La Vie de Bohème: The Starving Artist in Fiction (FRSEM-UA 600)

Spring 2018
Friday 3:30-6:00pm
Professor: Katherine Carlson
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411 Lafayette St., Room 415

“Axiom, ‘Unknown Bohemianism is not a path, it is a blind alley.’”
--Henry Murger, Scènes de la vie de bohème

“Occasionally a date with a face blank as a sheet of paper asks you whether writers often become discouraged. Say that sometimes they do and sometimes they do. Say it’s a lot like having polio.”
--Lorrie Moore, “How to Become a Writer Or, Have Your Earned This Cliché?”

Description

Not long ago, SoHo was home to hundreds of artists looking for affordable spaces to live and work. Now the streets are lined with high-end shops and bank branches. So it went with Paris’s Latin Quarter, and the fate of Brooklyn looks much the same. The question of how to earn a living in the arts is a perennial one. In this course we will examine how fiction addresses the economic and social instability faced by artists in the post-Industrial age. While most narratives romanticize the starving artist, the texts we’ll read this semester challenge that image. Our protagonists (such as Lucien Chardon in Balzac’s Lost Illusions and Edwin Reardon in Gissing’s New Grub Street) begin with uncompromising devotion to their craft but gradually give way to the strain, selling their work to tawdry outlets or (heaven forbid) teaching at universities. Students will be asked to consider the ways in which creative professions have and haven’t changed since so-called “starving artists” gave up their crusts of bread for bowls of ramen. Would the protagonists in these novels have the same concerns today? What new obstacles must emerging poets, painters contend with? We will examine some contemporary writing about how changes in economic policy and technological advances in production and distribution have altered the way artists and writers live and work, and by extension, the art they produce. Finally, with historic Greenwich Village as a backdrop, we’ll discuss what it actually means to “sell out” and consider the future of creative culture in our own fair city.

Required Texts:

* James Baldwin, Going to Meet the Man
* Honoré de Balzac, Lost Illusions
* Roberto Bolaño, Last Evenings on Earth
* George Gissing, New Grub Street
* Lore Segal, Lucimella
* Francine Prose, Blue Angel
* Additional short stories/articles that I will ask you to download and print

* A notebook dedicated to this class. You won’t hand this in, but it will be as essential to your work as the texts we read, for in it you will record everything from your observations on the readings and notes from class discussions to thoughts that spark at unexpected times: on the subway, walking in the park, in an art gallery, etc. If you’re anything like me, your finest insights are likely to arrive at the most unexpected times, so you’d be wise to always keep your notebook handy!
Policies

Attendance and class participation: A seminar is a space in which we develop knowledge collaboratively. That means that you must attend class ready to listen, think, read, write, re-read, revise, and speak thoughtfully. To do all of that, you must be present, complete the reading assignments and come prepared to think and write. This is the baseline for participation.

If you need to miss class because of illness, email me to let me know when I can expect your homework, and come to class with a doctor’s note. If you plan to miss class for a religious observance, notify me a week or so in advance and we can make a plan for completing your work on time. Missing four or more classes may make passing the course difficult. If you miss 2 classes in a row, I will notify the advisor for your cohort. This is in the interest of helping you get back on track.

A word on timeliness: Often an entire lesson will stem from some material I will introduce in the first five minutes, such as a film clip, music, or a reading. Missing these opening minutes severely limits your ability to participate, in turn affecting your grade. Not to mention that walking in late is both distracting and discourteous to your fellow students.

Reading: This course is reading intensive. You can expect reading assignments to average 150 pages per week.

Late work: Assignments are due at the time specified, no later. Late exercises severely limit my ability to provide productive feedback put you behind, putting your participation grade at risk. Please also note that for every 24-hour (or portion thereof) that your work is late I will lower reduce the grade by one step (A- becomes a B+).

Formatting: All writing must be printed and formatted in MLA style: double spaced, 1” margins, 12 pt. Times New Roman font, no extra spaces between paragraphs. Papers longer than one page should be numbered and stapled. Double-sided printing is fine. (The Purdue OWL is an excellent resource: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/)

Response papers and mid-term essay: You must submit at least eight (8) short (1-2 page) response papers throughout the semester. When you choose to submit them will be up to you (of course, you can only submit one per class, so plan ahead). As you compose your response, think about particular moments in the reading that were surprising to you, and consider some discussion points you’d like to bring up in class.

The mid-term essay will ask you to draw upon this practice to produce an interpretive argument based on literary analysis and research. We will discuss this in further detail as the deadline approaches.

Presentations: You will be required to give a 10-minute oral presentation introducing the reading for the week and topics for class discussion.

Final Paper/Project: The final for this course may take the form of an academic essay or a creative project. A creative project might be, for example, a short story, a film or video, a staged performance, or a portfolio of visual work. If you choose this option you will be required to produce a script, report, or written reflection on your work. All projects and/or papers will include some element of research.

Course website: We will be using our course website at NYU Classes in a number of ways. I will post handouts (like this one) there, so that you have a reference. I will also use NYU Classes to distribute instructions for all assignments. You can find the site through home.nyu.edu (⇒Academics tab ⇒ NYU Classes).
Electronic devices: Please stow these away before the beginning of class. This includes computers—take notes in your notebook. We humans are easily distracted creatures.

Grading

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short response papers</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>Midterm essay (3-4 pgs)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td>Presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final essay or project (7-8 pgs)</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<td>Participation and preparation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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Academic Integrity: Please carefully review the College’s policies on academic integrity. The University makes no distinction between intentional and unintentional plagiarism. This means that when writing in your notebook, take care to distinguish between your own words and the words of other writers and your classmates. Ideas are valuable commodities—we’ll discuss this quite a bit over the course of the semester.

Support: The Writing Center is an excellent resource, staffed by Expository Writing Program faculty who meet with students to help them with their writing. They don’t do the work for you—they don’t edit or proofread your work or give you ideas—but they can help you figure out what you need to do in order to improve your writing. To register as a client and to schedule an appointment, go to nyu.mywconline.com. It’s wise to schedule appointments well in advance of anticipated need, as appointment slots fill up quickly around essay deadlines.

Schedule

Week 1: The Origins of Bohemia

In class: “How to Become a Writer, Or, Have You Earned this Cliché?” Lorrie Moore

Film screening: Excerpt of Puccini’s La Bohème

Week 2: The Commodification of Bohemia

Read: Lost Illusions, Part I

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

In class: Excerpt of Jonathan Larson’s Rent

Week 3: Talent, or Intrigue?

Read: Lost Illusions, Part II

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

Week 4: The True Cost of Selling Out

Read: Lost Illusions, Part III
Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

**Week 5: The Tyranny of the Market**

Read: *New Grub Street*, Chapters I - XII

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

Film screening: Excerpt of *Barton Fink*

**Week 6: Writer’s Block**

Read: *New Grub Street*, Chapters XIII - XXV

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

**Week 7: The Personal Morality of the Starving Artist**

Read: *New Grub Street*, Chapters XXVI – End

Film screening: *Atlanta*

Mid-term essay (3-4 pgs.) due Friday by 11:55pm via Classes

**Week 8**

SPRING BREAK

**Week 9: Familial Obligations**

Read: Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”
Alice Munro, “Family Furnishings”

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

**Week 10: Re-Imagining Greenwich Village**

Read: From *Going to Meet the Man*: “Previous Condition,” “Sonny’s Blues,” “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” and “Come Out the Wilderness”

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

Film screening: Excerpt of *Inside Llewyn Davis*

**Week 11: The Starving Artist in Exile**


Film screening: Excerpt of *Basquiat*
Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

Week 12: Jealousies and Anxieties

Read: Lucinella

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

Week 13: The Artist Retreats to the Academy

Read: Blue Angel, first half (1-153)

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

Film screening: Excerpt of Wonder Boys

Week 14: Writing Programs as Incubators

Read: Blue Angel, second half (153-end)

Due: Response paper (1-2 pgs.)

Film screening: Episode of Girls

Week 15: The Future of the Starving Artist

Final papers and projects due (8 pages). Discussion, question-answering session, and celebration of the work we did in the previous weeks of the semester. Party.