bibliography, week 7, 15%:

Submit a 2-page prospectus outlining your final paper, followed by an approximately 10-page bibliography of primary and secondary sources—each with a short paragraph-long description of how you will use them in the paper.

First Draft, week 10, 15%:

Submit a partial draft of your final paper—at least 10 pages in length. The rest of the paper should be outlined beneath. In the week following the draft due date, we will meet individually to discuss your paper and progress.

Final Paper, TBD, 40%:

This is a 20-25-page paper on a major novel from this course engaging rigorously with secondary criticism within your field of inquiry.

Participation, 20%:

For a strong participation grade, come fully prepared each week to discuss the reading/viewing materials and secondary sources. Come with passages you'd like to discuss and questions to ask. The participation grade also counts for an informal presentation of your paper to your classmates and peer workshops of drafts.

Accommodations

If accommodations for this course are needed, please contact the Accessibility Education Office (AEO), which offers and coordinate accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Visit accessibility.harvard.edu or aef.fas.harvard.edu for more information. Accommodations are confidential. I am committed to making this course accessible for all students.

Honor code

All material you submit is expected to be your own work. Make sure that what you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and not that of others or artificial intelligence. Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and subject to discipline from the University Honor Council. Please speak with me if you are unclear on Harvard's expectations and standards.

Course Content

Please be advised that some of the texts on the syllabus depict sexual assault, domestic violence, suicide, and abortion. Take the care when reading or watching these works; let me know if you would like a guide of pages to skim or omit. We will be discussing these texts carefully and in good faith, talking openly about the language and framing we use to understand these themes.

Course Schedule

UNIT 1: Girls, As Seen by Girls

Week 1—Man as Muse: The Queer Midwest

Primary Reading:

Lucy Gayheart, Willa Cather

Secondary Reading:

"The Novel D meubl ," Willa Cather

Feeling Backwards, "The End of Friendship: Willa Cather's Sad Kindred," Heather Love
The Queer Art of Failure, chapter four, "Shadow Feminisms: Queer Negativity and Radical Passivity," Jack Halberstam

Week 2—Wayward Sisters

Primary Reading:

Housekeeping, Marilynne Robinson

Secondary Reading:

"How the Misfit Became a Moral Protagonist," *How Novels Think*, Nancy Armstrong
Excerpts, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman

Week 3—New York Awakenings

Primary Reading:

Lucy, Jamaica Kincaid
“Girl,” Kincaid

Secondary Reading:

Poetics of Relation, “Approaches,” Edouard Glissant

Week 4—Female Friendships

Primary Reading:

Sula, Toni Morrison

Secondary Reading:

“Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Toni Morrison
“Theorizing Black Girlhood,” Ashley L. Smith

Week 5—Sisters, Houses, Class

****Essay 1 Due****

Primary Readings:

House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros

Secondary Readings:

Introduction, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Sianne Ngai
“Chicana ‘Belonging’ in Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*,” Regina M. Betz

UNIT 2: Girls, As Seen by Men

Week 6—Master & Girl-Muse: Lolita and Hollywood then and now

Primary Reading:

Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov

Secondary Reading:

The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry, introduction
American Girls, Nancy Jo Sales, introduction

Viewing:

Pretty Little Liars, season two, episode 14 & 15

In-Class Viewings

“[The Good Ship Lollipop](#),” “[Animal Crackers in My Soup](#),” Shirley Temple
Excerpts of Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn to come
Lolita (1962), excerpts

Week 7—Radcliff B*es: Literary It-Girls***

Primary Reading:

Goodbye, Columbus, Philip Roth

Secondary Reading:

“Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” Eve Sedgwick
The Art of Editing, no. 3, Maxine Groffsky, *The Paris Review*

In-Class Viewings:

Love Story (1970), excerpts
Goodbye, Columbus (1969), excerpts

Week 8—Preppy Boys, Precocious Girls

Primary Reading:

Franny & Zooey, J.D. Salinger

Secondary Reading:

Excerpts, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman
Listening:

“Articles of Interest: American Ivy,” podcast episode 1

In-Class Images:

Take Ivy (photographs), Teruyoshi Hayashida

Week 9—American Girls Abroad

Primary Reading:

What Maisie Knew, Henry James

Secondary Reading:

“Art of Fiction,” Henry James
“The Beast in the Closet,” Eve Sedgwick

UNIT 3: Girls as Women

Week 10—Deadly Doubles

Primary Reading:

Passing, Nella Larsen

Secondary Reading:

The Souls of Black Folk, chapter 1, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” W.E.B. DuBois
“Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge,” Judith Butler

Viewing:

Fleabag, season 1, episode 1

Week 11—Thirty, Flirty, and Fallen: Wharton and Female Decline, Then and Now

Primary Reading:

House of Mirth, Edith Wharton

Viewing:

Gossip Girl, season 1, episode 1 & season 4, episode 1

Week 12: Private Trauma

Play It As It Lays, Joan Didion

Secondary:

“Modern American Abortion Narratives and the Century of Silence,” Meg Gillette

Viewing:

I May Destroy You, episode 1

CONCLUSION

Week 13: A Girl’s Story in Film, 2000s and Today

Viewing:

10 Things I Hate About You (1999)

The Summer I Turned Pretty, season 1 episode 1

Reflective Writing Assignment: 1-2 Pages

Connect either of these viewings to a novel we have read this semester. How are representations of girlhood different or the same? Who is the target audience, and who is the author/creator?