

REL 2930: Women and Religion in Popular US Fiction

Fall 2018

T | Period 5 - 6 (11:45 AM - 1:40 PM) Room: [MAT 0002](#) / R | Period 6 (12:50 PM - 1:40 PM) Room: [MAT 0004](#)

INSTRUCTORS:

Rachel Gordan, Asst. Prof., Religion 107 Anderson Hall, rgordan@ufl.edu	Trysh Travis, Assoc. Prof., Women's Studies 305 Ustler Hall, 273-0393, ttravis@ufl.edu
Office Hours: Thursday: 10-12 And by Appt. * Please email for an appointment even within Office Hours *	Office Hours: Wed., 2-4 pm and By Appt. * Please email for an appointment even within Office Hours *
	Past Teaching Evaluations available here :

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Women and religion have played central roles in American popular fiction since the terms “America” and “fiction” came into popular use in the 18th century. Women have always been the bulk of the fiction-reading public; novels that treat religious life have waxed and waned in popularity, but have always been what publishers call “steady sellers.” This was particularly true in the mid-20th century. After World War 2, many women who had moved into the paid workforce during the War returned to the domestic sphere, and mainstream religions (Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism) assumed a new centrality in public discourse as Americans reckoned with the horrors of the Holocaust and the atom bomb. TV, with its seemingly unlimited possibilities of genre and subject-matter, was only just becoming a staple of the middle-class home. In this “golden age” of American literature, fiction captured the centrality of gender and religion in society.

This course examines best-selling fictions dealing with women and religion, first in the immediate post-WW2 period and then in the late 20th century, as the popular culture pendulum swung in a more secular and, for women, “liberated” direction. Emphasis is placed on understanding works in historical context as well as on critical self-reflection; students are invited to understand how, like the authors they study, their own position as people with specific gender identities and relationships to religious practice (including being a non-religious person) affects what and how they read.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

At the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Identify and describe elements of the evolving religious landscape of Post-WW2 America
- Identify, describe, and explain the importance of historical context, including critical reception history, for the interpretation of literary texts
- Analyze literature using contextualizing historical sources and close reading
- Express ideas about literature in appropriate oral and written forms

CLASS COMPORMENT

This class deals with historical dimensions of American life that may be new and/or uncomfortable, including slavery, anti-Semitism, sexism, the history of homosexuality, and the nature and place of religion in public life. If we all knew everything there is to know about these topics and agreed on all of them there wouldn't really be much point to having this class. At the same time, there is also not much point to having the class if we each see it as an opportunity to grandstand about our beliefs and browbeat those who don't share them. Classroom discussion works best when it is both frank and respectful—sometimes a hard balance to strike. In this class you may need to separate your personal (intuitive, gut-level) feelings from your best rational mind in order to follow an idea through, see it from different angles, and give consideration to its complexity. If we all do that, we may find surprising common ground for agreement or—also useful—respectful and productive ways to disagree.

REQUIRED AND RECOMMENDED READING (ON ORDER AT UF BOOKSTORE):

Please purchase THESE editions unless otherwise indicated. Other materials will be available for downloading and printing through the Canvas E-reservation site. STUDENTS ARE REQUIRED TO BRING HARD COPY OF ASSIGNED READING TO CLASS EACH DAY.

Required:

- Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1957, Vintage reprint 2014)
- Walker, *The Color Purple* (Mariner, 1982)
- Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (Back Bay, 2002)
- Hannah, *Eternal Life* (Norton, 2014)

Recommended:

- Lunsford, *Easy Writer* (usage and style guide; 4th through 6th edition accepted)

Screening:

- There will be a screening of the film *Gentlemen's Agreement* on the evening of Thursday, 20 Sept., exact time and location TBA. Students unable to attend should let the professors know, and may view the film at Library West, where it is available at the circulation desk on closed reserve; inquire by course number and instructor name.

Introduction

WEEK 1 MEN AND WOMEN, RELIGION AND FICTION

Th., 23 Aug What do we know about this topic?

- Morrison, "[Men and Women Don't Read From Same Page On Books](#)" (2017)
- Maher, "[Oprah Books and New Socially-Conscious Zeitgeist](#)" (2017)
- Pew Center for Religion & Public Life, "[US Public Becoming Less Religious](#)" (2015)

Unit One: History and Theory Toolbox

WEEK 2 INTRODUCTIONS AND PROTOCOLS

T. 28 Aug Jane Tompkins, excerpt from "Sentimental Power" (1986; available through Canvas E-res page)

- read from start of chapter through "unexamined effect" on p. 127
- **Presentation: Library resources for context presentations**

Th. 30 Aug Tracy Fessenden, Introduction to *Culture and Redemption* (2007; available through Canvas E-res page)

- read from start of chapter through "cultural authority" on p. 6

WEEK 3 THE WASP LADY CANON AND THE BEGINNING OF JEWISH BESTSELLERS

T. 4 Sept. Harriet Beecher Stowe, excerpts from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852; available through Canvas E-res page)

- "An Evening in Uncle Tom's Cabin,"
- "In Which it Appears that a Senator is but a Man,"
- "Of Tom's New Master, and Various Other Matters"

∞ **Due in class: Context Presentation choice sheets**

Th. 6 Sept. Mary Antin, excerpts from *The Promised Land* (1912; available through Canvas E-res page)

- "My Country"
- "Miracles"

∞ **Due in class: Methodology papers**

- WEEK 4 FROM STOWE TO YEZIERSKA
- T. 11 Sept. Stowe, cont'd
- Th. 13 Sept. Anzia Yezerskia, excerpts from *Salome of the Tenements* (1923; available through Canvas e-res page)
- "Salome meets her Saint"
 - "Shopping for Simplicity"
 - "Jaky Solomon and Jacques Hollins"

Unit 2: The Postwar American Consensus

- WEEK 5 GENTLEMEN AND THEIR "OTHERS"
- T. 18 Sept. Lecture: Gender, Religion (and Race) in Post-WW2 America
- **Context Presentations: *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947)**
- Th. 20 Sept. Laura Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement* (available through Canvas E-res page)
- Opening of the novel
 - Screening of *Gentleman's Agreement*, 5 pm. Location TBA (with snacks!)
- Students unable to attend the screening should watch the entire film on their own through a streaming service or in Library West, where it is available on closed reserve.

- WEEK 6 THE RISING TIDE AND ALL THE BOATS
- T. 25 Sept. Hobson, cont'd
- Th. 27 Sept. **Context Presentations: Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)**

- WEEK 7 BEYOND LIBERALISM (AND DOMESTICITY)
- T. 2 Oct. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*
- Th. 4 Oct. Hansberry, cont'd

- WEEK 8 MID-TERM TIME!
- T. 9 Oct. In-class midterm; bring your own blue books
- Th. 11 Oct. Mid-term debrief and look ahead

Unit 3: The Post-Postwar World

- WEEK 9 "GOD IS DEAD"
- T. 16 Oct. Lecture: Women, Religion, and "the '60s"
- **Context Presentations: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)**
- Th. 18 Oct. Walker, cont'd

- WEEK 10 GOD LIVES
- T. 23 Oct. Walker, cont'd
- Th 25 Oct. Walker, cont'd

- WEEK 11 MY HEAVEN
- T. 30 Oct. **Context Presentations and discussion: Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (2002)**
- Th. 1 Nov. Sebold, cont'd
- ∞ **Due in class: Proposals for Book Recommendation for class anthology**

- WEEK 12 MY HEAVEN
- T. 6 Nov. Sebold, cont'd
- Th. 8 Nov. **Context Presentations: Dara Horn, *Eternal Life* (2018)**

WEEK 13	WRITING JUDAISM IN AMERICA
T. 13 Nov.	Guest Speaker: Dara Horn (with snacks!)
Th. 15 Nov.	Horn, <i>Eternal Life</i> , cont'd
WEEK 14	GRATITUDE WEEK!
T. 20 Nov.	Take-home final planning/brainstorm session (optional)
Th. 23 Nov	Thanksgiving—no class
Week 15	WINDING DOWN
T. 27 Nov.	Horn, cont'd; evaluations
	∞ Due in class: Book Recommendation for class anthology
Th. 29 Nov.	Conclusion
Week 16	LOOKING FORWARD
T. 4 Dec.	Distribute take-home exam questions and class anthology (with snacks!)

Take-home finals due via Canvas by 5:30 pm, 13 December
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Graded Work (note: you must complete all the graded work in order to pass the class)

- “ME AND MY METHODOLOGY” (500-750 WORDS; 20 POINTS, 15%)
 - Informal essay outlining and explaining the student’s typical interpretive framework for reading fiction, with attention to ways gender and religious belief (and/or lack thereof) impacts critical practice
 - **Due: Week 4**
- CONTEXT PRESENTATION (10 MINUTE IN-CLASS PRESENTATION; 20 POINTS, 15%)
 - Short reports on topics relevant to understanding the novel in its time period, posted to class website for other students to read as class begins a new book. Topics may include reception history or author biography as well as topics specific to a certain title (e.g., report on feminism and womanism for *The Color Purple*).
 - **Due: Various dates throughout semester**
- MID-TERM EXAM (20 POINTS, 15%)
 - In-class exam; questions distributed in advance
 - **Week 8**
- BOOK RECOMMENDATION FOR CLASS ANTHOLOGY (300-500 WORDS; 12 POINTS, 11%)
 - Short essay recommending a work of popular fiction that deals with women and religions to a friend or future classmate; these will be collected and published in a class anthology.
 - **Due: Title choice sheet—Week 11; Complete Recommendation—Week 15**
- TAKE-HOME FINAL EXAM (2-3 ESSAYS OF 300-500 WORDS, 30 POINTS 22%)
 - Synthetic essays drawing on material covered in the semester. Questions distributed in class.
 - **Due: at scheduled exam period (5:30 pm, 13 December) or before.**
- PARTICIPATION (20 POINTS, 15%)
 - Consistent alert (i.e., awake and paying attention), informed (i.e., shows evidence of having done assigned work), thoughtful (i.e., shows evidence of having understood and considered issues raised in readings and other discussions), and considerate (i.e., takes the perspectives of others into account) participation.
- ATTENDANCE (13 POINTS, .5 POINTS PER 26 CLASS MEETINGS, 9%)
 - Consistent, on-time, all-class period attendance

TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS: 135 (POINT VALUES ARE A FRACTION OFF 100% DUE TO ROUNDING)

Grading Scale

Points awarded on assigned work will be recorded over the course of the semester in the Canvas gradebook, which translates total points into a letter grade using a standard grading scale:

A= 94-100% of points possible	A- =90-93%	
B+=87-89%;	B=84-86%	B- =80-83%
C+=77-79%	C=74-76%	C- =70-73%
D+=67-69%	D=64-66%	D- =60-63%
<60=F		

More information on UF grading policy is [available here](#). A complete discussion of course policies is available on the class Canvas site, at the page "Course Administration and Policies."



Choice Sheet for Context Presentations

To help situate the novel in the larger social world within which it was written, distributed, and read, each student will give a short (8-10 minute) presentation on some aspect of that world, based on their research in library sources. The instructors will provide general suggestions for topics, a presentation on how to do library research will be offered early in the semester, and the complete assignment prompt is available as an "assignment" in Canvas. Presentations will be given in class, usually the day before the class begins discussion of the work in question.

So that we can schedule the presentations appropriately, please complete the form below. As you choose a book on which to present, you may want to think not only about the book itself (choosing one that you're particularly curious about is always a good idea!) but about the day on which the presentation will be due, and the other commitments you have around that time. Doing additional research on a book you love can be a delightful experience, but your joy may be diminished if you have to do it the same week as your organic chemistry mid-term and your sister's wedding.

My name: _____

My 1st choice for context presentation: _____ on _____

My 2nd choice for context presentation: _____ on _____

My 3rd choice for context presentation: _____ on _____

This form is due in class on Tuesday, 4 September