

Portfolio Exam

Due by 9:00AM on January 16, 2018 emailed as one continuous PDF to nsilverman@gc.cuny.edu. Exams received after 9:00AM on January 16 and/or not sent as one continuous PDF will receive a grade of Fail.

Assigned number

This exam includes:

Intellectual Autobiography (1200 word maximum)

Plus three of the following four parts:

Review Essay (12-15 pages, covering three texts published with the last 10 years)

Annotated Bibliography (15 primary or secondary texts);

including 1500 word rationale

Syllabus;

including 1500-word maximum pedagogical account of a single text

Conference Paper (10-page maximum, double-spaced);

including Conference Call for Papers

including 200-word Abstract

This exam fulfills the comprehensive stipulations in the following ways (texts may be repeated):

1. Three different centuries: *
 - a. Text: Part:
 - b. Text: Part:
 - c. Text: Part:
2. One Pre-1800 text & One Post-1800 text:
 - a. Text: Part:
 - b. Text: Part:
3. Two different national traditions:
 - a. Text: Part:
 - b. Text: Part:

* Syllabus contains texts from 1595, 1798, 1964, 1968, 1980, and 2014. Methodology is also briefly addressed in the intellectual autobiography.

Intellectual Autobiography:

As an early modernist, I feel that I am frequently challenged to justify the existence of my work. The literature of old, canonical poets is not entirely welcome among a collection of scholars increasingly focused on pushing back the traditional focus on a white, male canon. Why did it have to be Shakespeare? Particularly in response to this, I find my studies have progressively focused on developing commonalities between pieces. The question of authorial identity is indeed important, as well as the issue of inclusivity, but I find it generative to find connective tissue rather than focus on deconstructing literature into increasingly narrow categories. Our study prioritizes the human condition; to this end, I believe this portfolio demonstrates an attempt to reconcile the universalities of the search for identity with settings and ages taking a backseat to universal human experience.

The focus of my concentration might influence my perspective on a panliterary education. I prefer to focus on the relationship between sixteenth-century dramatists and classical literature. 500 years removed from the ancient Roman empire, English writers found reverence in the words of their western ancestors. Familiarity with Ovid and Homer was compulsory in educational systems; any well-read person was expected not only to know the *Iliad* and *Metamorphoses*, but also to reference them whenever possible. Current American society carries a similar bias 500 years later, when every high school is required to acknowledge *Romeo and Juliet* in some form. Somewhere along the way, we have decided that all those “thou”s carry importance and social prestige, and have set them atop a pedestal. But yet, there are few unique depictions within the literature of the period. Couples fight over money and fidelity. The elite 1% doesn’t understand working-class laborers. A young man is desperately in love with a woman who doesn’t return his affections. These are universal elements of humanity. Why should we set them aside in a walled space away from other periods?

The annotated bibliography begins in a traditional format, reaching slightly out of my comfort zone while still exploring the elements that draw me to academia in the first place. The scholarly elements focus upon the use of Ovid's Narcissus mythology in the medieval *Romance of the Rose*. It strikes me as a particularly interesting myth to include. In context, a forlorn man falls asleep and dreams a long, navelgazing exploit about his search for love, but seems to have enough awareness to compare himself to the mythological man who loved himself so much he turned into a flower staring at his reflection in a pool. But Guillaume de Lorris reappropriates the myth to place the blame squarely on a woman only circumstantially related to the original story. Armed with the scholarship of *Rose*, readings of Narcissus, and work done on the conventions of medieval translations, I attempt to unravel the reason behind interpreting the myth which such a slant. It reads quite like overt misogyny at first blush, but it might not need to be read that way.

The conference paper shoots this study forward into 20th century American fiction, wherein the construction of masculinity appears to still be a troubling issue. Focusing exclusively on Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the essay considers the expectations placed on the principle character, a heterosexual cisgendered man who is known only by the *nom de plume* he uses when writing a trashy advice column while waiting for "real" work to open up for him. He is an indecisive narcissist, struggling to adapt disparate identities while remaining unable to find one that fits well enough to suit his innate needs while still pleading the expectations of his hypermasculine peers. Is it possible for overanalytic tendencies to rob us of our identity even as we search for it? The question may not be far removed from the medieval poet and his casually misogynistic dreamer.

The discussion of universal textuality comes to a head in respect to the syllabus. As an introduction to literature, it is a piece which attempts to bridge over materials dated from 1595

through 2014, hooked into the conceit that there is something universal about the sorts of pieces we write when we feel as though we have been set into a crisis, be it personal or public. It makes room for discussions of Coleridge's opium addiction and plagiarism, Anne Sexton's depressive episodes and frequent cries for help, Philip K. Dick's concern of a postnuclear future, and G. Willow Wilson's response to the accusation that a generation of millennials will never be motivated enough to inherit the world. To be human is to struggle through the maze of identity and fight to process the surrounding world. It even reflects back to the incident that inspired its structure. During a previous semester teaching an introductory survey, a student shut down and refused to work with fiction, arguing that "fake" things could never hope to matter as much as "real" ones. Ever since, I've started with Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* and turned the question back upon students. It is my hope that asking them to be critical about literature as an outlet for universal anxieties helps them to name the unnamable.

Perhaps this study of some invisible ur-text will read as defensive or somewhat otherwise reductive in practice. Even so, I firmly believe that the quest for identity, gendered or otherwise, is a journey that spans literature of all ages and settings. My heart will always settle in the particular anxiety couched in the early English upheaval and slow acceptance of the virgin queen Elizabeth I and the hypermasculine superstitions of her successor James I, but all literature can enter the conversation of pretense and adaption. Continually being challenged by my peers has helped to shape a narrative around my methodologies. Perhaps on a metatextual level, this portfolio accomplishes a similar goal, existing in an uncertain time all its own and reaching across the distance to legitimize its creator. Anxious humanity marches forward.

Dreaming Narcissus in *Romance of the Rose*

Allen, Peter L. *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the Romance of the Rose*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. Print.

Peter Allen has dedicated the space of this text to routing the course of the literary conventions of courtly love from Ovid into the medieval era. This text contains an overview of amatory texts in medieval culture, as secular texts which break away from the confines of the Catholic tradition. Allen also takes care to note that “medieval literature about love, rather than reflecting social practice, provided a realm in which ideas and desires that could not be actualized in life could be played out in fantasy.” Despite this, there seems to be a paradox at play between the appeal of fantasy and the reinforcement of social rigidity. His work keeps sight of the social appeal of the classics, as Ovidian texts oftentimes reinforced the narrative of social inequities that the medieval aristocracies required to solidify their power, as well as perpetuating the notion that masculine desire supersedes feminine agency. The text concludes with a rich appendix chronicling the medieval reception of Ovid.

Bullon-Fernandez, Maria. "Gower and Ovid: Pygmalion and the (Dis)Illusion of the Word." *Through A Classical Eye*. Eds. Andrew Galloway and R. F. Yeager. University of Toronto Press, 2009. 363-380. Print.

Bullon-Fernandez helps to present an image of the medieval usage of Ovid. Her interest is in the reception of art, particularly within the Pygmalion myth. It looks a step beyond *Romance of the Rose* to the work of John Gower, and examines the ways in which Ovidian precedent is integrated in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. This becomes relevant to this study during the sections of Ovidian analysis, wherein Bullon-Fernandez takes interest in the stress that Ovid places on Pygmalion's wordplay before examining his abilities as a sculptor. Ovid, she argues, “is interested in the power of art and, by extension, of language” (367). This connection between physical art and spoken are is reviewed in the context of the Jean de Meun's contribution to *Rose*, wherein beauty is always positioned in the language of speech and rhetoric. Under this reading, the presence of rhetorical ability is particularly valuable in the context of Middle English poetry, which relies primarily on the ability of rhetoric to represent art only through descriptive language.

Cadden, Joan. *Nothing Natural is Shameful: Sodomy and Science in Late Medieval Europe*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Print.

Cadden has put extensive effort into exploring the application of medieval sex and genitalia. It is her thesis that medieval science was not linked only to spirituality and mysticism; contrarily, “objects and events that were sometimes referred to as ‘against nature’ were not usually beyond natural explanation” (36). This allowed medieval scientists to justify their study, because even unnatural acts sometimes stumbled into the natural order in time. The interest of the early portion of this text is in the necessity of the penis and the contemporary science of ejaculatory pleasure. Later chapters invoke the notes of scientists who debated the issue of sodomy and homosexual desire, exposing the discourse regarding whether men *could* also have sex with women, or if they *ought* to blend heterosexuality into their same-sex desire. Cadden notes that explanations

generally simplify biological behavior, such as the medieval perception of ejaculation as linked to the concept of joy building up and triggering euphoria upon release as it passed out of the body. Deviances in behavior could then be classified as birth defects and treated accordingly.

Coulson, Frank T. "Ovid's Transformations in Medieval France." *Metamorphosis: The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Alison Keith and Stephen James Rupp, eds. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007. 33-60. Print.

With a focus on archival work and educational manuscripts, Coulson's essay explains the significance of Ovidian mythology to the era, providing a background to the level of instruction that produced *Rose*. He transcribes the gloss of four manuscript commentaries of the *Metamorphoses*, revealing the medieval opinion that "Ovid's intention... is to speak of transformation, so that we may be aware... of internal transformation in the soul" (48). Coulson actively seeks to combat the accusation that medieval scholars could only act as "dunce monks" by stressing their ability to consider authorial intent and ability to parse dense classical material for an early European audience. He also pinpoints a hole in contemporary scholarship; the "Vulgate" commentary in particular was known to historians as early as 1920, and yet the confirmation bias had perpetuated unchallenged. This study encourages us to return to older texts and reexamine them for marginalia and miscellany that has been deemed unimportant by previous scholars who were not yet willing to challenge the assumptions produced by prior generations.

Desmond, Marilynn. *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

Desmond's text concerns itself with the subjects of medieval sexual desire, as well as the ethics inherent in sexuality. Desmond finds it problematic to immediately associate alternative sexualities, sadomasochism in particular, as demeaning toward women. Instead of forcing contemporary feminist theory onto medieval texts, she instead chooses to utilize an Ovidian framework to focus herself, connecting the *Ars Amatoria* to a budding European sense of "power erotics." Due to the medieval reader's penchant for accepting events as literal, Desmond argues, the *Ars* lost some of its ironic overtones and was presented as a model of chivalric chauvinism. The Everyman-esque Ovidian narrator is also addressed as a means by which the author can disappear into a narrator, while still lending an authoritative voice to a given piece. While discussing *Romance of the Rose*, Desmond argues that erotic violence is presented with relish, and is nearly voyeuristic in its flourishes. The conflation of author and protagonist, Desmond argues, presents an "authoritative text" (76).

Fyler, John M. *Chaucer and Ovid*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Fyler argues for the appeal of Ovid in the Medieval imagination. Though his introduction claims that his is not an intensive source study, he proceeds to draw connections between Chaucer's work and Ovidian precedent. He keeps this in conversation Virgil and other classical texts in mind, but the root of his interest is in tracing the Ovidian precedent of presenting fiction which encourages a break away from decorum. Ovid uses the work of his predecessors and contemporaries "to subvert and parody [his] blueprint of human life" (3). He uses this blueprint as a means to read the major works of Chaucer in context of Ovid's love poetry at first, and later

the *Metamorphoses*. This becomes important throughout the text; Fyler will later note that love is an expression for humankind's innate desire for the irrational. This allows early English poets to accept this literacy legacy with devices such as an obtrusive narrator with a clear personality and voice, complicating the image of the blank slate protagonist.

Friedrich, Ellen Lorraine. "Insinuating Indeterminate Gender: A Castration Motif in Guillaume De Lorris's *Romans De La Rose*." *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*. Larissa Tracy, ed. Boydell and Brewer, 2013. 255-279. Print.

Throughout the primary text, the image of a rose is used as a focal point to establish a dream-version of both bodily woman and female sexuality. Friedrich's reading accepts the marginalia in some manuscripts of *Roman* which denote phallic imagery near traditionally-feminine concepts. She presents a reexamination of the trope and how it can be altered when the Rose is presented as a phallic symbol, touching a precedent that originated with Marta Powell Harley's 1986 scholarship and flowed through the homoerotic readings of the 1990s. The "stiff-stemmed, bulbous" symbol is then particularly conspicuous when it becomes the object of desire. But this is then complicated by the times that the Rose is removed from the Dreamer's grasp. If the Dreamer is missing his rosebuds, then perhaps he is searching not for his woman but a missing gendered identity (262). Friedrich depicts *Rose* as a castration narrative concerned with forced genderlessness, a eunuch reaching into a narrative that breaks the gender binary.

Huot, Sylvia. "The Medusa Interpolation in the Romance of the Rose: Mythographic Program and Ovidian Intertext." *Speculum* 62.4 (1987): 865-77. Print.

Huot considers the edits made within *Rose*'s adoption of Ovid's version of the Narcissus myth. Her reading contextualizes Narcissus as a character innately tied to the tale of Echo, and notes that the most substantial edit in this presentation comes in assigning lines to Echo which Ovid did not have her speak. This gains importance as one considers that Ovid would leave Echo bodiless and have Narcissus replaced wholly by a flower. Where Ovid's version of the tale is accused of being "negative exemplum, representing sterility, frustration, failed communication and death," *Rose* becomes a celebration of life (866). The lines Echo is given are damning to Narcissus, but they provide a sense of agency. The punishments that warp Narcissus' figure at the end of the tale come at the request of Echo's own original voice, which in turn allow us to read the medieval Echo as an agent of her own wishes.

Jeay, Madeline. "Consuming Passions: Variations on the Eaten Heart Theme." *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*. Ed. Anna Roberts. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998. 75-96. Print.

This piece addresses the means by which metaphors are used to disguise and encourage sexual violence in texts primarily concerned with courtly love. Madeline Jeay discusses themes of sexual violence in medieval texts, specifically through the lens of Ovid's Philomela myth. She argues that the classic positioning of bird transformation and cannibalism in the same text produced a connection that perpetually recycles itself. Where the Ovidian myth addresses sexual assault and anthropophagy as revenge, Jeay ties this into the misogynistic streak in early European texts. She uses the metaphor of a heart-eating temptress as a means of constructing

fears of actual flesh-eating, since “the dissatisfaction inherent in sexuality turns into a misogynistic blame of women” (88). The pain of rejection is transposed into a physical suffering; if it is a particularly feminine injury to deny love, then the fear of rejection becomes an understandable paranoia of the bird of prey always prepared to swoop on an unsuspecting victim.

Luft, Joanna. "The Play of Repetition and Resemblance in the Romance of the Rose." *The Romanic Review*. 102 (2011): 49-63. Print.

Luft's analysis is concerned with the construction of masculine identity in the conventions of courtly love. She addresses the issue of homogeneity and “masculine self-sameness” which, once constructed, only understands the world in terms of comparison with itself. This ties into the concern of the Lover's identity, or noticeable lack thereof. If the Everyman narration is intended to be a blank slate, then why is it so personal? The poem contains a “destabilization of the Narrator-Lover persona,” which is reinforced even after the break where it switches to de Meun's authorial voice (54). *Rose* also frequently presents passages wherein the Lover compares himself to rosebushes until, Luft argues, he becomes indistinguishable from the metaphor. By invoking Ovidian precedent, the reader is conditioned to take metaphors more literally, because any of the roses presented could refer back to the one which was once Narcissus. Since the voice of the narration shifts in several places, it can be argued that the relative instability matches the shifting perception of the rose-as-nonrose.

Mann, Jill. "Falling in Love in the Middle Ages." *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of Medieval English Literature*. Boydell and Brewer, 2013. 88-110. Print.

Mann presents an examination of Ovidian precedent as it appears in a number of medieval works. She describes an intricate web of influences, as late-Medieval authors will reference Ovid while simultaneously referencing contemporary works that were *also* influenced by Ovid in different ways. When she addresses *Rose* directly, it is by focusing on the exchange between the Lover and the God of Love, cast as a figure who joins the rules of courtly love with Ovidian language. Mann notes that “much of the *content* of the god's advice seems like a set of Ovidian precepts that could be learned and put into practice... but the allegorical structure of the poem transforms its meaning: it tells us that *love itself* dictates the forms of the lover's behavior” (100). In this way, Ovid is presented as the true nature of the Medieval understanding of Love. Ovid is woven so completely into the works that shaped the early European mindset, love *is* Ovid.

Nouvet, Claire. “An Allegorical Mirror: The Pool of Narcissus in Guillaume De Lorris' *Romance of the Rose*.” *The Romanic Review* 91.4 (1996): 353-74. Print.

Explicating the notion of the narrator as Narcissus proxy, Nouvet's focus on reflections depicts the crystalline pool as a medium to receive visions. But this sight is primarily rooted in the limitations of the Lover's own flawed gaze, particularly since vision is presented “as a reflection which takes place not *on* the eye, but *in* the eye” (355). The vision received from the Narcissus Pool, then, can present more than the Lover is realistically able to receive in a purely scientific sense, which pairs with Ovidian descriptions of mirrors. If “the Ovidian mirror thematizes the text as being itself a mirror of sorts,” then “rhetoric disrupts from the start any pretense to a faithful and unadorned representation” (364). In Nouvet's reading, the Lover is conditioned to

see double, perhaps performing a form of creative nonfiction within the confines of a fictional work, rooted both to the natural world and the tacit understanding of what exists in his own text.

Robertson, Elizabeth. "Nonviolent Christianity and the Strangeness of Female Power in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*." *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack, eds. University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 322–352. Print.

Robertson's scholarship focuses on the way in which "Chaucer utilizes and transforms the medical and theological conventions of fluidity, subjection, and abjection commonly ascribed to feminine others in late medieval England" (325). In her discussion of the influences bearing down upon Chaucer's contemporaries, she ties together the image of purehearted Christianity with "repulsive" femininity. She sees Chaucer's Constance as a figure who represents a utopian ideal woman whose spiritual perfection is considered alien in explicitly racial terms. She incorporates Susan Schibanoff's work on medieval antifeminism to present the debate that Chaucer seeks to "establish and maintain woman's difference from (inferiority to) man, her otherness," and "to preserve and enhance such difference... between western patriarchal culture and the Other" (327-8). She integrates the pedagogical power of Christian doctrine and focuses on Chaucer's struggle to negotiate "conflicting attitudes towards the female body," illustrating the debate between Woman as representative of both purest motherhood and based temptress.

Schrock, Chad. "Neoplatonic Theodicy in Chaucer's 'Legend of Philomela'." *Studies in Philology* 108.1 (2011): 27-43. Print.

Schrock's text offers the presentation of Ovid's Philomela myth as utilized in Chaucer's adaptation in his *Legend of Good Women*. He gives attention to the trouble of adapting a pagan text for a particularly Christian audience, an issue which would trouble translators well through the Reformation period. He also notes that the changes tend to alter the Ovidian representation of the myth, until the women ultimately experience more suffering than what was present in the original, wherein characters are raped, murdered, and cannibalized. The issue of religion is also utilized as a means of eliciting compassion; in Christianizing the myth, Chaucer's narrator expresses his story "in such a way as to highlight God's absence from it" (38). Despite the ongoing critical narrative focusing on medieval misogyny, Chaucer's Philomela is designed to exist as a sympathetic character. This focus on "Christian urgency" serves to make an already-horrific myth even more upsetting to Chaucer's contemporary audience.

Viereck, Stephanie A. and Gibbs Kamath. *Authorship and First-Person Allegory in Late Medieval France and England*. Boydell and Brewer, 2012. 59-102.

Much of Viereck and Kamath's text is concerned with the reception of the authors in the Medieval period. They raise observations of authorship in a text which frequently manages to confuse the identity of its narrative voice. A chapter dedicated to *Romance of the Rose* finds substantive interest in the issue of exegesis, and declares that both authors of *Rose* follow the conventions of scholastic exegesis in the shape of their narrative. Viereck and Kamath note that the opening of *Rose* invites a question of authorship and embraces textual critique. In this way, they choose to read *Rose* as a metatextual quest. In the de Lorris segment, the allegorical Love "denies the textual control of both authors, thus inscribing a record of it" (33). Love continues to

test and flummox the narrator, resulting in the text losing touch with its own authorship for centuries as it was adapted into vernacular usage.

Rationale:

The influence of Ovidian precedent in the early European education system has been thoroughly discussed at the macro level. We have learned much about the classicism inherent in the early schoolhouse and the stress on Latin scholarship as a sign of educational mastery. It is interesting, then, to follow these influences alongside our contemporary study of early gender construction and its considerable flair for the misogynistic. A stark instance of both subjects occurs in *Romance of the Rose*'s Narcissus scene (lines 1411-1667), wherein the narrator pauses in his quest for a rose to reflect on the act of reflection at all. In this passage, a medieval text invokes classical mythology, but the representation in *Rose* develops an interesting reimagining. Ovid's Narcissus is a man who loved himself above all women, and was eventually condemned to an eternity of staring at a reflection, having fallen for the only person he could ever possibly love. But before this, he was pursued by the hapless Echo, who was cursed to only be able to speak words taken from someone else. Unable to express herself properly, she is rejected and wanders until her body decays and leaves only the spirit of her voice. Contemporized versions of the Narcissus myth are generally used to present allegories advising against vanity, but *Romance* shifts the meaning of the myth altogether by invoking Echo as villain of the piece. The last few lines of the reflective segment include a warning against "ladies who neglect your duties towards [their] sweethearts" (1508). This sudden shift of fault from his vanity to her vengeance distributes the blame differently than the source material would intend. I would argue that this exists as a result of masculine anxiety coloring the imagined threat of feminine autonomy.

To begin addressing this issue, we will first have to touch upon the issues concerning medieval translation into English, as well as the shifts in the scholarly reception of materials. The

old metanarrative of the “dark ages” still creates the misconception that medieval scholars had no familiarity with classical languages. Some would question that a medieval audience was both willing and able to consciously integrate these texts. This is the concern of Frank Coulson’s work on annotated educational manuscripts. Medieval scholars could quite capably read Latin texts with a critical eye, which is apparent in the content of their marginalia. This is also where integrating Peter Allen and John Fyler’s work emerges, as they both address Ovidian precedent and the medieval reception. With his assertions that medieval audiences sought a subversive text that could be coy with religious doctrine without perverting or corrupting it, Fyler allows us to accepted annotated manuscripts as proof that they could do more than simply translate verbatim. Sacred and secular texts could both exist and be appreciated without creating a conceptual paradox.

From this, some attention will need to be paid to the precedent of Ovidian mythos as they relate to the idea of agency and authorship in a metatextual construction. Maria Bullon-Fernandez discusses the use of Ovid as a method of drawing attention to the form of language. This takes center stage; if clever wordplay is the order of the day, then the author’s poetic aptitude would naturally follow as a point of pride. But in practice, such authorship is downplayed and wholly erased. The authorship of *Rose* is so split that it is recognized wildly as a collaborative work, and yet the voice of the narrator never manages to sustain itself for long periods. Vierick and Kamath chronicle the vanishing author in the centuries after *Rose* was circulated, and attribute it to a loss of agency in the primary voice. But this vanishing author then leads to the Everyman narrator also favored in the period; Marilyn Desmond discusses the conflation of the author with narrator in her study. If the narrator is no longer the author, then he is nobody. If he is nobody, then he can be everybody at once.

But once the author is reduced to the Everyman, what sort of person is he? Ellen Friedrich enters here to argue that the narrator may be a blanker slate than first realized. She presents the idea that the narrator's pursuit of a rosebud is actually a vision of a man who feels that he has lost his masculinity, rendered a eunuch after he has been parted from his precious phallic symbol. This quest for a phallus would not be uncommon for the medieval reader; Joan Cadden supplies contemporary science regarding the importance of ejaculation to physical euphoria. The narrator brings his quest for meaning and completeness to the depths of a reflective pool, though Claire Nouvet argues that at this moment the narrator will only ever be able to see his own subconsciousness reflected back at him. The narrator is stripped of subjectivity and the ability to act as an individual, but is forced to witness himself anyway. But if there is no substance within him, what could he possibly see?

Enter the myth of Narcissus. In Ovid, Narcissus is a man too beautiful to be satisfied with any normal mortal woman. He is a man obsessed with what Joanna Luft calls "masculine self-sameness" and exemplifies masculinity at its most pure. The initial description of Narcissus in *Rose* takes this understanding and creates a martyr from it, stressing that his fate was an unjust suffering, as "Love knew so well how to torment him," without mentioning his complicity in his suffering until later (1440). At this instance, it becomes important for the narrator, foggily recalling this myth in the middle of a larger dream, to not just become a desirable man, but also to become the *best* masculine identity. This is where elements of courtly love intervene; Narcissus is presented as an innocent victim of Love's machinations, leading into Jill Mann's assertion that all courtly love can be equated to Ovidian love. Under courtly love, actual affection is relatively irrelevant; the point is to perform "love" directly, which Narcissus has accomplished well enough to gain the fancy of the women around him. He is simply behaving as

he should; the action hangs entirely on his jilted admirer Echo.

It is in the rewriting of Echo that *Rose* takes its farthest leap away from its Ovidian precedent. In the original myth, Narcissus finds his reflection so beguiling that he finds no reason to pay attention to the lady Echo near him; she is ignored and withers away until only her voice remains, incapable of speaking beyond the language uttered around her. But the Echo in *Rose* refuses to be trapped inside mere parroting. She is at the same time an agent of her own heartbreak. She is the impetus of action. This invites Sylvia Huot's reading, which gives Echo a level of independence that ultimately is seen as untoward for the medieval era. It invokes the "dissatisfaction" noted in Madeline Jeay's work, upsetting the patriarchal order just enough that it sets the text clamoring for a relief from Echo's agency. In a way, it is Echo's newfound ability to speak for herself that creates friction with what Elizabeth Robertson calls "conflicting attitudes towards the female body." This serves as another example of Chad Schrock's "Christian urgency," wherein Ovidian narratives are retooled to better appeal to a Christian audience. This is an Echo capable of constructing a "reasonable" prayer, but this autonomy comes at the cost of her innocence (1467). If she can no longer exist as the innocent, tormented bystander, then she prevents her side of courtly affectations. Her boldness and vengeance become the cause of her suffering, and he is left unable to help himself afterward.

Ultimately, though, it is the dream framework that makes sense of these disparate elements. If the scholar becomes the author, who then writes a character indistinguishable from himself and falls asleep and dreams about old scholarship that is subsequently misremembered and tainted with the biases of contemporary life, then the threat of Echo is more easily understood. Filtered through the layers of reception, she is a stronger figure who becomes too strong for the mind that created her. If she must become an agent, then she overpowers the

limitations which exist specifically to bind her in her place. Echo exists expressly to be semi-mute and agreeable, but this empowered revision is too much for the dream to handle. The woman who can speak with God is threatening, as Robertson notes. That threat must quickly be abolished and dismissed, lest the quest for masculinity end without resolution. The dreamer is quick to shun Echo as a character, but the shadow of the myth continues until the end of the section featuring the pool. He begins to doubt that the rose is even worth pursuing. Why bother with genders and romances at all if they lead to nothing but misery? Jean de Meun's later additions to the piece will provide additional bouts of supplemental misogyny, but here we see flecks of his immediate reactions. The narrator leaves us in this moment, lapsing into indecision as he chooses to interpret his dream-in-progress: "I was afraid of hurting myself" (1667).

Introduction to Writing About Literature

Fall 2017

Hunter North C107 || Tue/Fri 8:10-9:25

ENGL 220-09.7442

{ **Hunter West 1238HW | Office Hours: Fri 9:35-10:35 & by appointment** }
{ **email | phone** }

With an emphasis on close reading, English 220 is intended to develop in students the analytical and interpretive skills necessary for both written and verbal critical response to literature that is firmly grounded in the text. It also establishes a common knowledge base, however minimal, in literature in English, and it equips students with the vocabulary and techniques for describing and analyzing literary works, with an emphasis on developing critical writing skills specific to literary analysis. In addition, the course develops in students an appreciation and understanding of the aesthetic qualities of literature, as well as an awareness that literature is part of a larger ongoing cultural, social, and historical dialogue that informs, influences, and inspires our experience.

Critical reception is crucial to adapt to a changing society. On a daily basis, we are bombarded with messages. Companies want us to buy things. We're told to like, to comment, to subscribe to countless networking attempts. We will spend this term dissecting the written word, making connections along a common theme. Though they come various times, locations, and media, the readings all hinge upon the concept of Crisis. When in Crisis, humanity engages the world in a variety of ways. Sometimes we suffer and crumble. Sometimes, we overcome adversity and find new virtues within ourselves. Each author presents a different sort of crisis, as well as a different method of coping. We will examine and respond to these disparate images along a common theme, until students ultimately are able to use a text as a springboard to create an original literary statement.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

1. Write thesis-driven analytical essays of 5-6 pages on all three genres (poetry, fiction, drama) that incorporate evidence from the literary texts and demonstrate close reading skills. This will culminate in the ability to develop a research paper of 6-8 pages illustrating a well-organized argument based on that thesis through critical reasoning and evidence from both the literary text(s) and critical sources.
2. Discuss fiction, poetry, and Shakespearean drama verbally through the use of close reading skills and, where appropriate, basic literary terminology.
3. Demonstrate some familiarity with literary criticism in class discussion and writing, or both.
4. Demonstrate the ability to compare and/or contrast two literary works.
5. Provide constructive critical comments on classmates' written work through peer review and group discussion.

Required Texts:

Coetzee, J.M. <u>Waiting for the Barbarians</u>	ISBN:9780143116929
Dick, Philip K. <u>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</u>	ISBN:9780345404473
Shakespeare, William. <u>Titus Andronicus</u>	ISBN:9780199536108
Wilson, G. Willow. <u>Ms Marvel: No Normal</u>	ISBN:9780785190219

Punctuality and Attendance:

We are provided with limited time in each class, with a great deal of material to be covered. As such, promptness is expected. As adults it is your responsibility to account for your own education, but please be aware that repeated lateness and absences will be reflected in the class participation portion of your grade. Lateness in excess of 20 minutes will count as an absence.

Grading:

Class Participation: 15%
Response Papers: 10%
Essays: 30%
Research Paper: 30%
Oral Presentation: 10%
Final Exam 5%

Major Assignments:

Weekly Response Papers (1-2 pages each)
Paper 1: Poetic Structure (5-6 pages)
Paper 2: Thematic Threads (5-6 pages)
Oral Source Presentation (30~40 minutes per group)
Research Paper (6-8 pages)

Each week, a brief response paper will be due. You will choose a section from the week's readings and analyze it for theme and content. Did you find any concepts thought-provoking? Can you find ways to apply the themes to your own life? Not everything that's been published is brilliant; can you find logistical errors and inconsistencies in the texts? Are the authors expressing themselves effectively? Can you think of ways to improve them?

The first two papers will challenge you to create an essay integrating texts to present an idea of your own. Papers are noted in bold on the schedule, and expected at the start of the meeting in which they are due. The oral presentation and final paper will demand an academic work focused on source integration and research. These assignments will be discussed in greater detail as the semester progresses.

Please format all written assignments per the guidelines on pages 6 and 7 of this syllabus.

When preparing papers for this course, please feel welcome to utilize the writing center's tutoring services for extra help and personalized tutoring. Appointments can be made via their web site: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/rwc>

Revisions:

Students are welcome to submit revised essays within 2 weeks after their initial return. Revisions will require an additional paragraph detailing what was revised to warrant a grade adjustment.

Schedule:

* Except where noted otherwise, all essay submissions and presentation dates noted below are due on the second (Friday) meeting of the indicated weeks.

** Scheduling may be subject to change, depending on our pace. If our scheduling changes, adjustments will be noted in class and a revised schedule will be posted on Blackboard, as will notifications of class cancellations.

***Please take note of page counts and reading expectations. You are strongly encouraged to read ahead.

Week 1: Aug 25	Introductions, In-class Writing Assessment
Week 2: Aug 29 and Sep 1	Poetic Traditions and Expectations Sidney and Cummings (Handout – backup pdf on Blackboard)
Week 3: Sep 5 and Sep 8	Wordsworth and Coleridge (Handout – backup pdf on Blackboard)
Week 4: Sep 12 and Sep 15	Anne Sexton (Handout – backup pdf on Blackboard) CRITICAL PRESENTATION: Paul Hetherington – “Confession and Authenticity”
Week 5: Sep 19 and Sep 22	No class: CUNY scheduling (Note that classes follow a Thursday schedule on Sep. 19 th)
Week 6: Sep 26 and Sep 29	Theme and Thesis in Other Media Paper 1 Due
Week 7: Oct 3 and Oct 6	G. Willow Wilson – <i>Ms. Marvel</i> CRITICAL PRESENTATION: Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini – “Comics as Pedagogy”
Week 8: Oct 10 and Oct 13	J.M. Coetzee – <i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> Chapters I-III
Week 9: Oct 17 and Oct 20	<i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> Chapters IV-VI CRITICAL PRESENTATION: Thomas P. Crocker – “Still Waiting”
Week 10: Oct 24 and Oct 27	Philip K. Dick - <i>Do Androids Dream?</i> Chapters 1-10
Week 11: Oct 31 and Nov 3	<i>Do Androids Dream?</i> Chapters 11-22 CRITICAL PRESENTATION: Christopher Sims – “The Dangers of Individualism”
Week 12: Nov 7 and Nov 10	Library Visits & conferencing – bring old response papers Paper 2 Due
Week 13: Nov 14 Nov 17	Integrating Research Materials (handout) Please submit list of works cited materials from last week’s session <i>Titus Andronicus</i> Act I

Week 14:
Nov 21 *Titus Andronicus* Act II
Nov 24 **Thanksgiving Break: no class**

Week 15:
Nov 28 **½ length draft due**
Peer review on drafts
Dec 1 *Titus Andronicus* Act III

Week 16:
Dec 5 and Dec 8 *Titus Andronicus* Acts IV-V
CRITICAL PRESENTATION: Caroline Lamb– “Physical Trauma and (Adapt)ability”

Final Meeting
(Date/time TBA) **Final Paper Due**

Plagiarism:

From Hunter's Academic Integrity Policy:

Academic dishonesty is prohibited in The City University of New York. Penalties for academic dishonesty include academic sanctions, such as failing or otherwise reduced grades, and/or disciplinary sanctions, including suspension or expulsion.

Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, obtaining an unfair advantage, and falsifying records or documents whether intentional or not.

Hunter College upholds the right to promote academic integrity on its campus as an educational institution of the City University of New York. The College has the responsibility to review all charges of academic dishonesty and implement sanctions, including, but not limited to, failing the course, official transcript notation, suspension or expulsion from the College when it has been determined that academic dishonesty did occur.

Plagiarism is the act of presenting another person's ideas, research or writing as your own. Examples of plagiarism include:

- Copying another person's actual words or images without the use of quotation marks and footnotes or citations attributing the words to their source.
- Presenting another person's ideas or theories in your own words without acknowledging the source.
- Failing to acknowledge collaborators on homework and laboratory assignments.
- Internet plagiarism, including submitting downloaded term papers or parts of term papers, paraphrasing or copying information from the internet without citing the source, or "cutting & pasting" from various sources without proper attribution.

Fulltext: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/studentaffairs/student-conduct/academic-integrity>
<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/studentaffairs/student-conduct/academic-integrity/cuny-policy-on-academic-integrity>

Violation of the above policy will result in course failure.

Special Accommodation:

In compliance with the American Disability Act of 1990 (ADA) and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational parity and accommodations for all students with documented disabilities and/or medical conditions. It is recommended that all students with documented disabilities (Emotional, Medical, Physical and/or Learning) consult the Office of AccessABILITY located in Room E1124 to secure necessary academic accommodations. For further information and assistance please call (212- 772-4857)/TTY (212- 650- 3230).

Sample Essay Format

Guidelines and sample page are courtesy of the Purdue Online Writing Lab: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

General Guidelines

- Type your paper on a computer and print it out on standard, white 8.5 x 11-inch paper.
- Double-space the text of your paper, and use Times New Roman. The font size should be 12 pt.
- Leave only one space after periods or other punctuation marks.
- Set the margins of your document to 1 inch on all sides.
- Indent the first line of paragraphs one half-inch from the left margin. MLA recommends that you use the Tab key as opposed to pushing the Space Bar five times.
- Create a header that numbers all pages consecutively in the upper right-hand corner, one-half inch from the top and flush with the right margin.
- Use italics throughout your essay for the titles of longer works and, only when absolutely necessary, providing emphasis.

Formatting the First Page of Your Paper

- Do not make a title page for your paper unless specifically requested.
- In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, list your name, your instructor's name, the course, and the date. Again, be sure to use double-spaced text.
- Double space again and center the title. Do not underline, italicize, or place your title in quotation marks; write the title in Title Case (standard capitalization), not in all capital letters.
- Use quotation marks and/or italics when referring to other works in your title, just as you would in your text: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as *Morality Play*; *Human Weariness* in "After Apple Picking"
- Create a header in the upper right-hand corner that includes your last name, followed by a space with a page number; number all pages consecutively with Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.), one-half inch from the top and flush with the right margin.

Here is a sample of the first page of a paper in MLA style:

Catlin 1

Beth Catlin

Professor Elaine Bassett

English 106

3 August 2009

Andrew Carnegie: The Father of Middle-Class America

For decades Americans couldn't help but love the red-headed, fun-loving Little Orphan Annie. The image of the little girl moving so quickly from poverty to wealth provided hope for the poor in the 1930s, and her story continues to be a dream of what the future just might hold. The rags-to-riches phenomenon is the heart of the American Dream. And few other people have embodied this phenomenon as much as Andrew Carnegie did in the late 1800s and early 1900s. His example and industry caused him to become the father of middle-class America.

Andrew Carnegie can be looked to as an ideal example of a poor immigrant making his way up to become leader of the capitalist world. Carnegie was born into a poor working-class family in Scotland. According to the PBS documentary "The Richest Man in the World: Andrew Carnegie," the Industrial Revolution was difficult on Carnegie's father, causing him to lose his weaving business. The Carnegie family was much opposed to the idea of a privileged class, who gained their wealth simply by inheritance ("Richest"). This type of upbringing played a large factor in Andrew Carnegie's destiny. In order to appease his mother's desire for material benefits, and perhaps in an effort to heal his father's wounds, Carnegie rejected poverty and cleaved to prosperity.

Carnegie's character was ideal for gaining wealth. His mother taught him to "look after the pennies, and the pounds will take care of themselves;" he later turned this proverb into "watch the costs, and the profits take care of themselves" ("Richest"). Such thrift was integral to his future success. He also believed that "all is well since all goes better" ("Richest"). His theory

Pedagogical Account

I think it's silly to be afraid of books. And yet, that seems to be exactly what we are instilling in our students. First-year composition has increasingly shied away from longer works, preferring instead to select excerpts and essays kept approachable in vernacular English. This class is designed as the late stage of a student's compulsory English education, the last bit of literature instruction that a student will receive before moving on into an alternate major. It's important for me to make sure that students are made to attempt a variety of texts and take note of universalities. For the purposes of this survey, I have chosen to center the course on the notion of *crisis*. Culling from English, American, and Anglophile literature, we find that the English-speaking community turns to the written word to express its time of uncertainty. Whether Sir Philip Sidney is pleading to a sixteenth-century audience about the merits of the humanities or Philip K. Dick is struggling to process the threat of nuclear violence in 1960s America, crisis requires language as a coping mechanism. In particular, the nature of narrative structure lends itself to the erection of heroic figures, as if the presence of a hero is an author's way to dream of a simpler solution to an issue far larger than themselves. This most directly impacts the syllabus in the transition from American G. Willow Wilson's 2014 graphic novel *Ms. Marvel* to South African J.M. Coetzee's 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Introducing *Ms. Marvel* first prepares the group for a discussion of the combination of race and heroic structure in fiction. The tale of a Muslim-American teenager who loves superheroes, *Ms. Marvel* is a decidedly millennial piece of fiction, and a bridge from short-format poetry into longer narrative structure. Kamala, the protagonist, is a genre-savvy character and herself a writer of fanworks, allowing her to understand the conventions of heroic fiction and facilitate the opportunity for me to introduce these conventions to the class. They are provided

with the framework of Joseph Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces" theories and asked about the ways that Kamala fulfills her version of the hero's journey. Under Campbell's theory, heroic epic follows a standard format which audiences are always-already trained to accept. A hero-to-be begins his¹ journey in a particularly ordinary setting, until something remarkable breaks the daily routine. The hero is then brought on a developmental adventure that allows him to discover himself and his own strength through a series of trials, culminating in the fantasy that helps us believe that any of us might be able to summon the strength to make a difference. It works fine for a superhero text, but students are then prepared to expand Campbell's mythologies to ask a larger question: what happens when these elements fail? How does the heroic narrative manage to stumble forward when the hero fails to become heroic? The narrative of *Barbarians* wastes no time in circumventing this model in the pursuit of this question.

It is tempting to read Coetzee's text as an artifact from a foreign age, and it proves challenging to pull students away from the instinct to distance themselves from the Other. It is rooted in the horrors of Apartheid, which some classes receive as an absurdity that could never really make its way close to home.² But by placing it in context of superhero fiction, we can instead read it as a vision of what can happen when the hero's journey is twisted by the realities of a bureaucratic structure. The Magistrate, the protagonist in this text, is a member of middle management in an ambiguously-located colony claiming land away from an indigenous people. He thinks he is a good, just man, but he is also an emotionally-distant philanderer. The

¹ Campbell's work assumes a heterosexual male hero, though several scholars have expanded this theory to be more inclusive to other potential heroic figures. Of note are Clarissa Pinkola Estés' *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1996) and Valerie Estelle Frankel's *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey Through Myth and Legend* (2010). As this is an introductory examination, I tend to keep the theory broad enough for early scholars to digest, though students are encouraged to complicate the issue as much as they find necessary.

² The sense of complacency among students insisting that "it could never happen here!" has been increasingly surreal to me in our current political climate, but perhaps that simply means that we need to have these discussions more than ever.

discrepancies between his self-assessment and his actions become tangible in his attitudes and exchanges with the local native population. The barbarians next door seem harmless, yet his government's military forces see them as a dangerous alien people who must be kept pliant and disciplined. Barbarians are kidnapped and subjected to torturous interrogations by an Empire that just barely understands their language. The magistrate identifies the injustice, but cannot see a means of action. His is the struggle of the privileged majority lost to the pressure of being an ally to a disenfranchised people.

Student response has been mixed as we move through this text, owing largely to their individual socioeconomic positions and relationships with Othering. Some students consider this to be a successful sort of hero. Their instinct is to reward him for trying to understand people outside of himself. Others take issue with his own unsavory views and behavior towards women. The magistrate befriends a barbarian girl (who is never named) and gives her a home and job, but regularly interrogates her and asks her to share the moments of her torture, oftentimes after stripping her nude. Students rightfully identify this as a signal that the magistrate should never be trusted as a reliable narrator, because his behavior never quite matches the vision he wishes to create for himself. To them, he comes off as a white man placidly explaining that he can't be racist if he has black friends.³

This lack of unity finds purchase in Coetzee's narrative. The magistrate's broken heroism fails at each step as he tries to repair the girl's broken body, and later returns her to her people during a dangerous winter travel. He doesn't think to ask for her consent or his peers' advice, deciding that his empathy is enough to buoy his personal narrative of colonial savior. He's ill-

³ This presents a teaching moment of its own; the text does not explicitly denote a "black/white" dichotomy among its characters. Students read blackness into the barbarians through their position as societal unequals, giving us the opportunity to discuss coded text and dogwhistling.

equipped to handle events when her people reject her, and she subsequently rejects his romantic advancements. His quest fails because it *cannot* work. A hero who cannot see beyond his individual viewpoint is doomed to overlook important signals and misappropriate key signs. He takes the steps required of a heroic journey, but he cannot move past his colonial individualism to reach a substantial transcendence. By the endpoint of our first week's discussion, students occasionally question whether a privileged class is even capable of allying with a marginalized group.

In the second half of the novel, Coetzee depicts the reception of social justice among a population that isn't ready to receive it. The magistrate is labeled a traitor for sympathizing with the Other, and subjected to the same tortures that were dispensed to the barbarians. He finds his status stripped away from him as his freedom is taken. He is eventually freed, but only after his civilization cannibalizes itself out of fear. The magistrate lives out his last days in a dying colony with a ruined infrastructure, ineffectively struggling to write down the colony's history for the posterity of future generations who are no longer being taught to read. Some students reject this ending and its lack of positivity, but others find something satisfyingly real in a story that lacks a tidy *deus ex machina* to clean up life's mess. Our time with the novel ends with a group presentation on Thomas Crocker's critical "Still Waiting for the Barbarians," which pairs Coetzee's novel with an assessment of Americans' willingness to give away personal liberties after a traumatic national event.

Narratives of crisis cry out for a hero. People who suffer need to know that broken systems will be overturned. Coetzee, however, is acutely aware that true heroism takes more than good intention alone. Any person can take the steps appropriate to a journeying heroic figure, but that would-be hero needs to be armed with an open mind willing to have its prejudices

challenged. At this moment in the semester, students are grappling with a willingness accept their own ignorance. It might not be enough to “do good” if they aren’t critical about what “good” entails. And from here, they will journey into the science fiction of Philip K. Dick, where issues of race, gender, and allegiance will be complicated still further.

CFP***Breaking Through: Textures and Aesthetics of Rupture***

The Graduate Center – CUNY

English Student Association Graduate Conference

March 23rd, 2018

“The degree is in disruption,” announces the homepage of the USC Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation, home of self-proclaimed “creative philanthropreneur[s],” “eclectic innovator[s],” and “fierce future CEO[s].” As Jill Lepore points out in her critique of the recent trend of disruption as a business model, “everyone is either disrupting or being disrupted. There are disruption consultants, disruption conferences, and disruption seminars.” It is to this ubiquity and institutional co-option of disruption as a term and a notion that this conference aims to attend. Why are we so obsessed with “breaking through”?

We posit that “rupture” as a concept of breaking through loses much of its value when it is fetishized and only figured as unidirectional, or universally positive, effective, counter-hegemonic. This conference calls for a rigorous unthinking around the space-times of rupture that questions these assumptions and asks, further: Who is licensed to disrupt? To what extent does that which consciously figures itself as disruption in fact create rupture? How do we conceive of disruption that can be so effectively co-opted and redeployed in service of neoliberal agendas? What is it about the aesthetics of rupture that makes them so appealing? So satisfying?

To this end, we invite you to think alongside multiple strands of thought that are undoing binaristic and contrapuntal notions that obfuscate and limit our ability to understand agency and the modes in which we might #RESIST. In thinking of ruptures beyond supposed eruptions from below, we posit the need to also think through the violences and inconveniences of living under counter-revolutionary and institutional violence as *irruptions* from above. The scope of this conference could extend from

beyond supposed ruptures from below, we posit the need to also think through the violences and inconveniences of living under counter-revolutionary and institutional violence as *irruptions* from above. The scope of this conference could extend from topics as divergent as analyses of the politics and aesthetics of the Women's March, to thinking through the feelings of satisfaction that some experience from watching internet genre-videos of pimples erupting. We invite scholars from a range of disciplines and methodologies to reconceptualize rupturing in a number of contexts such as: (inter)textual ruptures in period, genre, or medium; ecological crises and irruptions of corporate greed; histories and pedagogies of (dis)ruption; geographies and borders of (ir)/(e)ruption.

Abstracts of 250-300 words should be submitted [here](#) by January 15th, 2018 (DEADLINE EXTENDED!).

We invite papers from anyone who wishes to engage in this conversation, but as a starting point, we imagine submissions related to:

- Cultural studies
- Race and ethnic studies
- Pedagogy and education
- Queer and LGBT+ studies
- Political theory
- Science and environmental studies
- Feminist theory and women's studies
- Postcolonial and decolonial studies
- History and archival methodologies
- Poetics and rhetoric
- Visual culture
- Comparative literature
- Literacy and composition studies
- Anthropology
- Sociology
- Philosophy
- Affect theory and cognitive studies
- Media theory
- Digital Humanities
- Performance studies

If you have questions about the CFP or the conference itself, please reach out at

If you have questions about the CFP or the conference itself, please reach out at esaconference2018@gmail.com

Abstract:

As our national attention becomes ever more captivated by the narrative of resistance and consent, as well as with the discourse surrounding the deconstruction of the gender binary, it may be the responsibility of American literary scholars to return to Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. A sometimes-forgotten product of a novelist who didn't live long enough to produce a major canon, West's text features a jerky sequence of vignettes detailing the exploits of an advice columnist who's lost sight of who he is. Scholars frequently fall into the trap of dismissing the text as a piece of cynical misanthropy, as Kristin Renzi does. Rather than continually probe the text for its darkness, it may prove more fruitful to view *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a form of early identity tourism. This essay argues that, in a world where personalities have become commodities that can be worn and discarded, Miss Lonelyhearts is able to inhabit spaces determined by others and try on different forms of masculinity. The trouble with this construction is that he has convinced himself that his own happiness can be discovered by living out someone else's fantasy. Though he attempts to perform masculinity as determined by the world around him, Miss Lonelyhearts is unable to end his story in any satisfactory way because he neglects to consider his own preferences.

“The same old stuff”: Miss Lonelyhearts and the Search for Identity

Depression-era America forced a consumer-conscious culture to come to terms with an abrupt disconnect between financial responsibility and the expectation of competitive materialism. As personal stability crumbled, it became the job of the media machine to negotiate anxiety and rely on symbolic distractions to ease the public’s worries (Suarez 79).

Advertisements sought to engender this as a means to boost the maimed concept of capitalism by creating new desires and presenting them as needs. In an ad for Lifebuoy-brand products, it is implied that only through use of their particular brand of soap will the average man be able to cure and prevent future body odor – described as “public enemy number one” (Barnard 190). It is this validation of social fears that enabled many companies to survive the rough financial times of the era, but in the process created a populace that looked to the media for an example of proper dress, conduct, and lifestyle. Jonathan Veitch has proven that the ideal person as represented by the media was an impossible aspiration, noting that “whatever their political persuasion, almost everyone agreed that the people as they were... represented by the ‘culture industry’ were... disfigured beyond recognition” (68). In response to this uneasy social atmosphere, Nathanael West created the character of Miss Lonelyhearts, a man so lacking in self-identity that readers only know him via the pen name he uses when writing his uninspired advice column, left potentially misgendered by even the narrative that proposes to represent his viewpoint. His journey is not merely the fruitless quest for himself as many critics have suggested,¹ but also serves as the epic of an Everyman representing the people of his time.²

¹ Robert Lacy critiques West as a mediocre novelist outright, declaring him as an American author who “had written just four short novels, only two of which were any good” (1).

² There is potentially some autobiography inherent in this reading; West was frequently encouraged by his parents to abandon his literary aspirations and pick a more stable career (See Martin, particularly 28 and 227).

Ultimately Miss Lonelyhearts' suffering is caused not by a lack of identity,³ but from an inability to choose a single self from the multitudes offered by the world surrounding him.

To begin any study on Miss Lonelyhearts' quest for identity, it is crucial to first consider what is known about his true self devoid of any outside influence. Critics have cited the same passages to prove opposing points, such as Miles D. Orvell's insistence that Miss Lonelyhearts' antieroticism suppresses "darker, more primitive powers" and "primal vitality," while Randall Reid disputes that "deadness pervades all [Miss L.'s] responses" (Orvell 113, Reid 81). While discrediting neither, it appears that two such disparate conclusions are a symptom of the duplicitous nature of Miss Lonelyhearts' character. On one level, Miss Lonelyhearts exhibits the qualities Reid attributes to the literary "dandy" figure: "he is always morbidly sensitive, exacerbated by vulgarity, tormented by dreams and fantasies, weak-willed but compulsive, [and] fond of attenuated emotions and... eccentricities" (71). This contrasts with the Miss Lonelyhearts described by James F. Light as one with a "need for unity and order, so great as to border on insanity" (57). If both readings are accurate, then Miss Lonelyhearts is best described as a weak-willed neurotic with a compulsion to impose his sense of order on others, a nearly contradictory reading that encourages West's audience to join Miss L. on his journey to find sense in a nonsensical environment. It is this Miss Lonelyhearts who is drawn to the field of journalism, where his ambitious desire to have "the whole world... learn to love" could potentially be realized (West 8).

This inconclusive personality sketch lends itself well to the occupational setting in which Miss Lonelyhearts finds himself, particularly given the contemporary vision of the newspaper journalist. As Thomas Strychacz has noted, the newspaper journalist was considered "something of a culture hero – tough, uncompromising, at once reporter, investigator, and man of action"

³ I would argue that Renzi misreads this sentiment when she refers to it as an "antihumanist message" (58).

(15). The journalist was able to conduct himself as an early hero, experiencing life in a way about which others would only be able to read. This type of position is an obvious draw to a man like Miss Lonelyhearts, who is labeled by outsiders as having “no outer life, only an inner one, and that by necessity” (West 15). Miss Lonelyhearts, seeking to discover an outer life that would grant him a sense of purpose, joins the staff of a local paper only to suffer disillusionment when faced with the tedious gruntwork of entry-level positions. When the “gag” job of advice columnist opens, he by his own admission “welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column” (32). The pipe dream was never intended to end at “advice columnist,” yet this is the only example the reader is provided as a glimpse into Miss Lonelyhearts’ professional ambition before taking up the “Miss L.” moniker. In the same passage, he reveals that “after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him,” subtly revealing the horror with which Miss Lonelyhearts settles into his assigned role (32). What was intended to work as a stepping-stone has failed to guide him to success, and the “joke” escapes him once he realizes the finality of his commitment. As a writer, he is something of a hack. The Miss Lonelyhearts position, built as it is upon the foundation of a single insensitive joke, does not lend itself well to journalistic pursuits. Even so, Miss Lonelyhearts is unable to write even the drivel of his column, discovering that it is “impossible to continue” (1). As Lee Rozelle reflects, Miss Lonelyhearts is “littered with words” in the form of both letters and his columns (104). Unfortunately, the words are no comfort to him, and he can no longer laugh at the letters sent from his readers begging for help because he loses the detachment that initially brought humor to their content; his career stagnates because he has become Miss Lonelyhearts in more than mere name.

It is one thing for Miss Lonelyhearts to abandon his journalistic goals for the sake of his dead-end job, but his failure to maintain himself in an environment steeped in toxic masculinity

presents a real-world effect on his ability to perform-as-man in the real world. After making the decision to adopt his feminine *nom de plume*, Miss Lonelyhearts suffers from a decided lack of sexual desire, despite his numerous sexual encounters. An early example of his inorganic sexuality occurs when he is first approached by Faye Doyle about scheduling a meeting. Miss Lonelyhearts uses a payphone and sets “his eyes on two-dimensional genitals,” simultaneously drawing attention to the filth of the city and his focus on a pictorial representation of male virility (26). Reid has taken this to mean that not only does Miss Lonelyhearts reveal “his own attempt to seize upon sexuality,” but he also presents sexuality as a social construction; a man obsesses over genitalia because other men have continued a tradition of obsession for generations. Yet, in the same passage, West explains that Miss Lonelyhearts’ fixation on the lewd scrawlings is in fact compensation for “the completeness of his failure” (26). Contextually we are to assume that the “failure” is over his inability to keep away from the married Mrs. Doyle and engaging in adultery, but that is only the most recent of Miss Lonelyhearts’ failures: he has failed to make a name for himself in his professional field, to break out of his advice column, to make a difference in his readers’ lives. As Jan Gorak explains, Miss Lonelyhearts “becomes trapped in illusion-making machinery he can no longer control” (79). Miss Lonelyhearts allows his career’s failure to follow him home, and proceeds to lose control of the barrier between his personal life and his professional existence as a representative of the news media.

The “completion of his failure” follows Miss Lonelyhearts to the bedroom, as he discovers a lack of proper sexual desire for his willing partners. Instead, he experiences what Sandra M. Gilbert has called a “nausea associated with the blurring of gender boundaries,” responding with an anger “that replicates... revulsion” (773). All encounters with women in this novel end with some level of anti-eroticism: Mrs. Doyle makes “sea sounds” and is “heavy,”

creating the image of a man making bestial love to a manatee; he attempts to skinny-dip with Betty, but “the water was so cold that they could only stay in for a short time”; naked Betty also is criticized for being “a little fat”; with Mrs. Shrike, he is forced to willfully “work [his sexual] spark into a flame” and later tries “desperately to keep the spark alive” (28, 38, 24). When his frustrating ability to undercut and eliminate his own desire for women prevents him from asserting himself as a possessor of a masculine sex drive, Miss Lonelyhearts immediately resorts to violence. Though he never beds her, he tears off Mary Shrike’s clothes despite her protests, and later flees from Faye Doyle in the most violent way possible, as “he kept hitting her until she stopped trying to hold him” (50). As Light notes, “man’s desire for life leads to him seemingly instinctive preoccupation with sexual violence, the type most intimately associated with life” (85). Though Miss Lonelyhearts’ violent streak could be attributed to a reaction against the usurpation of his manhood via his nickname, it is more likely that his backlash is actually a reaction of confusion manifesting itself. He faces the expectation that he ought to be attracted to ladies, but his options are abhorrent to him by nature of being animalistic, rotund, or physically unwilling. For the man who appears to identify as a cisgendered heterosexual male while answering to a woman’s name, the end result is a lack of any reciprocated sexual contact aside from an encounter with Betty that leads to almost sterile, obligatory procreation.

Stripped as he is of physical and emotional identity, Miss Lonelyhearts requires outside assistance to rebuild himself, and he suffers from no lack of volunteers to aid his cause. The most prolific of these is the managing editor William Shrike, who is most instrumental in sculpting the identity of the Miss Lonelyhearts introduced at the beginning of the text. In addition, Miss Lonelyhearts receives assistance from his respective emotional mother and spiritual father: Betty and Christ. With their influential powers combined, they construct Miss Lonelyhearts’ moral

compass, replacing his confusion with their own images of what constitutes masculinity.

The significance of Shrike in Miss Lonelyhearts' life exists in Shrike's dual role as creator and puppetmaster: he builds Miss Lonelyhearts into the cynic met at the novel's opening, but only after he first has worn him down. Late in the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts summarizes his lack of control over himself and his thoughts when in the presence of Shrike's commanding air. Plaintively, he insists that an ill-fated party "was Shrike's idea and he did all the talking," unwittingly describing the source of his identity crisis (55). Throughout the novel, there is little about Miss Lonelyhearts that is not in some way influenced by his editor. He provided Miss L. with his column, his name, and his material. In the opening paragraph, before we are completely introduced to Miss Lonelyhearts, we are given a "prayer... printed by Shrike" (1). As Strychacz suggests, "Shrike is fully aware of his clichés and of what is truly original, but wants only to set in motion an endless series of parodies whereby clichés... are subverted by what is original... and what is original is subverted by the appropriative mode of mass culture" (175). As a metaphor, Shrike exists as a representation of the newspaper that has engulfed Miss Lonelyhearts' life. At one point Miss Lonelyhearts might have been a talented writer with a promising career, but after Shrike has taken control of his life, Miss Lonelyhearts discovers that even in speech, he "substitut[es] the rhetoric of Shrike for that of Miss Lonelyhearts" (50).

Unfortunately for Miss Lonelyhearts, the word of Shrike is not a suitable fit for anyone, and it ultimately fails when put to use. Shrike, who uses words in the form Gorak calls "hysterical outbursts... carefully scripted... to consolidate his own authority," possesses control exclusively in the working environment; at home, he is powerless to his nearly-cheating wife (47). Likewise, when Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to utilize his Shrikean speech in the outside world, he often discovers that "his tongue [becomes] a fat thumb" inhibiting his linguistic ability

(11). Veitch has described the nature of this speech as a devolution “into ‘mere’ rhetoric or afflatus that floats above and seemingly beyond the subject until it resembles the balloons of dialogue that hover over cartoon characters in a comic strip” (72). Thus, in attempting to imitate Shrike’s parodic speech, Miss Lonelyhearts is left without an outlet for meaningful discourse. His conversations with Mrs. Shrike run into impassionate circles: over dinner, she speaks of her mother’s death “leaning over a table” in perpetual pain from cancer, to which Miss Lonelyhearts can only reply an imploration for her to “sleep with me” (23). Earlier, Shrike notes that a sexual encounter with his wife “is like sleeping with a knife in one’s groin,” using a clumsy analogy to describe the very the very reason adopting Shrikehood is the route to disaster (21). Taking on Shrike’s identity is accepting his incomprehension of the healthy route of passions and implies a darker castration as the male Shrike is penetrated by the female Shrike in complete sexual reversal. Yet, Mary Shrike never allows Miss Lonelyhearts to consummate his assumed role, and instead sets him on a path to find a new character to embrace.

Though much of the novel follows Miss Lonelyhearts’ search for a suitable self, few of his options are embraced as wholeheartedly as the role of idealized fiancée projected by Betty and her desires. Coming from the disastrous party scene wherein Miss Lonelyhearts leaves Shrike’s presence in a run, the simplicity of Betty and her domestic fantasy becomes a welcome option. Upon noticing that Betty is the type of woman who “dressed for things,” Miss Lonelyhearts finds that “it [is] his mind that [is] touched” (54). From then on, he aspires to become the romantic ideal for her, dating over strawberry sodas in a setting Light has described as a “fragmentary view of the universe [that] would leave out pain and violence. With [Betty’s] belief that man’s needs are always bodily ones and his ills are easily cured by aspirin, Betty would destroy the spiritual in a man” (95). Betty’s rhetoric is the voice of magazines and

placebos, unable to confront a problem without idealistically imagining a solution. Miss Lonelyhearts berates her for her view of society's "lost" ("no morality, only medicine"), only to embrace her sunshine when his world begins to crumble (13). Betty provides the most common media tonic of the era: advertising. Rita Barnard presents the period's advertisements as followers of a uniform pattern: "they always delivered the same message: that a solution can be purchased, neatly packaged, in the form of a commodity" (191). By choosing to remain with Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts selects a route which seeks to remedy his identity crisis by ignoring it: he quits his job and plans to move away with Betty, assuming his troubles will cease to exist if he can flee far enough from them. It is this assurance that causes his world to crash when immediate fulfillment is not reached.

As appealing as Betty's happy ending might sound, it is doomed to fail by its very nature. The more critical Miss Lonelyhearts of the early scenes foreshadows this, reflecting that Betty's "world was not the world... Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily," implying a willful naïveté that does not allow reality to creep within her ideal (11). Phillip Brian Harper expands on this idea, concluding that "the shell around... Betty's world is the demarcation of an arbitrary limit that [she] impose[s] on reality, a limit that a globular reality itself would neither need nor allow" (39). Betty's fantasy of happiness built from vague specifics is a machination. Miss Lonelyhearts sees in Betty not a person with whom he wishes to share a life, but rather a "party dress" representing an ideal woman whose face is immaterial because she could be any number of anonymous women. He "beg[s] the party dress to marry him," and it is with this dress that he plans to build his first family home (56). There is no identity in this role; Miss Lonelyhearts wants only to become "what the party dress want[s] him to be" (56). Unfortunately, the party dress is an interchangeable figure, and abstractions cannot desire the

concrete. The wish to fulfill Betty's ending thusly suits him no better than his role as mini-Shrike. He can play the romantic lead, but it still is not the role of Miss Lonelyhearts' essence. It is within not long after that Miss Lonelyhearts finds himself faced with Peter Doyle's intention to murder him, and Miss Lonelyhearts' identity crisis reaches its head.

Curiously though, despite the implications of death that end the novel, no actual violence takes place. The instruments of death are all properly assembled: jilted husband, concealed weapon, gunshot, innocent bystander, the act of falling; yet, none of the images are connected enough to more than hint at a bloody climax. Strychacz presents this as an homage to the American "'slam ending,' in which the [comic] strip concludes with a blow dealt by one character to another" (178). He suggests the possible reading that Miss Lonelyhearts' "falling is unrelated to the gun... and that therefore Miss Lonelyhearts will rise like Krazy Kat from his latest 'beating' to suffer still more comic violence" (178). This possibility is reinforced by the ending of the *Miss Lonelyhearts and the Clean Old Man* segment, which concludes with the statement that "somebody hit Miss Lonelyhearts from behind with a chair" (18). If any injury was sustained by the incident, the reader is not informed, nor is the incident ever mentioned again. The ending may well prove to be the "shaggy-dog story" Roger D. Abrahams fears, "which seems to drive toward something, only to be exposed as pointless, frustrated action" (22). Yet, one could optimistically infer that a death does indeed take place – simply not the death West would lead his audience to believe. The novel concludes on inconclusion, which only directly implies that the story of Miss Lonelyhearts has come to an end. This says nothing of Thomas Matlock, the legal name for Miss Lonelyhearts that appears in West's early drafts (Madden 204). Perhaps the ambiguous ending is not quite the death of Miss Lonelyhearts as a person, but rather the death of Miss Lonelyhearts as a persona and a rejection of the

misgendering hoisted upon him by men who provided no emotional fulfillment. By the concluding pages, Miss Lonelyhearts has quit his job and is slated to move out of state. Peter Doyle, bearing a gun wrapped in newspaper, represents the last tie Miss Lonelyhearts bears to the moniker. After the shot has been fired, there can be no continuation for a Miss Lonelyhearts with no column and no readers.

Whether West's Miss Lonelyhearts ends with a funeral, an inappropriate laugh, or a gender-questioning Thomas, it still manages to function as an engaging text dealing with the frustrating search for personal identity in an environment which desires to force individuals under a stereotyped blanket. Characters strive to discover a reason for existence, and are continually disappointed by the results they find. Though this spiritual emptiness is a common theme of West's characters, it is too easy to conclude, as Ralph Russell stresses, that "the chief characters are either boldly drawn or lightly sketched – in the flat, though, not the round" (88). Russell's oversimplification is emblematic of the role religion plays in Westian fiction, and misunderstands the greater tragedy of people, not only characters, who struggle through their half-sketched natures. Miss Lonelyhearts' column is a pale imitation of a feminine identity because the man writing it is a pale imitation of everything he has tried to become. He spends the length of this short work striving to discover himself, but the self never becomes apparent. Instead, Miss Lonelyhearts is only ever the Miss Lonelyhearts of the opening sequence, who witnesses the world and its suffering but can never come to terms with his relation to it. He fails at taking the role of cynic and husband, with the only alternative option remaining as victim. The reader is led to believe Miss Lonelyhearts dies rather than concoct an original personality for himself, creating the far larger tragedy of an anonymous man who perishes as a direct result of his journey for self-identity.

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