FEMINISM: SILENCES AND ABSENCES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE – 5 creds.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is a hands-on course on how feminist epistemologies can be applied to literary texts across genres and history to generate readings that underscore, enhance, shift and/or problematise the received interpretation of texts. This is addressed in three sections, each of them taught by a lecturer specialised in the literary works chosen for analysis from a feminist perspective. We have joined our strengths to add to the solidity of the course, and have taken special care to harmonise our teaching methodology and evaluation criteria.

The first section appropriately brings the more solid theoretical component, which is nevertheless made not only reader-friendly but engaging by interspersing theory with selected texts illustrating very specific concepts, establishing a pattern of critical reading which is to be followed for the whole course. Students will become familiar in very general terms with French feminist theories (Cixous, Irigaray and Kisteva) and gynocriticism (Showalter, the latter with an application of selected fragments of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Alice Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”), thus gaining a brief yet comprehensive theoretical framework that they will be to apply to the selected literary readings for the course. After this theoretical introduction, students will start reading a selection of short stories by twentieth century women writers. First, the stories of Katherine Mansfield will provide a subtle feminist study connected with a modernist aesthetic background and the exposition of the feminist strategy of mimicry linked with the criticism of traditional gender roles, both in women and men. Second, the study of contemporary writer Angela Carter will serve to take feminism to a radicalised version through the study of performativity (Butler) and fairy tale subversion in a selection of stories from her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1991).

The second part taps into feminist ideas, vectoring them into a more unfamiliar, perhaps even unexpected, territory in this field. Now that students have gained a foothold on feminist readings, two new paradigms - genre and period - are introduced in the study of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. Precisely due to the very remoteness of the poem, straddling two very different, even antagonistic cultures and worldviews, this Old English poem lends itself very aptly to feminist scrutiny. Applying this perspective to *Beowulf* will help “establish the unspoken in the text” (C. Belsey). After helping students bridge the time gap with Anglo-Saxon times by taking an updated look at a fascinatingly exotic and surprising society, attention will be brought to the two different societal constructions of gender clashing in *Beowulf*: the Germanic-derived one vs. the Christian recoding of womanhood. This polarity, which will underpin the whole poem, will take us to accounting for some of its conflicts and ambivalence, and ultimately will point towards a female-based structural symbolism in the poem.

The third section will start with a brief introduction of the concept of power in literary and visual discourse. Attention will be devoted to the issues of feminist reconstructions of official canons, re-readings of canonical texts (both literary and visual texts) and feminist methodologies for the critique of representation. This introduction will be followed by three sessions dealing with the structures of the gaze, women as visual signs and the politics
of spectatorship and visual pleasure. The concepts will then be applied to a selection of visual and written texts ranging from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Jane Campion’s *The Portrait of a Lady* to Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* and Sarah Waters’s *The Little Stranger*.

**CONTENTS**

**Part 1 (Prof. Gerardo Rodríguez)**

0. Feminist theories. Introduction.
   - French Feminism.
   - Julia Kristeva.
   - Mimicry/Masquerade.
   - Performativity.
   - Fairy tales subverted.

1. Feminism and subversion strategies in selected 20th Century short stories.
   - Katherine Mansfield
   - Angela Carter

**Part 2 (Prof. María-José de la Torre)**

2. From pagan folklore to Christian tradition: tracing two different constructions of the female gender. Ambivalence and ideological conflict on women’s identity in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The case of *Beowulf*.
   - Vestiges of women’s prominence in Germanic societies (archaeology, myth, folklore, etc.)
   - Christian re-coding of womanhood. The reasons for misogyny.
   - Dual reading of the female role as peace-weaver in the “comitatus”.

**Part 3 (Prof. Adelina Sánchez)**

3. Gender, art and literature: the representations of women in literary and visual discourse.
   - The WASP canon. Feminist writings; feminist readings.
   - Feminist re-readings of canonical texts.
   - Women, Literature, Art and Power.

• The critique of representation.
• The structures of the gaze: women as visual signs.
  • Spectatorship and visual pleasure.

**EVALUATION**

Class attendance and active participation are mandatory. The final grade will be awarded on consideration of both on a 10/90 ratio.

The student’s performance will materialise in the oral presentation which must be submitted (either individually or in groups) at the end of any of the course sections. The
oral presentation topic must be discussed with and approved of by the lecturer in question, and its progress will be checked in supervision tutorials as often as determined by them. Marks will be given to aspects such as:

- design or plan;
- clear, consistent and illustrated argumentation;
- an appropriate use of sources;
- attention to supervisor's guidelines/corrections;
- keeping deadlines;
- effective group work, when appropriate;
- clear, fluent delivery.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Part 1:


Part 2:


Part 3:

**Viewings/readings:**

AMENÁBAR, Alejandro. 2001. *The Others*
HITCHCOCK, Alfred. 1960. *Psycho*
JAMES, Henry. 1881. *The Portrait of a Lady*
WATERS, Sarah. 2009. *The Little Stranger*

**Recommended further reading:**


SÁNCHEZ ESPINOSA, Adelina. 2011. “Feminist Approaches to Close Reading”. In
