

English 355 AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS, 1820-1930, AND FEMINIST LITERARY
CRITICISM
Spring, 2003

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Gender is so much a part of our culture that we often regard it as fixed. Actually, however, gender's formation is historically particular. The contours of modern masculinity and femininity coalesced in the U.S. in the early nineteenth century, in conjunction with such phenomena as the movement of production outside the home and the identification of the home as a distinct domestic sphere, the proliferation of commodities, the emergence of the white, middle-class family, the solidification of racial distinctions, the spread of literacy, the explosion of print culture, and the importance of the written word in the "cultural work" of modeling American life and values. Gender emerged as a major explanatory discourse during the nineteenth century. Virtually every aspect of life, from people to acts and activities to the "private" and "public" spheres, was seen as gendered and accounted for in gendered terms. For most of the century "femininity" was generally conjoined with domesticity. The written word--and, increasingly over the course of the century, the printed image--played major roles in making these discourses pervasive. Not surprisingly, "gender" and "domesticity," far from being taken as stable, were the focus of intense anxiety, debate and conflict, much as "the family" is today. A good deal of the writing we'll read attempted to define them, even though, from the distance of a century and more, this writing may seem to be describing life as it actually was.

This course will zero in on several of the major strains of American women's writing during the period covered, including sentimentalism and its association with reform, domesticity, regionalism, and activism; as we'll see, these strains overlap. We'll try to get a sense of the appeal of what we read to its first readers: the codes of which it made use (such as the sentimental keepsake or depictions of family meals), the implications of writers' use of specific genres (the female Bildungsroman, or novel of development; the tract), the emotions and values the fiction invoked (which will involve us in the much-debated subject of the effects of sentimentality), the efforts to which writers went to mobilize their readers to specific ends (as in Uncle Tom's Cabin's commitment to the abhorrence of slavery). As we explore the matter of appeal, we'll also consider how twentieth- and twenty-first century feminist critics have assessed earlier American women's writing--the attitudes and expectations with which they have approached it, their apparent objectives in undertaking their work, the relationships they have posited or implied between this work and questions and issues with which we grapple today.

The reading will sometimes be heavy and the fiction may initially seem remote or old-fashioned, but I suspect that you'll find yourselves getting accustomed to it. It's quite possible that nineteenth-century America will, by the end of the semester, seem at once nearer and more alien than it does at the beginning: it's also possible that your sense of how "literature" has been seen gets shaken up somewhat. I hope you'll take your pulse occasionally to check your thinking on these and other issues.

I'm sure you'll formulate other questions over the course of the semester, and we'll also want to integrate these into the course.

Required books (available at Oberlin Bookstore):

Frances E. W. Harper, Iola Leroy (1892)
Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896)
Mary E. Bradley Lane, Mizora. A Prophecy (1880; 1890)
Agnes Smedley, Daughter of Earth (1929)
Elizabeth Stoddard, The Morgesons (1862)
Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin (1851-2)
Harriet E. Wilson, Our Nig (1859)

Two recommended collections of critical essays (available at the Bookstore and on reserve (R)):

Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould, eds., The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth Century American Women's Writing (2001) (CCNCAW)
Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds., No More Separate Spheres (2002) (NMSS)

Abbreviations and other information

C = Coursepack. (To be purchased in the English Department office. Please have exact change or write a check: Ms. Elkevizth, the department secretary, cannot make change.)

R= regular reserve; ERes = electronic reserve.

More information follows the schedule for the semester. All of the reading listed below is required unless otherwise indicated.

SCHEDULE

Feb. 2	First Class
Feb. 4	A sampler of nineteenth-century American women's writing (hand-out)
	American Women Writers and Feminist Literary Criticism
Feb. 6	Joanne Dobson, Sandra Zagarell, "'Female' Authorship, 1790-1840" (ERes); Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, "Introduction" (NMSS), Dana Nelson, "Women in Public" (CCNCAWW; ERes), Mary Kelley, "Conclusion: (CCNCAWW; ERes);

Ann duCile, "African American Women's Writing" (ERes)

Sentimentality and Reform

- Feb. 10 Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin
Feb. 12 Ditto
Feb. 14 UTC and the question of sentimentality: Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power" (in Sensational Designs and otherwise on R); Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza" (NMSS)
- Feb. 17 conclude discussion of UTC
Feb. 19 So what was sentimentality? June Howard, "What is Sentimentality?" (ERes); Joanne Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature" (ERes); Laura Wexler, "Tender Violence" (in Samuels, Culture of Sentiment and otherwise on R)
Feb. 21 Harriet Wilson, Our Nig
- Feb. 24 Ditto
Feb. 26 Critics on Our Nig: P. Gabrielle Foreman, "The Spoken and The Silenced" (R); Claudia Tate, "Maternal Discourse As Antebellum Social Protest" (R). Rec: Frances Smith Foster, "Written By Herself" (R)
Feb. 28 conclude discussion of Our Nig

Domesticity and Its (Dis)Contents

- March 2 Rosemarie Zagarri, "The postcolonial culture of Early American women's writing" (CCNCAWW; ERes); from Mary P. Ryan, from Empire of Mother, "Introduction," chapters I, II, IV (R)
March 4 Lydia Huntley Sigourney, from Lucy Howard's Journal (1858), Catherine Beecher & Harriet Beecher Stowe, from The American Woman's Home (1869); Horace Greeley, "The Sphere of Woman" (1848) (all C)
March 6 Patricia Okker, "Women Periodical Editors" (R); Ronald Zboray, "Antebellum Reading" (R); June Howard, from Publishing The Family, "The Hearthstone at *Harper's*," pp. 58-88 (R)
- March 9 Trip to Special Collections for first-hand experience of the look and feel of nineteenth century magazines
March 11 Elizabeth Stoddard, The Morgesons
March 13 Ditto
March 16 Ditto plus Susan K. Harris, "Projecting the I/conoclast: First-Person Narrator in The Morgesons",

- Sandra Zagarell, "Strenuous Artistry" (CCNCAWW); rec.,
Sandra Zagarell, *Legacy Profile*: "Elizabeth Drew Barstow
Stoddard" (R)
- March 18 The domesticity debates: Lora Romero, "A Society
Controlled by Women" (Eres); Amy Kaplan, "Manifest
Domesticity" (NMSS) (review the Ryan readings and the
"sampler" as well)
- March 20 FIRST PAPER DUE: in class discussion of your papers

*****SPRING BREAK*****

**Regionalism: a Testing Ground for American Women
Writers and for Feminist Literary Critics**

- March 31 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "A New England Nun," "The Amethyst
Comb" (C)
- April 2 Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs
- April 4 Ditto
- April 7 Continue discussion of CPF in light of the debates
about regionalism. Read Richard Brodhead,
"Sarah Orne Jewett and Writing as Women's Work";
Judith Fetterley, "Not in the Least American";
Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, "Introduction";
Elizabeth Ammons, "Material Culture and Empire"; June
Howard, "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Traffic in Words"
(all R; see Howard, ed., Cambridge Companion to Sarah Orne
Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs for the Howard and
Ammons essays)
- April 9 Same as above, addressing the Freeman stories as well as
CPF
- April 11 Alice Dunbar-Nelson, from The Goodness of St. Rocque (C)
- April 14 Ditto. Also Kristina Brooks, "Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Local
Colors of Ethnicity, Class, and Place" @ mjournal2.jstor.org
(mjournal2.jstor.org [141.213.83.59]); Gloria Hull,
"Introduction," The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson (R)
- April 16 Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton, from Mrs. Spring Fragrance (C)
- April 18 Ditto

Transformations: Taking Charge of the Future

- April 20 Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Good Ship Democracy," Florence
Kelley and the Nation's Work (esp. pp. 13-26; R); Hazel V.
Carby, "Woman's Era," Reconstructing Womanhood (esp. pp. 3-
8; R); Jean Pfaelzer, "Introduction" to Mizora
- April 22 Lane, Mizora

April 24 Ditto

April 28 Frances E. W. Harper, Iola Leroy

April 30 Ditto

May 2 P. Gabrielle Foreman, "'Reading Aright': White Slavery, Black Referents, and the Strategy of Histotextuality in *Iola Leroy*" (R); John Ernest, "From Mysteries to Histories; Cultural Pedagogy in . . . *Iola Leroy*" (R)

May 5 Agnes Smedley, Daughter of Earth

May 7 Ditto

May 9 Ditto and wrap-up

Final Papers Due: Date for which Final Exam is Scheduled

Some particulars:

Attendance is mandatory. As a rule, I'll take attendance; more than 3 unexcused absences will negatively affect your grade for the course. Please note that attendance means full participation in class: being up-to-date on the reading, bringing the texts to be discussed to class, and being actively present--that is, engaged in class and participating, thoughtfully, in discussion.

You'll be doing several kinds of writing for this course.

1] You'll be keeping reading journals. For the critical and theoretical material, this will involve identifying 1] the premise or point of an essay; 2] its basic argument; 3] the implications of the argument. If you also want to discuss or explore your responses, please do, but only after having accounted for the essay in the way I've outlined.

For the "primary material" (i.e., the fiction), this will involve identifying what you see as key points of interest in the work--what it seems to be taking up, how it seems to make its appeal(s), or something that strikes you as interesting and significant.

2] You'll also be writing two 8-10 page papers, one due before Spring Break, the other at the end of the semester. The first paper may be on anything we read through The Morgesons and the domesticity debates, and may address questions of a work's original appeal, including matters concerning the context of its initial publication, questions taken up or prompted by the criticism, or something else of interest and importance to you. The second paper may be on anything we read during the second half of the semester. Another option for the second paper is to create a 2 or 3 week syllabus developing a topic for this course which our syllabus this semester does not cover.

We'll go over specific guidelines for the papers before they're due; just after Break I'll also give you more information on the syllabus option. Remember that a general rule of thumb for English

papers is that they be focused on a subject they can discuss thoroughly within the assigned page-length and that they develop your own insights about the work or works discussed. This translates as: depth and originality. You may use secondary sources, and you may well want to address the critical/theoretical material; however, the primary objective of the papers is to give you a medium for developing your own readings/analyses, and they should therefore not be research papers.

Each of you will also present at least one of the readings to the class, working in groups of two. For the secondary material, this will involve identifying its the main argument(s) and implications and framing class discussion. For the fiction, it will involve zeroing in on one or more important aspects of the work.

Your grade for the course will be based on all aspects of the work required for the course. Written work--journals and papers--will count for approximately 70% of your grade; class participation and leading a discussion about 30%. You must complete all written work, do a presentation, and take part in class discussion to pass the course. LATE WORK WILL BE PENALIZED. NO WORK WILL BE ACCEPTED AFTER THE DUE DATE FOR THE FINAL PAPER UNLESS YOU HAVE ARRANGED FOR AN INCOMPLETE THROUGH THE OFFICE OF THE DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS.

Do come to see me if you have any questions or if you want to talk about the course. All questions, thoughts and concerns are of interest! My office hours are listed at the top of the syllabus. I'll be happy to set up an appointment at another time if you cannot make my scheduled office hours.

NOTE that I have put a good deal of material related to the course on Reserve: you may enjoy looking through some of it.