

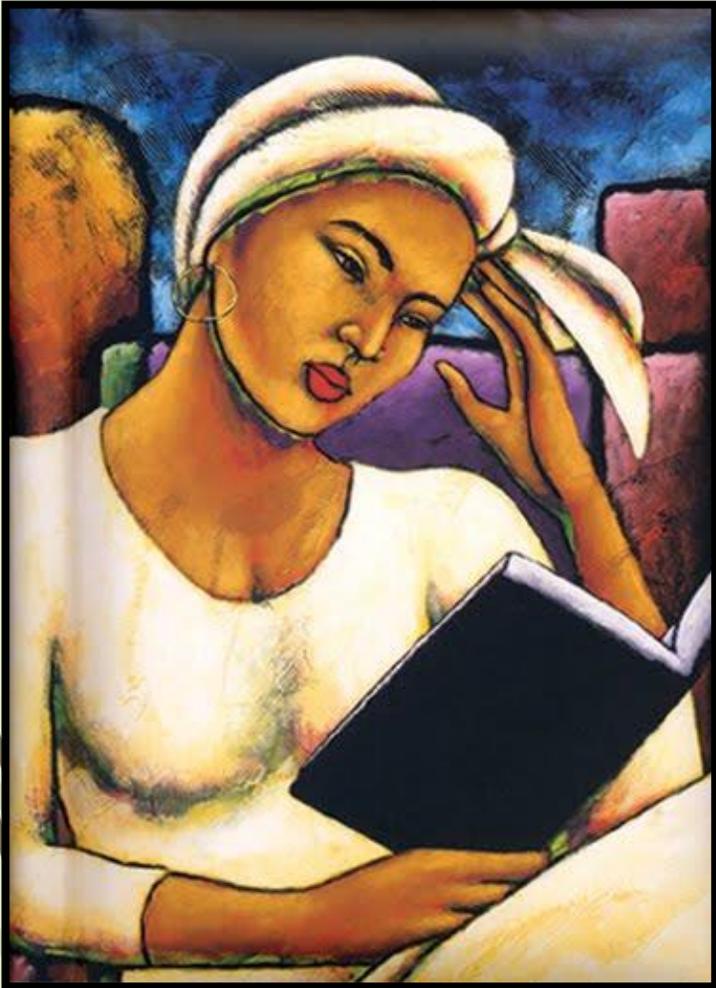
ENG 3430/WGS 3200: Survey of Women and Literature

Dr. Hope Jennings

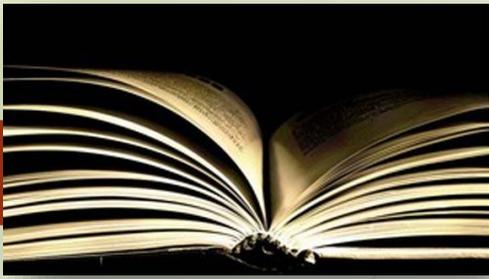
Wright State University



Introduction to the Course



- ▶ In this course we will be reading representative works by and about women of diverse backgrounds across major literary periods.
- ▶ Students will critically examine traditions in women's writing, pervasive representations of women in literature, and the mutually constitutive relationship between language, literature, and identity.
- ▶ Assigned readings will be in American, British, and Anglophone literatures and cover a multicultural range of works by women of different social backgrounds.

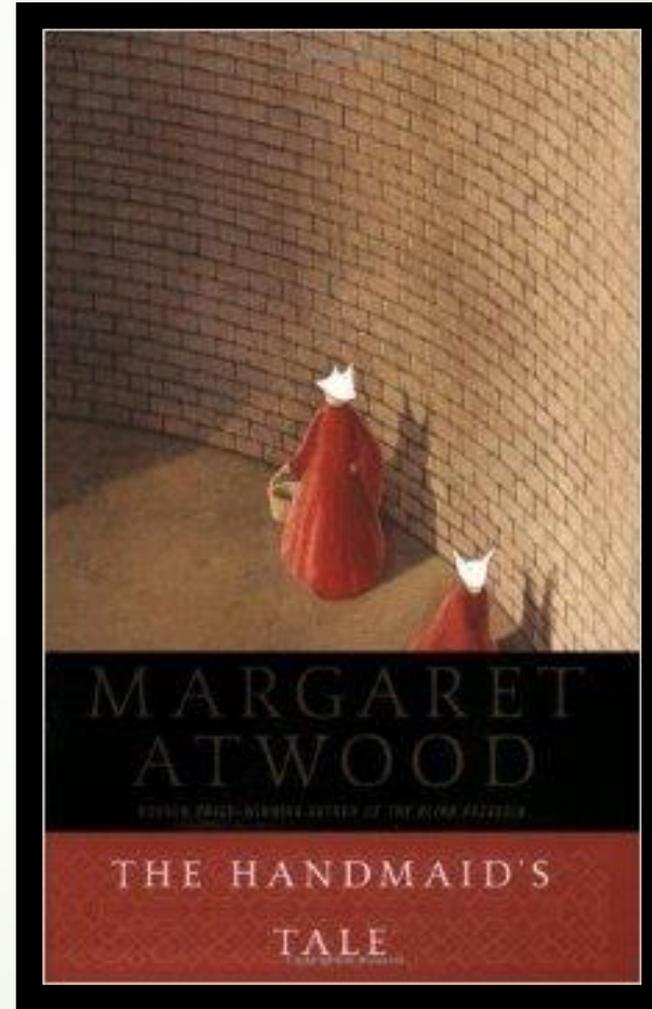
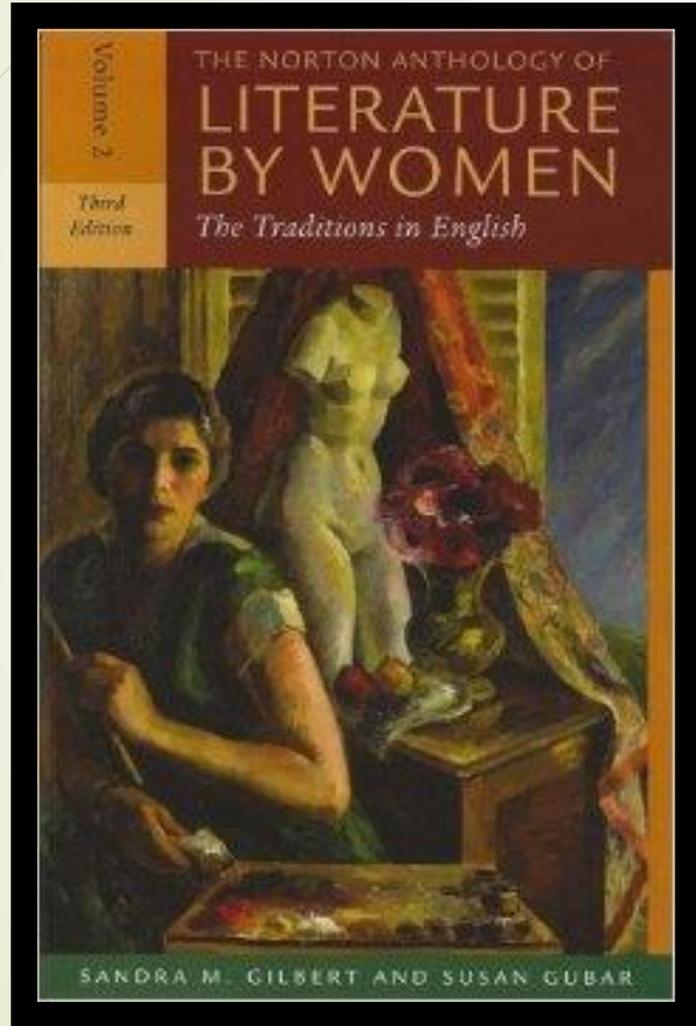


Course Objectives



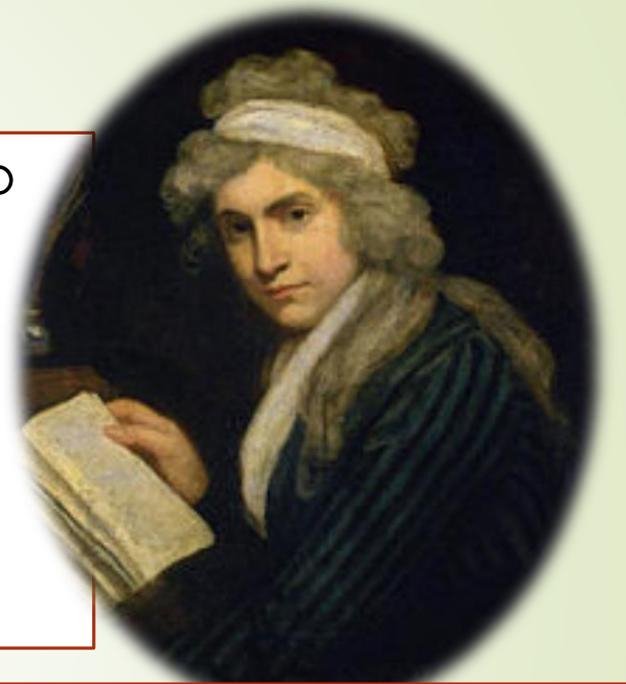
- ▶ To learn about the diversity of women's contributions to literature across various times and places, and the diverse range of women's representation within literary practices;
- ▶ To understand cultural, historical, and geographic differences within and amongst groups of women and how these differences influenced the lives of women writers, the conditions in which they lived and wrote, and the reception their work received;
- ▶ To analyze the feminist politics and implications of women's writing and the ways in which women writers have either resisted or reinforced traditional roles and identities through their explorations of language, voice, and genre;
- ▶ To demonstrate knowledge of the broader social, material, cultural, and historical contexts influencing representations of women in literature, the production of literature by and about women, and the major critical and thematic concerns in women's writing.

Required Texts



Feminist Polemic & Women's Rights: Education, Equality, Emancipation

- ▶ Lack of a women's tradition of writing was often connected to the dilemma of women who aspired to be taken seriously as intellectuals and found the doors of education closed to them.
- ▶ Mary Wollstonecraft is perhaps the figure most famously associated with early feminist polemics, as she argued for female equality through education based on a secular rather than religious rationale.



- ▶ 19th C. American feminists Margaret Fuller and Sojourner Truth extended the argument to include women of other races and classes -- linking suffrage and abolitionist movements.
- ▶ These women blazed the way for later figures such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf, and Mina Loy to continue the tradition of the feminist polemic into the early twentieth century, as well as mid-twentieth second wave & civil rights movements.

Women Writers on Writing: Influence, Inspiration, Mentorship



- ▶ Virginia Woolf famously argued in *A Room of One's Own*, “We think back through our mothers if we are women.”
- ▶ For women writers, finding lost literary foremothers has often been an empowering experience, allowing the woman writer to not feel so alone in her literary aspirations.
- ▶ Women writers often sought to celebrate their literary foremother’s work, to pay homage to what that writer’s work or mentorship has meant to their own literary endeavors.

Wrestling With Eve: Revisionary Approaches toward Religion

- ▶ Many women writers, from the Renaissance to the 20th century, have explored the figure of Eve and other Biblical women in an attempt to provide an alternative perspective to their stories and women's lives, including their oppression.

He must make woman lower than
So he can be higher than.
Oh what cruelty,
In history what misery
It is only a legend
You say? But what
Is the meaning of the legend
If not
To give blame to women most
And most punishment?



- ▶ For example, in the poem "How Cruel is the Story of Eve," British poet Stevie Smith suggests that Genesis is the root of Patriarchy, making a case for why through the centuries women writers have had to wrestle with the legacy of our first ancestor, or at the least, one of our earliest literary mothers.

Killing the Angel: Marriage, Motherhood, Madness

- In her 1942 address to the Women's Service League, Virginia Woolf famously instructed her audience that "part of the occupation . . . of a woman writer" was to kill the "Angel in the House."
- Woolf describes her own "Angel" as "always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her," an image that recalls Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper".
- "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a cautionary tale of what might happen to a woman when her identity and choices remain restricted to the domestic sphere – either a symbolic or very real madness, which is a theme also explored in *Wuthering Heights*.

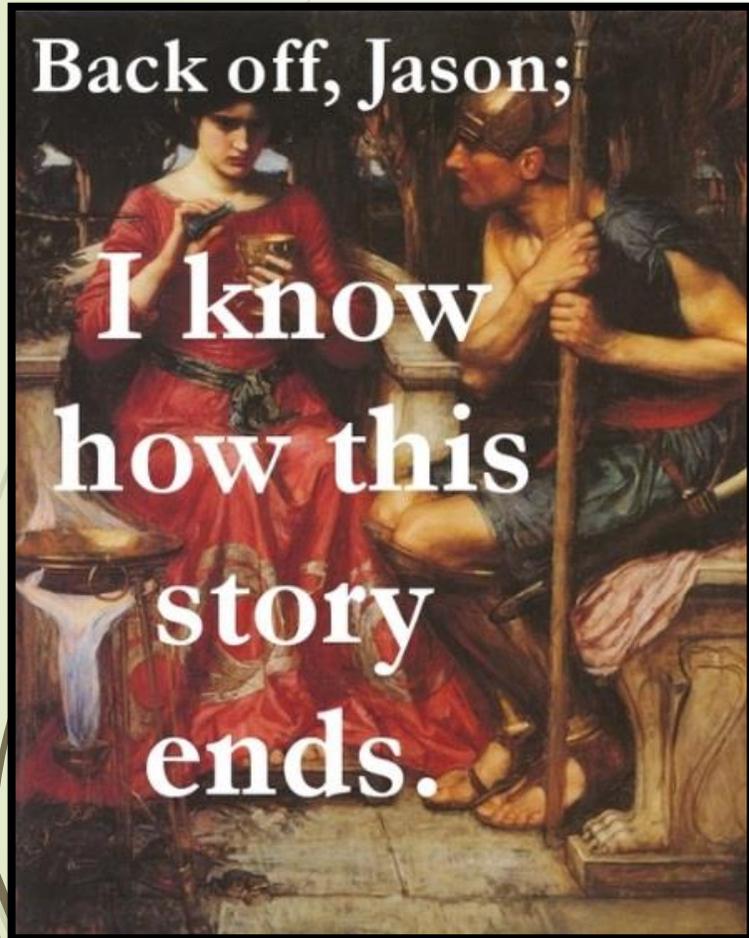


Re-writing Bodies and Sexualities: Desire, Difference, Identity



- Historically, women have been associated with Nature and the body as opposed to the masculine realms of Culture and mind.
- Because “woman’s” body, and by extension female desire, was viewed as unruly, primal, savage, and dangerous (like Nature or Eve), it was “man’s” duty to control and tame her.
- A key strategy for controlling women’s bodies and desires has been to reduce their identities to the reproductive function and maternal role.
- For many women writers, redefining and reclaiming their bodies has been of primary importance, and is often explored through intersecting identity markers such as race, class, sexuality and age.

Re-writing Myth and Fairy Tale: Language, Silence, Voice



- Many women writers attempt to re-vision traditional stories found in classical myth and fairy tales by changing narrative conventions, empowering both female and male protagonists, and encoding feminist themes and values.
- Historically the spirit of inspiration, the muse, has been gendered as feminine, and the creator of art or literature has been gendered male.
- Thus, it has been important for women writers to re-imagine Greek and Roman myth for their own purposes in order to inhabit and re-interpret female mythological figures.

- Much like myth, fairy tales encode and often reproduce cultural norms concerning gender roles, and are especially powerful cultural forces in the socialization of children.
- Although women have long been involved in the cultural production of fairy tales, since the 1970s the fairy tale has been of particular interest to feminist critiques of patriarchy and androcentric narrative traditions.
- Feminist revisionist versions of myth and fairy tale work to disrupt, subvert and redefine gender stereotypes and roles, and thus serve as a vehicle for challenging patriarchal ideologies and reclaiming women's voices and agency.

Maybe the fairy tale ending is where the Stepmom is the Fairy Godmother, and the Mother of the Year is the Wicked Witch..



Re-writing Pasts & Futures: Feminist Utopia & Dystopia

- ▶ When Women's Studies was established as a disciplinary field in the 1970s, many women writers and feminist presses were focused on women's history and the recovery of female-authored literary texts.
- ▶ For example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* was "rediscovered" and became influential in contemporary portrayals of idealized all-female communities where women might experience a respite from the systemic discrimination of patriarchy and more self-determined lives.
- ▶ Although feminist utopias critique the flaws within patriarchy, they can also have as many flaws of their own; feminist dystopias thus became a popular form of critiquing such utopian visions while also continuing to expose patriarchy as a social evil that results in a lack or absence of individual freedoms, and especially for women in their status as "second-class citizens."