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# Precarious Positions of Femininity in Contemporary Literature: A College Course Creation

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**Precarious Positions of Femininity in Contemporary  
Literature: A College Course Creation**

Created by Ireland E. Atkinson

Thesis Chair: Dr. Todd Kuchta  
Committee Member: Dr. Lisa Minnick



## **ENGL 2070: Topics in Literature**

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Spring 2017 | TR 2:00-3:15pm | Instructor: Ireland Atkinson |  
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3:00-4:30pm | Phone: (586)-258-9908

### **Course Description**

#### **Precarious Positions of Femininity in Contemporary Literature**

With the title of “Precarious Positions of Femininity,” this class will require students to delve into the difficult, if not impossible, position women find themselves in as a minority group that ironically constitutes half of the population. The class will explore topics such as women existing in the public versus private sphere, aging and beauty, female professionalism in the literary world, sexual assault, intersectionality, homosexuality, and the taboo of female desire. Thus, “Precarious positions” denotes the complex world women inhabit full of ironies, hypocrisies, and impossibilities.

On the surface level, this course functions as an introduction to collegiate-level analysis of and writing about literary works over many genres: poetry, drama, and prose. In an interdisciplinary format, students will explore feminine themes, perspectives, and authors to tell a story about inequality and intersectionality with these goals in mind.

In a unique niche, this course will focus on contemporary American literature by female authors. Through a synthesis of media and text, students will analyze creative choices while exploring the history, authorial intent, and analysis-rich text with the aim of not only composing insightful, succinct papers on these works, but also to gain a better understanding of a point of view rarely presented in other courses or outlets. This class, therefore, is designed to prepare students for both future literature courses and for the embodiment of a well-informed individual outside of the classroom. The course will be predominantly discussion-based, broken up by occasional lectures on the author or the historical context. Therefore, students are expected and encouraged to participate in the discussions and must be prepared to do so every class period, a task necessitating that the reading is not only done, but understood. That being said, I will be available for any questions through office hours, email, or scheduled appointments.

## Course Goals

At the completion of this course, students should be able to...

- Interpret and analyze introductory collegiate-level literature in the form of poetry, prose fiction, and drama
- Compose critical and analytical essays developed with skill, creativity, and consideration
- Incorporate both primary and secondary sources, logically and cohesively, into written works
- Formulate original arguments grounded in textual evidence
- Recognize basic literary terms and be able to employ them correctly
- Gain an understanding of the intersectional, precarious female position in the modern United States
- Feel comfortable discussing literature and mature themes with a group
- Cite correctly in MLA format

## Content Warning

This course will explore issues of femininity from many perspectives, several of which will involve gender disparities; intense sexuality and language; depictions of homosexuality, homophobia, and racism; inequality and discrimination; the definition and presence of privilege; and many other heavy topics relating to women's social roles and positions using both literary and real world examples. Through the exploration of these themes, the course will encourage discussion and (polite, considerate) debate. These are considered mature themes; so if you do not think you will feel comfortable discussing them openly in a classroom setting, please consider selecting a different English course to pursue this semester. I would be happy to recommend one to you. ☺

## Required Reading

- "Mirror," "Lady Lazarus," and an excerpt from *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath (handouts)
- "In the Combat Zone" by Leslie Marmon Silko (handout)
- *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood
- *Ain't I A Woman* by Bell Hooks
- "Real Women Have Curves" by Josefina Lopez
- *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith

## **Grading Scale**

A	93-100
BA	87-92
B	81-86
CB	77-80
C	71-76
DC	67-70
D	60-66
E	0-59

## **Assignments**

Attendance & Participation	10%
Quizzes	10%
Online Responses	20%
Paper	15%
Midterm	20%
Final Paper	25%

## **Classroom Policies**

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### **Attendance**

Attendance will be taken every class period and will constitute 10% of the final grade received. This also entails being punctual, so leaving early or being late more than two times will be considered an absence. This behavior is disruptive to the class and is highly discouraged. If a student has a legitimate reason to leave class early or arrive late, that student is responsible for bringing it to my attention. Regular tardiness will be detrimental to the final grade. While regular attendance is necessary, I understand that there are situations beyond a student's control that may cause him/her to miss class. Thus, students will be allowed three absences. Please designate these absences for religious observances, potential illnesses, vacations, etc., as four or more absences will result in the lowering of the final grade received by one letter grade per additional absence. If there are extenuating circumstances that will require a student to be absent more than the allotted three times, that student is responsible for bringing this to my attention and taking any of the necessary steps to prove the legitimacy of this absence.

## **Technology**

While technology such as laptops and tablets may be allowed for note-taking and online readings, any inappropriate use of technology during class time is prohibited. This includes perusal of social media sites, surfing the web, doing homework for other classes, checking email, etc. If it is discovered that students are abusing their technology privileges, there will be no more use of such devices for the rest of the semester for that individual. Cell phones are to be turned down and put away. Please refrain from texting during class, as it is both distracting and impolite.

## **Academic Honesty**

As this is a collegiate-level English course, students are expected to write their own work and to understand what constitutes as academic dishonesty and misconduct. The prohibited behaviors that pertain to Academic Honesty as dictated by the University are as follows: cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple submission, plagiarism, complicity, and computer misuse. If there is any confusion, please refer to <http://libguides.wmich.edu/plagiarism> for tutorials and explanations. While I am also available to clarify any issues involving proper citations and references, this should all take place *before* submission of an assignment. In the event that a student is suspected to have plagiarized work or participated in any other prohibited behavior, this student will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and will receive a failing grade for the course if found guilty.

## **Disability Statement**

If a student believes that he/she has a disability and may require special accommodations, please get the disability documented with the university through The Office of Disability Services for Students. From there, I will be more than happy to make any of the necessary accommodations. For more information go to [www.wmich.edu/disabilityservices/](http://www.wmich.edu/disabilityservices/).

## **Sexual Assault Policy**

Due to Western's policy, if a student confides in most faculty members about an instance of sexual misconduct (including, but not limited to, stalking, exploitation, assault, and molestation), that faculty member is obligated to relay this information to campus investigators. Thus, if a student does not want an investigation to take place, this student should pursue other outlets like the YWCA crisis line at (269) 385-3587 or FIRE on campus to speak to educated and trained peers without forced intervention.

## Course Schedule

<u>Class Period</u>	<u>Reading &amp; Discussion</u>	<u>Assignment Due</u>
Week 1 Day 1	Introduction	
Week 1 Day 2	“Mirror” and “Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath	
Week 2 Day 1	Excerpt from <i>The Bell Jar</i> by Sylvia Plath	Online Response 1
Week 2 Day 2	“In the Combat Zone” by Leslie Marmon Silko	
Week 3 Day 1	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 1-5	
Week 3 Day 2	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 6-10	Online Response 2
Week 4 Day 1	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 11-20	
Week 4 Day 2	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 21-30	
Week 5 Day 1	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 31-37	
Week 5 Day 2	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 38-46	Online Response 3
Week 6 Day 1	<i>Ain’t I A Woman</i> by Bell Hooks pgs. 1-50	

Week 6 Day 2	<i>Ain't I A Woman</i> by Bell Hooks pgs. 51-100	
Week 7 Day 1	<i>Ain't I A Woman</i> by Bell Hooks pgs. 101- 170	
Week 7 Day 2	<i>Ain't I A Woman</i> by Bell Hooks pgs. 171- 220	Online Response 4
Week 8 Day 1	SPRING BREAK	
Week 8 Day 2	SPRING BREAK	
Week 9 Day 1	In-Class Midterm Exam	
Week 9 Day 2	<i>Real Women Have Curves</i> by Josefina Lopez	
Week 10 Day 1	LGBTQ+ Introduction (Terms, History, and the Media)	Paper 1 Submission via Dropbox on Elearning
Week 10 Day 2	<i>The Price of Salt</i> by Patricia Highsmith	
Week 11 Day 1	<i>The Price of Salt</i> by Patricia Highsmith	
Week 11 Day 2	<i>The Price of Salt</i> by Patricia Highsmith	
Week 12 Day 1	<i>The Price of Salt</i> by Patricia Highsmith	
Week 12 Day 2	Begin showing <i>Carol</i>	



Week 13 Day 1	Finish showing <i>Carol</i>	
Week 13 Day 2	Paper Conferences as Scheduled	Online Response 5
Week 14 Day 1	Paper Conferences as Scheduled	
Week 14 Day 2	Student Workshops	
Week 15	Final Exam Week	Final Essays due via Dropbox on Elearning

## Course Schedule (My copy)

<u>Class Period</u>	<u>Reading &amp; Discussion</u>	<u>Assignment Due</u>
Week 1 Day 1	Introduction	
Week 1 Day 2	“Mirror” and “Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath	
Week 2 Day 1	<b>Aging and Beauty Standards</b> Excerpt from <i>The Bell Jar</i> by Sylvia Plath	Online Response 1
Week 2 Day 2	<b>Female Authorship, Pseudonyms, and Professional Struggles</b> “In the Combat Zone” by Leslie Marmon Silko	
Week 3 Day 1	<b>Public versus Private Spheres—Gender Roles</b> <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 1-5	
Week 3 Day 2	<b>Introduce the novel’s terms, discuss the use of flashbacks</b> <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 6-10	Online Response 2
Week 4 Day 1	<b>Religion and Sex</b> <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 11-20	

Week 4 Day 1	<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 11-20	
Week 4 Day 2	<b>Rape Culture</b> <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 21-30	
Week 5 Day 1	<b>The Role of Government, Personal "Freedoms"</b> <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 31-37	
Week 5 Day 2	<b>Show Clips of TV show</b> <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood CH 38-46	Online Response 3
Week 6 Day 1	<b>Conclude discussion, introduce the next novel</b> <i>Ain't I A Woman</i> by Bell Hooks pgs. 1-50	
Week 6 Day 2	<b>Slavery, systematic rascism, and Black Feminism</b> <i>Ain't I A Woman</i> by Bell Hooks pgs. 51-100	
Week 7 Day 1	<b>Intersectionality</b> <i>Ain't I A Woman</i> by Bell Hooks pgs. 101-170	
	<b>Problematic depictions of black women in the media</b> <i>Ain't I A Woman</i> by Bell	

Week 8 Day 1            SPRING BREAK

Week 8 Day 2            SPRING BREAK

Week 9 Day 1            In-Class Midterm Exam

Week 9 Day 2            *Real Women Have Curves*  
by Josefina Lopez

Week 10 Day 1            Immigration and working  
women, Latinas

Week 10 Day 2            LGBTQ+ Introduction  
(Terms, History, and the  
Media)

Paper 1 Submission via  
Dropbox on Elearning

Week 10 Day 2            Conference Sign-ups  
*The Price of Salt* by  
Patricia Highsmith

Week 11 Day 1            Taboo of female body and  
sexuality

Week 11 Day 1            *The Price of Salt* by  
Patricia Highsmith

Week 11 Day 2            Make sure everyone has  
signed up for a conference  
time

Week 11 Day 2            Slut shaming  
*The Price of Salt* by  
Patricia Highsmith

Week 12 Day 1            Sexual double standards  
*The Price of Salt* by  
Patricia Highsmith

Lesbianism and Fetishizing

Week 12 Day 2	Begin showing <i>Carol</i>	
Week 13 Day 1	Finish showing <i>Carol</i>	
	Discuss differences and go over final exam	
	Remind them about conferences and tell them about Online Response 6	
Week 13 Day 2	Paper Conferences as Scheduled	Online Response 5
	Remind them to bring paper copy of rough draft to workshop	
Week 14 Day 1	Paper Conferences as Scheduled	
	Remind them to bring paper copy of rough draft to workshop	
Week 14 Day 2	Student Workshops	
Week 15	Final Exam Week	Online Response 6
		Final Essays due via Dropbox on Elearning

# Assignments

## Online Response Prompts

(Worth 20% of final grade)

These prompts will be on Elearning and must be submitted online by noon the day of the class period on which they are due. Your response should be approximately 300 words in length with proper spelling and grammar.

- 1.) *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and “In The Combat Zone” by Leslie Marmon Silko both explore the difficulty and potential danger of women’s position in the public sphere. Furthermore, both titles function as the primary metaphor for this predicament; a bell jar is a protective glass cover for delicate objects or can be used to describe an environment in which someone is protected or cut off from the outside world, while the combat zone is meant to be representative of the dangers of the public. Silko draws comparisons between veterans walking through a combat zone and women walking down the street—each scenario is full of potential predators and enemies. Which metaphor do you think is the best supported and/or most persuasive between the bell jar and the combat zone in regards to women’s precarious position in a male-dominated society? Use text to support your answer.
- 2.) Focusing on the first ten chapters of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, select one instance where the author interjects a flashback into the narrative and explore why she chooses to tell the story in this way. Use text to support your answer.
- 3.) Review the text passages portrayed by the video clips of the television show “The Handmaid’s Tale” (links available on elearning). Select one clip and the corresponding passage. What are the most salient differences? Why might the TV show have chosen to alter the story in this way? How does this affect the scene and the consequent message about women’s position in the public sphere?

- 4.) Define Intersectionality in your own words, and select a passage/example from *Ain't I A Woman* by Bell Hooks that demonstrates this definition.
- 5.) Compare the movie *Carol* to the novel *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith. Explore one or two of the creative differences present and their possible functions. Do these differences have an affect on the portrayal of female sexuality and lesbianism? Why might creative directors have chosen these changes if they do alter the message that was conveyed by the novel?
- 6.) (This will function as an option to replace the lowest scored response—the students will not know that this option exists until the last few weeks of the course) Look back on your response #3 and compare it to your response #5. How have you grown as a literary critic? What areas do you still need to hone?

### **Paper Assignment**

(Worth 15% of final grade)

This assignment is meant to expose students to the value and import of finding and using secondary sources. In doing so, you should gain a more comprehensive understanding of the primary work, as well as knowledge of the way the primary work (or topic) was received outside of the classroom in the academic sphere. The paper should logically and perceptively use **both** the primary and secondary sources to cohesively support an original argument. To help ensure that the source is a *scholarly* source, use the online databases on the library's website to find either a piece of literary criticism specifically discussing *Ain't I A Woman* by Bell Hooks **or** a scholarly article about intersectionality that you can apply to the novel yourself. That being said, *Ain't I A Woman* by Bell Hooks will function as the primary text for this essay, while you will be responsible for finding the secondary source on your own.

The argument you present can...

- Contend with the argument of the secondary source
  - Either create a thesis that directly counters that of the secondary source or select several claims from the secondary source and dispute them

- Contribute additional support for *and further analysis* of the secondary source's argument
- Construct a thesis independent of the secondary source's argument but still use the source as support for the original argument you create
  - If you choose this option, please verify your thesis with me before moving forward

This paper should:

- Be in proper MLA format
- Be approximately 4-6 pages long
- Contain proper grammar and spelling
- Be submitted via Dropbox on Elearning
- Present a sophisticated, thoughtful argument that integrates the secondary author's claims with your own

### **Midterm (In Class Essays)**

(Worth 20% of final grade)

Pick two of the three prompts below and respond accordingly, paraphrasing and citing specific examples when possible. Spelling and grammar will affect your grade.

- 1.) Compare the two poems by Sylvia Plath we discussed early in the semester: "Mirror" and "Lady Lazarus." Explore the ways in which both poems deal with the topic of beauty and aging; and more specifically, identify how Plath depicts aging as a woman as a singularly difficult, unique experience.
- 2.) In her short story "In the Combat Zone," Leslie Marmon Silko asserts that existing as a woman in the public sphere is much like living in a combat zone. Critique her argument, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. What are your recommendations to strengthen these weaknesses?



- 3.) Both novels we read (*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Ain't I A Woman* by Bell Hooks) function as a criticism of the society and consequent constructs they are responding to. What do you perceive to be the basis of that criticism in each novel? In other words, what is most important societal construct that each author is critiquing? Cite examples that support this theory.

### **Final Exam**

(Worth 25% of final grade)

This paper should demonstrate the growth you have made in your ability to formulate an argument, critically think about a piece of literature (its intention and position—considering social climate), and competently find and use secondary sources. Like the first paper, this assignment is aimed at honing your skills as a literary critic; however, you are expected to be more creative and independent in this essay. Success on this assignment relies on your ability to formulate a unique, perceptive argument that employs examples from both the primary and secondary texts to support an original, arguable thesis. Please note that unlike the first paper, you cannot merely support or dispute the secondary author's argument—your argument should be original and should not copy the claims of the others. You may choose either *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood or *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith as your primary source.

This paper should:

- Be approximately 5-7 pages long
- Be in proper MLA format
- Contain proper spelling and grammar
- Be submitted via Dropbox on Elearning by the start of the scheduled final exam time for this class period
- Present a cohesive, articulate argument that integrates relevant evidence from both the secondary and primary sources in order to support an original thesis

## Teaching Philosophy Statement

Though I do not have any actual teaching experience, through my own personal life, college experience, and extracurriculars, I have gained some insight into the type of pedagogy I plan to employ. Drawing on these past experiences and observations to construct courses centered around student growth, being unafraid to ask for help and advice from those more experienced than I, being forthright with both myself and my students about course goals and expectations, and fostering creative and original thought and discussion are the main ways that I intend to be successful in the classroom.

The main wealth of experience I plan to draw upon is my own experiences in nontraditional teaching outlets and classroom observations. As the oldest of six siblings and a babysitter and tutor for my small neighborhood, I have been influencing and shaping minds almost my entire life. This experience was very useful when I joined the Bronco Buddies organization through the Lee Honors College, a program designed to encourage 6<sup>th</sup> grade students to attend college through pen pal relationships with Western Michigan honors students. Through this program, I became privy to the importance of encouragement and cultivation at early stages of learning. I believe these tactics are directly transmittable to a course like “Precarious Positions of Femininity,” as an introductory literature course should operate similarly in terms of encouraging future scholarship and cultivating universally applicable close reading skills. Employing these same tactics in a classroom setting, I imagine myself stressing the importance of the applicability of an English degree and the skills it fosters, and also, helping my students explore the possibilities and opportunities of life after graduation.

That being said, unfortunately, very few of my professors ever discussed life outside of the classroom or emphasized professional skills and insights. Because of this observation, I will make it a point to express the versatility of an English degree as well as make my own experience a resource for students who desire it in an effort to prepare them in a way that I was not. This lack of information led to difficulty considering and applying to graduate schools, as it is hard to appraise something when you have no idea what gives it value or what you should be looking for. While I was fortunate enough to find a mentor to answer my questions, I wish I would have started my graduate school journey earlier, as I did know I wanted to apply much earlier than I started looking into it, but I did not realize the extensive amounts of time and effort that would go into this endeavor. Thus, I intend to openly explore life after graduation with my students, being sure to inform them of their options as well as the time frames in which these options should be completed. Additionally, I plan to make myself available to students for questions regarding graduate options and make it known that I am open to these inquiries. While I am sure many professors would have been more than willing to discuss these topics with me, none of them made it a point to mention this serious aspect of the undergraduate experience, and in this way, I plan to set myself apart. All that being said, while I will convey that I am willing to go over graduate plans and to discuss them at length, my classes themselves will not be dominated by these conversations, as they will occur primarily during office hours or over email.

Another observation that I intend to draw upon in my future teaching is that literature does not exist in a vacuum, and to teach it as such effectively takes the humanity out of the humanities. Thus, it is crucial to include not only information about

the author, but also about the culture and social context in which the piece was written. This became salient in Dr. Todd Kuchta's British Literature II class in which he fully fleshed out the social climate, authors' lives, and the way in which these works fit into the greater picture of the literary movement to which they belong. In this way, I was able to understand layers of meaning and authorial intent that likely would have been lost to me had I not known what the author was writing in response to. Knowledge of the bigger picture also is beneficial in relating works and authors to one another and understanding the greater fabric of literary movements. This is especially relevant for interdisciplinary work like the course I am creating or any other course connecting literature to history, culture, etc. Because of this, I intend to teach in the same way.

Additionally, this thesis project has shown me the importance of being comfortable asking for help in order to be a successful, effective professor. Talking to Keli Masten, Dr. Todd Kuchta, and Dr. Lisa Minnick has given me a substantial foundation for my own philosophy. After meeting with doctoral student Keli Masten, I learned about teaching while still a student. We discussed the importance of staying extremely organized as I learn how to balance teaching and my own course load, she warned me about staying stern and being true to my class policies, and explored tips for establishing a respectful authority as someone who is not much older than the students I will be teaching. Moreover, Dr. Todd Kuchta went through all of my thesis materials and taught me about constructing effective materials that create the basis for your entire semester. From him I have also learned about how to engage students in a topic as well as how to logistically organize a course, creating my own narrative behind the text and topic choices and trajectories. Additionally, Dr. Lisa Minnick taught me how to build a

comfortable, welcoming environment for discussion of difficult topics and how to deal with opinions that contrast with my own. While the insights that I gained from these individuals has its own merit in constructing courses, the knowledge, comfort, and professional relationships I gained by asking for help is something that I will carry with me into my professional career.

Furthermore, a pivotal part of my philosophy revolves around being honest with both myself and with my students about course goals and expectations. One of the biggest challenges in designing this course was being realistic with what the students could feasibly do in a semester's time. While I would have loved for them to read more texts, to write longer papers, and discuss topics more extensively, it would not be practical, or even possible, to do so. In order to effectively and comprehensively go over the materials, there needs to be a feasible number of required readings. Additionally, if I expect students to do the work and to do it well, I need to not only give them a reasonable assignment that they have the time and the skill set to compete, but also, I need to be clear and honest about what I am expecting out of their assignments. No one benefits from hidden agendas in the classroom. Simply hoping that students will pick up on something or understand the underlying meaning of an assignment is unfair and unwise.

Similarly, in order to foster creative discussions, honesty is a necessity. Too many times I have had instructors who have a secret answer hidden in their questions, which are all designed to lead you to the same conclusion. One of my favorite aspects of literary study is the ability and expectation of free thinking and creative pursuit. I hope to learn from my students' insights and gain perspectives I would not otherwise have seen. In fact, I aim to lead discussions in such a way that I do very little of the talking. While I am

aware that this is much easier said than done, I have seen my best professors accomplish this task, and I have boiled it down to three main approaches. First, the reading needs to be interesting, and while I cannot guarantee that everyone will enjoy the same things, being transparent in the course description and introduction allows students to determine whether or not the class and its readings will be of interest to them. Second, instructors should avoid asking questions with only one correct response. Students can typically ascertain when there is a specific answer in mind and will do their best at reading the instructor for clues to the answer instead of developing their own original thoughts based on the text. Third, use interesting prompts and topics that will get people talking. One way I have seen this done is through the use of student online responses, which the professor has due before class. The professor is then able to read these responses and use them to facilitate that class's discussion. I have modeled my own course in this same fashion in order to use the students' own questions, ideas, and theories to encourage discussion. I have seen this work well in my own courses and hope to implement it in classes I teach in the future as well as in my thesis.

Though I do not have any real teaching experience, I feel confident in the examples I have seen thus far. I have encountered and learned from numerous decorated faculty members and even Keli Masten, an award-winning doctoral student teacher. Using my own observations and nontraditional teaching experiences, being unafraid to ask questions of those with more experience than I, being honest with myself and my students about class goals and expectations, and fostering creative and original thought are the primary ways in which I see myself being successful in the classroom, and I look

forward to beginning my teaching career with these examples in mind and this thesis experience in hand.

## Honors Thesis Reflective Paper

As my thesis work draws to a close, and I am left reflecting on this process, I am struck by the collective nature of this endeavor. This thesis project has been influenced and encouraged by many other people aside from myself. Dr. Jane Baas encouraged my desire to do a creative thesis; Dr. Kuchta walked me through the logistical side of a course creation and provided me with tips and tricks I will bring with me into my professional career; doctoral student Keli Masten provided me with insight into teaching as a student yourself and the ways to stay organized; and Dr. Lisa Minnick sparked the idea to do a creative presentation and inspired me to pursue an interdisciplinary format. Though the thesis started with my own ideas, it flourished and came to be because of the advice and guidance I received while working on it.

That being said, it began with some encouragement from Jane Baas. The word or task of *thesis* had always taken form in the shape of a paper in my mind. However, I write a lot of papers, and very few of them have had any real, significant impact on me. Many, if not most, were hastened away with a looming deadline and forgotten as quickly as the grade was administered. As an English major, I write many, and as an honors English major, many of them are quite good. However, I thought that my honors thesis should do more than accomplish the task of helping me reach my graduation requirements. Interim

Dean Jane Baas explained to me that I should not think about the thesis as a final test, as something that the Honors College was using to evaluate me. Faculty do not want me to look at it in this way because that is not how *they* look at the honors thesis requirement. Instead, it is meant to provide the students with an outlet to demonstrate their own growth, to push themselves to create something they did not realize possible, and to network with professional individuals in their area of study. The thesis should be an exploration of the self at best, and simply professionally worthwhile at worst, and I knew I had to look beyond the format of a research or critical essay to reach these aspirations.

It was with this in mind that I began to consider the idea of undertaking a creative thesis instead, which ultimately took the form of the creation of a collegiate level course that I would enjoy teaching. This task would allow me to flex creative muscles unexercised in my normal scholarship, and aspiring to eventually be an English professor, this seemed like the perfect coalescence between intellectually stimulating and professionally relevant. After learning that a similar format was in place for education majors regarding their theses, I sprang into action to make my plan a reality.

Moving forward, I began to work very closely with a faculty member I greatly admire, Dr. Todd Kuchta, to learn invaluable tips and tricks of the trade. Reflectively, I could have chosen a thesis chair with more experience in the interdisciplinary field of gender studies and contemporary women's literature, but what I was looking for from him was precisely what I got—insight into being a successful, effective professor. I already knew the topics I wanted to focus on, so the real obstacle was in understanding the logistical side of creating a course, and not just any course, but a challenging class that both entertains and pushes students. I have been fortunate enough to have three



courses instructed by Dr. Kuchta, but I learned things through this thesis creation that I never would have otherwise.

Prior to undertaking this project, I did not understand the forethought, time, and dedication that this thesis would take, and this insight is one of the most important things I learned through this thesis project. With the help of my thesis chair, my thesis materials (the syllabus, schedule, assignments, etc.) underwent numerous revisions and edits before they were ready for submission; and through these edits, I learned a lot about the logistical side of course creation. For example, I learned that a course description is, in a way, a sales pitch. Dr. Kuchta gave me a piece of advice that opened my eyes to the enrollment side of teaching; he warned me against writing the description under the assumption that those reading it are already signed on and interested in the course. Instead, the course description should entice and lure potential students. It should engage their curiosity and compel them to either sign up for the course or remain in it after they have already done so. This insight was one of many that I gained over the course of the last year through my work with the wonderful faculty at this University, and more specifically, in the English Department.

Once I discerned that I wanted to do an interdisciplinary course built around feminine themes and perspectives, Dr. Kuchta and I realized that the course most similar to the one I would be teaching is ENGL 2070: Topics in Literature, so I organized a meeting with a current instructor of the course, doctoral student Keli Masten, to discuss her own experiences in order to gain an insight into what my plans should entail. From her, I got the idea that I should make two schedules: one for the students and one in-depth one for myself as a form of organization. This additional, in-depth schedule gave me a

space to dictate the exact topics we would be discussing, create reminders for myself about logistical things like handing out papers or having students sign up for conferences, and was one of the main ways that Keli advised me to stay organized while teaching and pursuing my own scholarship. Though it was not something that I could make for this thesis, she also advised that I have a spreadsheet of students' names with notes in order to help with attendance and participation points at the end of the semester. Furthermore, we discussed being an authoritative presence in the classroom as a young instructor, as well as the importance of planning and organization as a new instructor. Keli also offered to assist me at any point through my thesis work or future professional endeavors, demonstrating the ways in which this thesis journey also built and strengthened my budding relationships with assets at the university—individuals who I feel confident I could go to with questions as I stay on to do my graduate work here.

Moreover, I was under advisement from Dr. Lisa Minnick who helped me with the presentation side of my thesis. Because I chose a unique topic, Dr. Minnick wanted to see that same peculiarity be a part of my presentation as well, so we knew we could not do a simple PowerPoint demonstration. With Dr. Minnick's encouragement, I decided to do something fairly unusual: to present my thesis like the first day of my course with the audience members and judges as my students. I divided my presentation into two main sections: Class Is In-Session and Meta-Thesis. In this way, I was able to creatively get the audience interested and also talk about my thesis and what I learned. The creative portion was the most nerve-wracking; however, I am very happy that I went through with it, as it is essentially the way in which I will be talking to my own students on my first day. Because I am already nervous about being assertive enough and establishing authority

among students who are essentially my own age, being very comfortable on the first day is a necessity for me. By presenting my thesis in this way, I was able to ease some of that anxiety. This presentation also demonstrated the need for organization. Though I did not have to look at my outline much, the extensive amount of time I spent considering what I wanted to talk about and organizing it into an outline made it much easier for me to talk comfortably without needing to read off of the actual piece of paper the entire time. This preparedness was also beneficial for me in answering the judges' questions. Each judge had interesting, pointed questions to ask about my thesis that I feel I was able to competently respond to because of how much time I spent just thinking about this project.

While working with these professionals has enlightened me in so many ways, the process of simply doing this thesis project has also educated me. I learned a lot about the time and thought that goes into creating a course, about the difficulty of text selection, and the need to be realistic about how much time you actually have in a semester. I also learned about the texts themselves, as many of them were works I had not read prior, and I was able to discuss those in a way by including the major discussion topics in my version of the schedule. However, I also learned quite a bit about myself through this journey. Based on the choices I made surrounding my course, I learned what I prioritized and how I imagined the classroom. This gleaning made it much simpler to write a teaching philosophy because I could see (in a semi-concrete fashion) exactly what I wanted to be doing in the classroom. Because I had to write a teaching statement in the fall for my graduate applications, I was able to compare my progress from that one to the one I wrote for this thesis. I was honestly amazed at how much more detailed and specific

the latter one was. Though I did not teach at all in this project, I was able to understand what that will look like one day, and that was a very interesting realization.

The main thing that I have taken away from this project, however, is the relevance of its topic. Working on this through a tumultuous political interchange has made the topics of women's safety, health care, and overall rights that much more prevalent. While not an overtly political class, I realize that students will be tempted to use modern examples to facilitate discussion and to argue for or against certain texts, and this project has forced me to consider how I will handle those conversations. Refraining from discussing politics myself even now, I will say, however, that this course's reading materials have strengthened by own beliefs and values, and opened my eyes to how many different precarious positions all of the different embodiments of femininity can create.

Overall, I wanted my thesis to do more than check a box on a graduate requirement checklist, and it certainly did. This thesis made me set goals and exceed my own expectations. It exists as a celebration, not an examination, of my progress and growth as a thinker and a literary scholar, one that I can refer to and draw upon as I begin teaching in the fall. My thesis journey put me in touch with several individuals who proved to be integral to this process and provided insight and relationships that will carry into the professional world. It also gave me the opportunity to learn about the field I am going into and to tackle an aspect of the job currently unavailable to me. This thesis allowed me to see the side of being a university professor that a student typically is blind to: all of the other difficult, marvelous aspects of the job that do not directly involve teaching.

