Fiction, Feminism, and the #MeToo Movement

Description

When Kristen Roupenian’s short story “Cat Person” was published in the *New Yorker* in December, 2017, amid a larger public conversation about power, gender, and changing definitions of sexual harassment, it went viral, becoming the magazine’s most-read story of the year. The story—which represents the murky and often unspoken power dynamics that influence how we act towards ourselves and others—resonated with the recent #MeToo movement, but it also speaks to farther-reaching questions about sex, gender, and inequality. In this seminar, we will read novels and short stories (from the very recent, to the not-so-recent) that have grappled with these questions, as well as some work in feminist theory, in order to think about how literature has been used in the past—and might be used today—both to critique existing inequalities, and to imagine a more just world.

Seminar participants should be aware that we will read and discuss texts that explicitly examine rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Required Texts

- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*
- Octavia Butler, *Kindred*
- Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*
- Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*
- Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*
- Critical essays and articles will be distributed as PDF’s and must be printed out.

Requirements

*Class Preparedness & Participation:* This is a discussion-based seminar course, so your attendance, punctuality, and active participation are required. You must arrive to class having read and annotated the assigned texts, and be prepared to share your responses and questions, as well as to actively listen and respond to each other. You must have your copy of the assigned readings, as well as a (paper) notebook and a pen.

*Reading:* This is a reading-intensive course. You will read, on average, 125 pages of fiction and criticism each week.

*Writing:* Throughout the semester, you will write one-page response papers to the assigned readings (you are required to submit 7 out of the 10 response papers). You will also write two short (3- to 4-page) essays, analyzing one of the novels or short stories through the lens of one of the critical text. In your final research paper (7-8 pages), you will delve deeper into a topic that interests you, and give a short, conference-style presentation of your argument in class on the last day.

*Formatting:* Following MLA guidelines, all of the work that you hand in must be typed, double-spaced, in a 12-point serif font (like Times New Roman), with 1” margins, and include your name, the seminar title, your professor’s name, and the assignment’s name (e.g., “Response Paper #1”) and due date at the top of the page and single-spaced. All work that is longer than one page should include page numbers and
be stapled, and may be printed single- or double-sided. Titles of articles, short stories, chapters, poems, or other parts of longer works should be in quotation marks (e.g., “Cat Person”); titles of books, newspapers, journals, films, etc., should be italicized (e.g., The Handmaid's Tale). Always give authors’ first and last names when first mentioning them; subsequently, give just their last name.

**Presentation:** Each seminar participant will give one in-class presentation, meant to frame that day’s readings, by bringing in a “contextualization”: a news article, video, song, image, or other text that resonates with that day’s assigned reading in some way, and offers the class a context for understanding the reading’s significance. You will have 5-10 minutes to present. Visuals and handouts are encouraged! If more than one person is scheduled to present on the same day, please consult with each other at least a week before the class in which you will present—you have the option of presenting together or separately.

**Grading**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response papers (1 page each)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short essays (3-4 pages each)</td>
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<td>Presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final research essay (7-8 pages)</td>
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<td>Presentation of final research essay</td>
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<td>Preparedness &amp; participation</td>
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**Support**

The Writing Center is an excellent resource, staffed by 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 http://nyu.mywconline.com. It’s wise to schedule appointments well in advance of anticipated need, as appointment slots fill up quickly around essay deadlines.

**Academic Integrity**

Please carefully review the College’s policies on academic integrity: https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html

The university makes no distinction between intentional and unintentional plagiarism. This means that when writing, always take care to distinguish between your own words and the words of other writers and your classmates. Refer to the Purdue OWL for guidelines on how to cite your sources (we will use MLA citation style): http://owl.english.purdue.edu

**Schedule of Readings & Assignments**

**Desire and Consent: Some Problems of Representation**

**Week 1 (1/31)**
- Introductions; read and discuss Kristen Roupenian, “Cat Person”
- Possible discussion topics: #MeToo and #TimesUp; Title IX and affirmative consent; Third-wave feminism(s) and rape culture; Babe magazine controversy and criticisms of #MeToo

**Topics in Feminist Aesthetics**

**Week 2 (2/7)**
• Read: Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899), chapters I-XV (pp. 43-94) and Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), *Signs* vol. 1 no. 4, pp. 875-893
• Possible discussion topics: the “New Woman” and *fin-de-siècle* women’s writing; Censorship and criticism of Chopin; “French feminism” and post-structuralism; “Écriture féminine”
• Due: Response paper #1
• Presenters: TBD

Topics in Feminist Aesthetics (cont’d)
Week 3 (2/14)
• Read: Chopin, *The Awakening*, finish (pp. 94-176)
• Possible discussion topics: Race in *The Awakening*; Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*; revisit Cixous and difference
• Due: Response paper #2
• Presenters: TBD

Topics in Feminist Politics
Week 4 (2/21)
• Read: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986), Atwood’s Introduction (pp. XIII-XIX) and chapters I-III (pp. 1-40), and Angela Davis, “Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights” (1982), reprinted in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, pp. 353-367
• Possible discussion topics: Hulu adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017); Reading the *Handmaid’s Tale* as response to contemporary politics; Second-wave feminism and backlash; Feminist approaches to reproductive rights
• Due: Essay #1 (3-4 pages)
• Presenters: TBD

Topics in Feminist Politics (cont’d)
Week 5 (2/28)
• Read: Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, chapters VII-XI (pp. 101-196) and Teresa de Lauretis, “Feminism and Its Differences,” *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 25, no. 1/2 (1990), pp. 24-30
• Possible discussion topics: “Anti-pornography” and “sex-positive” feminisms
• Due: Response paper #3
• Presenters: TBD

Topics in Feminist Politics (cont’d)
Week 6 (3/7)
• Due: Response paper #4
• Presenters: TBD

Women of Color Feminisms
Week 7 (3/14)
• Due: Response paper #5
• Presenters: TBD
Spring break; no class 3/21

Women of Color Feminisms (cont’d)
Week 8 (3/28)
- Read: Butler, *Kindred*, “The Fall” through “The Fight” (pp. 52-188)
- Due: Response paper #6
- Presenters: TBD

Women of Color Feminisms (cont’d)
Week 9 (4/4)
- Read: Butler, *Kindred*, finish (pp. 189-264)
- Due: Essay #2 (3-4 pages)
- Presenters: TBD

The Body in Literature
Week 10 (4/11)
- Read: Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, Parts 1 and 2 (pp. 1-135) and Shulamith Firestone, “The Culture of Romance,” from *The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), pp. 131-139
- Due: Response paper #7
- Presenters: TBD

The Body in Literature (cont’d)
Week 11 (4/18)
- Due: Response paper #8
- Presenters: TBD

Figuring Consent and Sexual Violence
Week 12 (4/25)
- Guest speaker, Gabriella Lindsay, Ph.D. Candidate, NYU French Department: Representations of Consent in Contemporary French Literature
- Reading TBD
- Due: Response paper #9

New Feminisms and Post-Feminisms
Week 13 (5/2)
- Read: Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, The Feminist Press 2010 (pp. 1-130)
- Due: Response paper #10

Review and Presentation of Final Research Papers
Week 14 (5/9)
- Presentations
- Due: Final research essay (7-8 pages)