

## Sex Without Consequence: Modern Fiction and Femininity

Office: Humanities 242

Mailbox: Humanities 149

Email: lisame@ucla.edu

Office Hours: Thursdays 1:30-3pm & by appointment

Course website: [sexwithoutconsequence.wordpress.com](http://sexwithoutconsequence.wordpress.com)

Spring 2016

Tuesdays 12:15-2:50pm

Haines A20

This class considers the consequences of sex for the modern woman. We will begin by reading six novels by female authors of the American interwar period (1915-1929). We will end the course by comparing these novels to a recent narrative of feeling, femininity, and female sexuality: the 2011 novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (initially, and infamously, a work of *Twilight* fan fiction). In most of these texts, unmarried female characters have sex without dying, getting pregnant, derailing their careers, or otherwise falling from grace. These characters also travel abroad, pursue higher education, and nurture creative ambitions. Several narratives end with maternity, but these, too, repudiate conventional depictions of female sexuality and desire. The interwar-era plots may seem unremarkable by contemporary standards, but they were shocking enough to interwar readers to inspire book bans, best-seller status, and, in one case, a syndicated comic strip, a Broadway musical, and a Hollywood film. In other words, the tumult caused by *Fifty Shades of Grey* (also a controversial best-seller that has inspired book bans and a much-discussed movie) is hardly new.

Despite this initial popular and critical attention, these innovative literary projects have been largely ignored by scholars of the past eighty years. We will consider the myriad reasons for this oversight. We will look at the novels' original reviews, often a mixture of acclaim and condemnation. We will also consider the works' cultural and historical contexts, from the rise of pink-collar labor, suffrage, birth control, and free love advocacy to the Great War, prohibition, and emergent modernism. We will also examine the period's antipathy towards nineteenth-century mores of femininity and sexuality, often linked under the sign of "sentimentalism"—a literary mode associated with hyperbolic displays of emotion, religious morality, and women writers and readers. How do these modern female authors grapple with assumptions about "women's literature"? How do their modern works reinvent as well as critique this tradition? Finally, when considered in relation to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, how do the paradoxes, double standards, and double binds these novels register persist in contemporary expectations of female sexuality, femininity, and literature by women writers?

### Reading list

(In order of course reading)

Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915)

Anzia Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements* (1923)

Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925)

Frances Newman, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926)

Edith Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927)

Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929)

E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011)\*

\*Based on the episodic fan fiction "Master of the Universe," by Snowqueen's Icedragon (the pen name of Erika Leonard, subsequently known as E. L. James), a dynamic we will also discuss

We will also look at a few choice non-fiction texts that discuss women, sex, and modern literature. Examples include excerpts from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898), Margaret Sanger's *What Every Girl Should Know* (1916), and H. L. Mencken's *In Defense of Women* (1918). These supplementary readings will be posted on the course website.

### Assignments and grading

Classwork (includes presentation) 25%

Paper One (4-6 pages) 25%

Paper Two (7-9 pages) 30%

Participation 20%

### Classwork

We will do small, weekly writing assignments as building blocks towards each of the two papers. We will work with these assignments in class on their due date, so they must exist, in hard copy, at the start of each class period.

Students will also be responsible for an oral presentation. The presentations will be done in small groups (2-3 students) and will focus on one (1!) organizing concept for a single course novel, beginning with Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements*. These 10 to 15 minute presentations will initiate class discussion on their assigned day and thus should aim to raise questions rather than provide answers about the given work. I will deliver an example presentation at our second meeting.

### Papers

Both papers will be analytical essays about at least one course novel. Topics are flexible (translation: if you have an exciting idea/question/hunch/puzzle, just ask!). Papers should include a well-formulated, argumentative, focused thesis and ample, pertinent textual support. They must also be typed, double-spaced, MLA-formatted with a proper heading, margins, and Works Cited.

The second paper should briefly consider the novel's original reception and cite at least two reviews that speak, in some way, to the essay's overarching claims. To that end, we will dedicate an early class session to a library orientation to archival research. I will be happy to discuss additional tips for archival research throughout the quarter.

### Participation

Participation constitutes a large portion (20%) of the final grade for the course. I will calculate it as follows: I will not keep track of the number of times you raise your hand; I will attend to the evidence that you actively, regularly engage with the material, share your insights and questions with the class, and incorporate these thoughts as well as my feedback into the course assignments.

**I have a no-small-screens policy in class. Laptops and iPads are acceptable for note-taking practices only.** If I see you on your phone, email, or Facebook during class, it will drastically affect your participation grade. The same rubric applies to your physical classroom presence: arrive on time; stay for the entire session; do not take bathroom breaks on your own terms (I will pause class roughly halfway through to allow a collective break, during which time you can use the restroom and catch up on all missed social media). The chance to attend to one subject for several hours, with a community of other people, is a rare opportunity; take advantage of it.

## Plagiarism

Plagiarism is unacceptable. I define plagiarism as presenting someone's words, ideas, or any other work that can be considered intellectual property as if they were your own. If you use someone else's work without quoting or citing completely, you have committed plagiarism and will fail the assignment and/or the course, be reported to the Dean of Students, and possibly be dismissed from UCLA. Do not rely on Cliff's Notes or Wikipedia; do not submit versions of the same paper more than once; do not paraphrase without citation—all of these are considered plagiarism.

## Weekly schedule

Unless otherwise noted, the week's assigned novel should be completed prior to our meeting. The themes and issues highlighted below recur throughout the novels we will read. Once a topic has been introduced, it is fair to expect it to reappear (and reconfigure) in future weeks.

### **Week 1: Contexts**

Topics include the New Woman, birth control, suffrage, and the changing field of women's labor, from domestic work and factory positions to stenography and department store clerkships.

Reading: excerpts from Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* & Sanger, *What Every Girl Should Know*

### **Week 2-3: Cather, *The Song of the Lark***

Topics include the sentimental tradition and the bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel).

Reading: sections I and II of *The Song of the Lark* for April 5; complete the novel for April 12. The second half of class on April 5 will be an orientation to archival research (we will focus on Cather's early journalism and *Song of the Lark* reviews).

### **Week 4: Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements***

Topics include socialism, immigration, urban issues, and ethnic literature.

### **Week 5: Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes***

Topics include satire, the free love movement, the Jazz Age, prohibition, and the flapper.

Additional reading: excerpt from Mencken, *In Defense of Women*

### **Week 6-7: Newman, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin***

Topics include emergent modernism and New Psychology.

\*Paper #1 due in class & to Turnitin.com prior to class on May 3.

### **Week 8: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep***

Topics include emergent modernism and New Psychology.

Additional reading: Hunter Gilkyson, "The Importance of Not Being Earnest"

### **Week 9: Fauset, *Plum Bun***

Topics include the Harlem/New Negro Renaissance, New Negro femininity, racial passing, and modernist primitivism.

**Week 10: James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and course summary**

Topics include all of the above, and more.

Optional class viewing of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015 film); timing TBD.

\*Final paper **due to my mailbox in Humanities 149 & to Turnitin.com** by 3pm on Tuesday June 7

DO NOT DUPLICATE