Lesbian Literature in America in the Twentieth Century: A Syllabus

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

Literature by Lesbians is often omitted or overlooked by many survey courses, including those found in many Women and Gender Studies programs. This syllabus explores the progression of Lesbian literature and cultures as they are found in twentieth-century American society and provides a resource for future colloquiums dealing with these subjects. The selections, which are organized chronologically, were chosen specifically to expose students to a range of literary genres and Lesbian issues. Included are discussion questions and project guidelines which are intended to promote student involvement in the readings and subjects.

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A special thanks goes to my sister Courtney for her help in keeping me on task and her praise when the work was finally done. Finally, I need to offer heartfelt thanks to my parents for not preaching “tolerance” of homosexuality, but rather teaching intolerance of ignorance in whatever form it exists.
Lesbian Literature

Course Objectives:

The colloquium will survey twentieth century American fictional works written by and about Lesbians. The focus of study will be on Lesbian cultures and perspectives as they are presented in the readings. Moving chronologically through the century, the works include both mainstream classics and lesser-known pieces of literature in order to demonstrate fully the changes which have occurred in the Lesbian community, as reflected in a rich and varied literary tradition. Students will be encouraged to examine issues -- historical and current, personal and public -- which Lesbians have had to face. The reading and writing assignments will foster critical inquiry and deepen understanding of the literature while broadening the perspectives from which students view Lesbians and Lesbianism.

Required Texts:

Hiatt packet

Grading and Attendance Policy:

Grade will be based on a possible 200 points (180+ is an A, 160-179 is a B, etc.). The midterm and final are each worth 50 points; the project is worth 100 points (see separate sheet). Five extra credit readings will be offered at 5 points each. A one page typed review will be required for students to receive the extra points. Attendance is essential to attain the full benefit of the instruction offered; therefore, any absence in excess of three will be penalized as per Ball State University Undergraduate Handbook rules.
WEEK #1: Welcome to the Wonderful World of Lesbian Literature!

Day 1 -- Introduction to course, explanation of course content, goals, etc.
Day 2 -- Willa Cather, “Tommy, the Unsentimental.”
(Optional reading: Linnea Stenson, “From Isolation to Diversity: Self and Communities in Twentieth-Century Lesbian Novels.”)

WEEK #2: Closets and Other Secret Places


WEEK #3: The Thirties

Day 1 -- Gale Wilhelm, We Too Are Drifting.
Day 2 -- Djuna Barnes, “Nightwatch,” from Nightwood.

WEEK #4: The Forties

Day 1 -- Sarah Dreher, Hollandia ’45.
Day 2 -- Guest Speaker
(Optional reading: Kate Adams, “Making the World Safe for the Missionary Position: Images of the Lesbian in Post-WW II America.”)

WEEK #5: The Fifties

Day 1 -- Claire Morgan, The Price of Salt (1st 1/3)
Day 2 -- 2nd 1/3 of Salt.

WEEK #6: Cruising the Bookstores

Day 1 -- Final 1/3 of Salt.
Day 2 -- Ann Bannon, excerpt from Beebo Brinker; watch “Forbidden Love.”
(Optional reading: Lee Lynch, “Cruising the Libraries”)

WEEK #7: Love in the Time of the Cleavers

Day 1 -- finish “Forbidden Love.”
Day 2 -- Jane Rule, Desert of the Heart (1st 1/3)

WEEK #8: Deserters

Day 1 -- 2nd 1/3 of Desert . . .
Day 2 -- finish Desert . . .
(Optional reading: Gillian Spraggs, “Hell and the Mirror: A Reading of Desert of the Heart.”)

WEEK #9: Riding the Wave

Day 1 -- MIDTERM; proposals for projects due.
WEEK #10: From the Desert to the Jungle
   Day 1 -- Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (first half).
   Day 2 -- finish *Rubyfruit* . . .

WEEK #11: Motherhood and Lesbians
   Day 1 -- Sima Rabinowitz, "Lullaby;" Lorde, "Now That I Am Forever With Child," "Black Mother Woman."
   Day 2 -- Beth Brant, "A Long Story."

WEEK #12: Types and Stereotypes
   Day 1 -- Lee Lynch, "Stone Butch;" Barbara Ruth, "Playing Roles;"
   Christine Cassidy, "Walt Whitman: A Model Femme;" Cheryl Clarke, "Of Althea and Flaxie."
   Day 2 -- Audre Lorde, excerpt from *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.*
   (Optional reading: Barbara Smith, "The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980's")

WEEK #13: Bashing . . . and Bashing Back
   Day 2 -- Cardea, "Tremors;" Parker, "Boots Are Being Polished;"

WEEK #14: Silence=Death
   Day 1 -- Claudia Allen, *Movie Queens.*
   Day 2 -- watch "Go Fish;" projects due.

WEEK #15: Gone Fishing
   Day 1 -- finish "Go Fish."
   Day 2 -- review for FINAL
Project Guidelines

Students will be required to complete a project worth 100 points. That's half of the final grade, so the project should reflect serious research or creative thought (hopefully a little of both). Students may go the more traditional academic route by writing papers or reviews, or they may experiment with innovative project ideas. Creative projects must be accompanied by a 3 page (typed) explanation of their work. Papers should be a minimum of 8 typed, double-spaced pages.

Project suggestions:

- Write a paper on one of the authors studied and present it to the class.
- Read and review a novel, play, or collection of poems written by a Lesbian in this century. Author must be American.
- Write your own play (may be one-act), poems, or short story which focuses on a theme or piece of work studied in class.
- Compile an annotated bibliography of at least 15 works by twentieth-century Lesbian authors.
- Collect several reviews of (or, possibly, introductions to) one of the works from the first half of the century and compare what was said about the subjects dealt with when it was first written as opposed to more recent discussion.
- Write a journal which is written from the perspective of one of the characters in the readings.
- Paint, draw, or otherwise visually recreate a scene from one of the readings.
- Be creative!!
Discussion Questions

for “Tommy, the Unsentimental:”

1. Why does Harper fail to recognize the “squareness and honesty of spirit” in Tommy that others recognize?

2. Explore the possibilities of who Tommy might be talking about in the final line of the story.

3. Why is Tommy perceived as being “unsentimental?” What are the implications for her character?

4. What does Tommy mean when she talks about “kinds of people?” Discuss what social roles a Lesbian might have had at the turn of the century.

for “Ada:”

1. Who is the “someone who was loving” Ada? Why does this person make Ada happy?

2. Who are the family members that Ada likes? What do they have in common?

3. Why would the fact that Ada “was charming inside in her” not be evident to everyone? To whom was it evident?

for “The Wise Sappho:”

1. What makes this a “Lesbian” story? Why would it be included in an anthology of Lesbian fiction? Would you include it?

2. What makes Sappho “wise,” according to the author? Address her discussion of moderation.

3. What would be H.D.’s purpose in writing this story? Why would she choose Sappho? Why would she choose to include the points that she did?

for Lowell:

1. Analyze the use of the erotic in Lowell’s poetry. What is the flower to which the author refers in “Weather-Cock?”
2. Discuss the different stages of a relationship during which Lowell may have written each poem, particularly “Opal” and “Decade.” How can you tell when she wrote them?

3. Who might be the subject of “Madonna of the Evening Flowers?” Define the author’s relationship to this person.

for *We Too Are Drifting:*

1. Compare the relationship Jan has with Madeline to the one she has with Victoria. What role do the two women play in her life? How does she benefit from each one? How does she suffer?

2. How does Kletkin’s death affect Jan, particularly in her relationship with Victoria? What does she realize about herself?

3. Imagine what might happen at the end of the novel. How might Jan’s life be affected by Victoria’s return? How might Victoria’s life be changed by her trip?

for “Nightwatch:"

1. In what ways does meeting Robin change Nora? What was she like before they met? And after?

2. What are some possible meanings of Nora’s dream?

3. Compare Robin to the subject of Lowell’s “Madonna of the Evening Flowers.”

for *Hollandia ’45:*

1. Does this seem an accurate portrayal of life in the WAC? What are the author’s limitations?

2. What do you think the play says about the separation of the sexes during times of war? Do you agree?

3. Why does Kit refuse to tear down her tent? What does the tent represent? Why would Marian want to destroy it?

4. How do the women view their treatment in the army? Do they feel they are seen as equals? Do they want to be?
for *The Price of Salt*:

1. How does Therese adjust to falling in love with Carol? What are some of her concerns? Are they similar to the concerns of some of the characters in the previous reading? How are they different?

2. Explore the possible meanings of the title.

3. How do the characters change throughout the novel? What might cause these changes? How do the characters affect each other?

for *Beebo Brinker*:

1. Who helps Beebo come to accept her sexuality? How does that character (or characters) do it?

2. What incident gets Beebo kicked out of school? Why did she do it? What does she realize about herself?

3. How does Beebo's self-image affect her relationships with women? What in her life caused it to be that way? What happens to her self-image in New York?

for "Forbidden Love:"

1. Discuss the different ways each woman discovered her sexuality and how she dealt with it.

2. What were options for Lesbians in the fifties? What types of lives did the women in the movie lead?

3. What books were available to Lesbians in the fifties? How did they find these books?

4. In the film, Ann Bannon discusses some ways in which her situation was unique. What does she say about most stories dealing with Lesbians? Is what she said evident in the excerpt of *Beebo Brinker*?

for *Desert of the Heart*:

1. Examine several of the religious allusions and references made in the book. Who initiates them? Who are they directed toward? How do the different
characters react to them?

2. Explore the importance of place (desert as metaphor) evident in the novel. How does the desert affect Evelyn? How does it affect Ann? Does this change? In what ways, and why?

3. Is there a dilemma about either Evelyn's or Ann's sexuality? Whose dilemma is it, and what conclusions are eventually drawn? Is this the central conflict?

for "Love Poem," "Woman," and "Dancing:"

1. Compare Lorde's use of the erotic with Lowell's. Examine in particular the earth as metaphor for the female body.

2. Why is Brown's poem titled as such? What movement is she talking about? Who is silencing her "song?"

for *Rubyfruit Jungle*:

1. Discuss some of the class issues evident in the novel.

2. At what point does Molly understand that she is a Lesbian? What makes her decide this, and how does she feel about it?


for Rabinowitz and Lorde:

1. Who is struck by maternal urges in "Lullaby?" Why is this surprising? Should it be?

2. Who is speaking in each of Lorde's poems? Discuss the connections she draws between mother and child.

3. What did Lorde learn from her mother? What does she hope her child will take from her?
for “A Long Story:”

1. Why does the author compare Native American and Lesbian culture? Do you think it is a valid connection?

2. Who is taking the children away from the Native Americans? Who is taking the child from Lesbian parents? What are the reasons each has for doing so?

3. How does separation affect the children who are taken? How does it affect the mothers?

for Lynch, Ruth, Cassidy, and Clarke:

1. What does Lynch mean when she says the stone butch is “their ultimate woman?” Who are “they?”

2. To what roles does Ruth compare the butch/femme dichotomy? Does she say it is a valid distinction?

3. What arguments does Cassidy use to assert Whitman’s place in the butch/femme dichotomy?

4. How do Althea and Flaxie reflect the butch/femme divisions? How do they differ from the stereotype?

for Zami:

1. How much of a role does clothing play in the butch/femme dichotomy? How strictly is it enforced?

2. Why does the author enjoy the fact that she and Kitty have matching belts? What might this represent to her?

3. In what ways is race reflected in the narrator’s description of Lesbian culture?

for Chrystos and Aalfs:

1. How does Chrystos respond to the attack on her sexuality? Does she come away from the incident stronger? Why or why not?

2. What “war” does Aalfs refer to in “Branded?” How does she plan to fight
it? Why does she contend that women are the "battlefield?"

3. Discuss the need to write a letter to Claudia Brenner. What might a Lesbian feel when reading about an attack like this? What are some possible responses?

for Cardea and Parker:

1. What are the "tremors" to which Cardea refers? How might they affect Lesbians and Lesbian cultures? How might they affect all women?

2. Explore the ways in which "the bond of sister/mother daughter lover friend" might help heal the emotional wounds associated with rape.

3. Whose boots does Parker say are being polished? For what purpose? How does she suggest avoiding the outcome she sees as imminent?

4. What is "perversion," according to Parker? Discuss the legal and social uses of this term.

for Movie Queens:

1. What "types" (butch/femme, closet/out, etc.) do Adele and Meg represent? Are they metaphors or are they fully developed characters?

2. How did Meg and Adele manage to hide their sexuality from the public? Why did they feel the need to hide?

3. Imagine what will happen to Meg and Adele after the close of the play.
Resources


Lowell, Amy. “Opal.” *Norton Anthology.* (p. 1299)


Lowell, Amy. “Venus Transiens.” *Norton Anthology.* (p. 1297)


