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## Virginia Woolf: Writing Fiction and History at the Margins

Virginia Woolf was a novelist of the future: a hyper-modern literary innovator, a proponent of psychological forms, a theorist of gender and sexuality, and general visionary. Her radical vision and openness to change revolutionized literature of the 20th century and made possible much literature of the 21st. However, Woolf's thinking about the future is grounded in an equally robust fascination with the past. Throughout her fiction and non-fiction writing, Woolf shows a need for history, a desire for its transformative, stabilizing, and imaginative power. Unfortunately, she did not often see herself represented in it: in the early 20th century, women's literary history—not to mention queer history—was just beginning to be written. Woolf embarked on a career-long mission to create the history she—and all women writers—needed, both to understand their present and to enable their future. In this course, we will examine the ways in which Woolf made and remade literary history for herself. We will read texts like *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *Between the Acts*, all of which revolve around history, gender, and literature. We will consider the intersection between the personal present and the historical past in Woolf's writing and the role of fiction in the making of history. Finally, we will use our understanding of Woolf's approach to canonicity and literature to explore the similar historical needs of the many groups of people who have embarked on their own historical projects. Throughout the course, we will think through the ways other marginalized peoples—especially queer, trans, and people of color—have struggled to restore their own buried histories, and the ways in which Woolf's methods might aid, hinder, damage, and support these ongoing projects. As Woolf well knew, one needs a past to imagine a future: in this course we will take the real lessons Woolf gives us in recovering submerged, destroyed, and fragmentary pasts to create a history that is lively, reparative, and ultimately, generative.

### General Goals

*To introduce the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level, & to write 20-25pp research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will be able to:*

- 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
- Judiciously integrate feedback in accordance with your own vision for your project
- Develop a personal writing process, supported by a critical and compassionate approach to one's own writing.

## Course-Specific Goals

*To reflect critically on the ways in which Virginia Woolf explored the creation of a literary history for women, and to understand the various scholarly frameworks and concerns that factor into discussions of historiography. You will:*

- Gain intimate familiarity with Woolf's corpus
- Gain an understanding of the basic contours of European literary history, and the ways in which Woolf expands that history
- Become comfortable reading and applying a variety of literary theories and approaches
- Gain an understanding of the limitations of Woolf's ideas of and approach to European literary history
- Understand a variety of approaches to making history, recuperating textual tradition, and criticizing, expanding, or eliminating canonicity

## Assignments and Grading

**Canvas Posts** (See in-syllabus due dates, 15%) There are 4 assigned response posts throughout the course, worth ~4% each. Each post is geared towards honing your skills in preparation for certain texts, stimulating your thinking in advance of the course's larger projects, and encouraging a consistent writing schedule.

**Short Paper** (Due in Week 5, 15%) Write a paper of 5-6 pages close reading one of Woolf's essays (either from *The Common Reader* or a chapter from *A Room of One's Own*). This essay is due the Friday of Week 5.

**Annotated bibliography and Prospectus** (Due in Week 7, 10%) Draft a two-page prospectus and an annotated bibliography with 8-10 sources. The prospectus should articulate texts to be explored, the method or lens with which these texts will be examined, and any projected conclusions. The annotated bibliography should be a list of sources which you hope to use or which you hope will further your thinking. Annotate each source with how it relates to your argument and will further your project.

**Drafts** (Due Weeks 9 and 12, 5%): A 10 page draft of your final paper, due in Week 10, a 20 page draft of your final paper due in week 12. Your second draft should incorporate a text from weeks 7-10 of the course.

**Participation** (15%) Participation is an essential component of this course. All absences from the course must be made up. To obtain the full 15%, students must show rigorous class participation and remarks must evidence close and thorough reading.

**Final Paper** (Reading Period, 40%): 20-25 page paper that proposes a critical intervention in a literary conversation concerning a major literary work read in this class.

**Conference Presentation** (ungraded but required): a 5-minute paper on your research, given at the Junior Tutorial Conference at the end of the semester.

Critical Readings:

*All critical texts and excerpts will be provided.*

*History of Sexuality:* Valerie Traub, “Thinking Sex: Knowledge, Opacity, History” in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*

*Canon Theory:* John Guillory, Chapter 1: Canonical and Non-Canonical in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*

*Queer Theory:* Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*; Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix”

*Archival Studies:* Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives*; Catherine Gallagher, Introduction to *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*

*Intertextuality:* Jane de Gay, “Bringing the Literary Past to Life in *Between the Acts*” in *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Past*.

*Feminist Theory and Criticism:* Jill Matthews, “Feminist History”; Jane de Gay, “Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Historiography in *Orlando*”; Nancy Armstrong, Chapter 3, “The Rise of the Novel,” in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; Nancy Armstrong, “What Feminism did to Novel Studies” in *Feminist Literary Theory*

*New Historicism:* Jane Marcus, “Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny” in *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*

*Genetic/Biographical Criticism:* Anne Fernald, “*To the Lighthouse* in the Context of Virginia Woolf’s Diaries and Life”; Gabler, Hans Walter. “From Memory to Fiction: An Essay in Genetic Criticism”

*Reception:* Marea Mitchell, “The details of life and the pulsings of affect”: Virginia Woolf’s Middle English Texts”

*Post Colonial:* Said, excerpts from *Orientalism*

*Black Studies:* Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”

## Texts

Primary:

Texts by Virginia Woolf:

*The Common Reader* (1925)

*To the Lighthouse* (1927)

*Orlando* (1928)

*A Room of One's Own* (1929)

*Between the Acts* (1941)

Excerpts from the *Collected Essays, Diaries, Letters and Short Stories*

Other Texts:

Sappho, fragments (7th century BC)

Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (15th century)

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1599)

Montaigne, *Essays*

Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* (1688)

Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina* (1725)

Samuel Johnson, Essays from *The Rambler*

Audre Lorde, *Zami* (1982)

Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993)

## Schedule:

### **I. The Need for History**

*Guiding questions: What is Literary History? How is it made, and who makes it? What is history for, and why do groups of people feel the need to create it? How do we organize and narrate time? How does Woolf engage with these processes?*

#### Week 1: The Need for History

Primary:

- *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

Secondary:

- Jill Matthews, "Feminist History"
- Heather Love, excerpts from "Emotional Rescue" in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*

### **Canvas Post Due: Outline of Woolf's Argument**

Write a response totalling ~250 words. Outline the progression of Woolf's argument in one chapter of *ARoOO*. Avoiding summarizing Woolf's wandering reflections, instead, map the ways in which she states problems, explores and complicates them, and presents (or fails to present) alternatives.

### Week 2: Writing the Self

Primary:

- Excerpts from *A Passionate Apprentice* and vols 1-6 of Woolf's diaries
- *A Writer's Diary*
- "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown"; "Modern Fiction"
- LISTEN: Woolf, "Craftsmanship":
  - ▶ Virginia Woolf's voice, 1937 – "Craftsmanship" (with the closing li...

Secondary:

- Select chapters from Hermione Lee's Biography of Woolf

### Week 3: Thinking Back Through Our Mothers

Primary:

- *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

Secondary:

- Anne Fernald, "To the Lighthouse in the Context of Virginia Woolf's Diaries and Life" in *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*. [Biographical criticism]
- Gabler, Hans Walter. "From Memory to Fiction: An Essay in Genetic Criticism" in *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*. [Genetic Criticism]

### **Canvas Post Due: Reading Woolf**

Write a response of ~250 comparing Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay. How does Woolf suggest the ways in which both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe are products of their cultural moment? How does she relate them to each other?

### Week 4: *The Common Reader*: Canon and Relationship with the Past

Primary:

- Essays from *The Common Reader* (1925) and *The Second Common Reader* (1929):
  - "Introduction; "The Elizabethan Lumber Room," "Montaigne," "The Duchess of Newcastle," "The Lives of the Obscure," "Jane

Austen,” “‘Jane Eyre’ and ‘Wuthering Heights,’” “The Modern Essay,” “How it Strikes a Contemporary,” “How Should One Read a Book?”

- Posthumously Published, Incomplete Work:
  - “Anon” and “The Reader”
- Montaigne, “On Books”

Secondary:

- Catherine Gallagher, Introduction to *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*
- Excerpts from John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chapter 1: Canonical and Non-Canonical

## II. Beginnings

*Guiding questions: What is an “origin”? How does the choice of origin impact the construction of the history that follows? Where does Virginia Woolf locate her literary origins? How do they expand and limit her own literary horizons?*

### Week 5: In the Beginning, There Was Chaucer

Primary:

- Woolf, “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” (c. 1906); “Chaucer and the Pastons” (1925)
- Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*: Prologue; “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”

Secondary:

- Marea Mitchell, “The details of life and the pulsings of affect”: Virginia Woolf’s Middle English Texts”

### **Assignment Due: Short Paper**

### Week 6: In the Beginning, There Was Sappho

Primary:

- Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925)
- “A Society” (1921)
- Sappho, Fragments

Secondary:

- Jane Marcus, “Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny” in *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*

### **Canvas Post Due:**

Write a ~250 word reflection on your writing process for paper one. You must name three things that you liked, or that went well, in the project. You must then name three areas in which you would like to improve. These should be specific examples, with detailed reference to your paper.

### **Meeting with Odile Harter and Houghton Library Visit (time, TBD)**

### **III. Middles:**

*Guiding questions: Once a beginning is chosen, how might history be organized? How does Woolf outline the progression of history? How does she re-interpret and re-organize her source material? Where does Woolf place historical emphasis in the creation of narrative?*

#### Week 7: Orlando and the “Other”

Primary:

- Woolf, *Orlando* (1928) pp. 1-112
- Woolf, “The Strange Elizabethans” (1932)

Secondary:

- Said, excerpts from *Orientalism*

### **Assignment Due: Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography**

#### Week 8: Interlude: Woolf and the Queer Potential of Elizabethan Literature

Primary:

- Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1599)
- Sidney, excerpts from *Astrophil and Stella* (c. 1580)

Secondary:

- Traub, Valerie Traub, excerpts from “Thinking Sex: Knowledge, Opacity, History” in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*

#### Week 9: Orlando and the Invention of Gender

Primary:

- Woolf, *Orlando*, pp. 112-end

Secondary:

- Jane de Gay, “Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Historiography in *Orlando*”

## Assignment: Draft of Final Paper Due

### Week 10: Interlude: Satire and the History of the Novel

Primary:

- Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* (1688)
- Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina* (1725)
- Samuel Jonson, *Rambler* essays 4 and 60

Secondary:

- Nancy Armstrong, Chapter 3, “The Rise of the Novel,” in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*
- Nancy Armstrong, “What Feminism did to Novel Studies” in *Feminist Literary Theory*

## IV. Ending and Beginning Again

*Guiding questions: How does Woolf engage with history at the end of her life? How has her thinking developed over the course of her career? How do writers engaging in other reparative history projects—fictional, critical, and non-fictional—approach the business of recovering and writing destroyed and submerged histories after Woolf? How do Woolf’s methods allow these authors to write? How do they fall short?*

### Week 11: Literary Survival: Imagine the Past, Imagine the Future

Primary:

- Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941)

Secondary:

- Jane de Gay, “Bringing the Literary Past to Life in *Between the Acts*” in *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Past*.

### Week 12: Recovery and Reinvention

Primary:

- Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982)

Secondary:

- Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”
- Excerpts from Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives*

## Assignment Due: Second Final Paper Draft

## Week 13: Claiming Experience, Making History

Primary :

- Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993)

Secondary:

- Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix”
- Susan Stryker, excerpts from *Transgender History*

### **Assignment Due: Canvas Post**

In ~250 words, reflect on the ways in which Lorde’s “bio-mythography” or Feinberg’s biographical novel treat their own presence as historical material. How do these authors use the narratives and practices for imagining the past, present, and future that Woolf legitimized? What does Woolf’s example enable these authors to write? Where does that model fall short? How do Lorde and Feinberg innovate to “tell the truth?”

### **Class Expectations**

#### Collegiality:

In literary study, it is necessary to talk about every topic that makes up human experience, including politics, gender, race, belief, socio-economic status, etc. In such conversations different members of this class may have very different things at stake. All are welcome in this class, and thus these discussions will be conducted with sensitivity, generosity, and respect. Moreover, we recognize that all are learning here, and that when we learn, we inevitably make mistakes. I ask that we assume the best of intentions in one another in class, as we work to gently expand our own horizons.

#### Reading

Come to class having done the readings. This may mean that you have skimmed some texts and read others very deeply. While “improvisation” is at times a necessary evil and perhaps a useful skill, engaging in discussion without having done the reading is not respectful and is therefore not encouraged.

#### Discussion Etiquette

The art of discussion is one of the most important aspects of an education in English literature. To avoid a discussion consisting of disconnected observations, I do insist that students respond to the person who has spoken previously, before establishing a new topic if they wish to do so.

## Collaboration

You are absolutely encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others' work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, or take-home exams), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

## Attendance:

Be Present, prepared, and on time. Consistent lateness will affect your participation grade (two points per day late). All absences must be made up for full participation marks.

## Content Warnings

I always give content warnings in class for violence, assault, and racist and homophobic language. If you would like warnings for things that fall outside of these parameters, or you would like warnings privately for yourself, please indicate this on the course form circulated on the first day of class.

## Technology Policy

In order to prevent distraction from our conversation, laptops are not allowed in class. This policy does not apply to those with academic accommodations.

## Communication

I respond to emails between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday-Friday, and emergency emails within 2 hours before 11pm.

## Grading

Grading is an arbitrary system of measure. In my class, your mark (a percentage out of a hundred that translates to a letter grade) is an indication of the readiness of your work to be used as a writing sample in an application, or submitted to an undergraduate publication.

Assignments must be uploaded on canvas (pdf) and will be returned to you in an annotated pdf through canvas.

Papers will be corrected for grammar and style on pages 1-2, and will have in-line comments throughout.

Along with a grade, each student will receive three aspects of their writing to work on, in addition to in line comments. A paper receiving a grade of “A” must address those elements. This policy helps to chart improvement and promote self-awareness in writing.

### Extension Policy

Extensions will be granted under extenuating circumstances at my own discretion.

Late Canvas posts will receive a mark of 0.

Short assignments turned in late will incur a 10% penalty per day late.

Papers turned in late will incur a 2% penalty per day late for up to 3 days, after which the late paper will drop one letter grade per day late.

### Academic Integrity

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.*

### Title IX

I am happy to speak with you about all aspects of your life at Harvard, academic and personal, within the bounds of propriety. However, please do keep in mind that as a TF I am obliged to report any confidences of sexual assault or harassment to the Title IX office. If you wish any confidences of this nature to remain confidential, I would direct you to the following resources, all of which provide confidential support: Sexual Harassment/Assault Resources & Education (SHARE) Counselors, College Office of BGLTQ Student Life, Contact Peer Counseling, Harvard Chaplains, Harvard University Counseling and Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Harvard University Health Services (HUHS), or the Harvard University Ombudsman Office.

