Linfield College
Fall 2015

English 305: A New Genus: Writing in the Wake of Mary Wollstonecraft

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Required Texts:
*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft, online
*Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen
*Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley
*Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte
*A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf

Students are to choose one of these **suggested texts** for a final paper topic:

*Beloved*, Toni Morrison
*Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson
*House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros
*The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula Le Guin

**Course Number:** ENGL-305

**Course Description:** Literary works addressing issues of gender, class, race, minority experience, or national literatures besides those of the U.S. or England. May be repeated once for credit with different content. Prerequisite: INQS 125 or consent of instructor. 4 credits. (CS or UQ or GP)

She is a woman with a serious wall eye. She is ill dressed. She is a mother before she is a mother, mothering anyone in her path. She falls in love all too readily, has a child with a man who betrays her. She tries to commit suicide twice. She is also a revolutionary, and the world’s first feminist, which is a funny appellation for someone who says terrible things about women, about socially constructed women, that is. No matter. She is above her gender. She is other than them. Their rules, and the rules she sets for them, don’t apply to her. In fact, no rules apply to her, except biological ones. On the verge of greatness, at the age of 41, she’ll die in childbirth,
and the huge acclaim she won will turn to a larger hatred by a suddenly conservative culture. What can one say about Mary Wollstonecraft except this – she was a genius.

I have chosen Wollstonecraft as the engendering heroine—i.e., mother -- for this course on diverse voices because of her unusual desire to create a new genus, something bigger, or better, than the genus that includes humans – *Homo sapiens*. As one can imagine, it is no small thing to create a new genus. How would a human go about doing such a thing, and why would they need to?

Wollstonecraft mentions this desire in a letter to her sister. The year is 1787. Wollstonecraft has written a pamphlet on the education of girls. On the basis of her early success, she is moving from Ireland where she was a nanny, to London to live in her own apartment and set herself up as a writer. To her sister, Everinna, she writes: “Mr. Johnson (her publisher) assures me that if I exert myself in writing, then I might support myself in a comfortable way. I am then going to be the first of a new genus. I tremble at the attempt.”

Wollstonecraft doesn’t need to reinvent the genus in order to support herself through writing. She – and a few other women – are already doing that. Underlying Wollstonecraft’s announcement, and, in fact, all of her work, is a deep frustration with the way things are. One of the problems with the current genus, according to Wollstonecraft, is that within it, women are infantilized. They are not allowed to develop the faculty of reason. They demean themselves by affecting a manner of super-sensibility, a weak and fawning attention to things, a “sickly delicacy.” Wollstonecraft takes her sisters to task for their manners and affects—exhorting them to be intelligent, to shun love and sensibility, to be good mothers, like some of the peasant and farm women she has known. Does this require a new genus? It seems not. There must be more to Wollstonecraft’s idea. There must be something so wrong, so unfixable in the current genus that the only answer is to get a new one.

Where are they all, Virginia Woolf will later ask. Where are the female geniuses? We know they’ve existed, and that they exist, but where are they? It’s actually a staggering question. Wollstonecraft considered herself a romantic genius, but she was vilified after her death, her vastly important work, sidelined. The Brontes trafficked in Genii, but did so under male pseudonyms. Woolf, herself, labors under the burden of genius, and ultimately kills herself. This, she claims, is the fate of any woman born with this curse. Why can’t the genus support them?

Genius, as we will see in an essay by Robert Graves, is a sacred office, perhaps even a cult. Women, in particular, were barred through a series of cultural injunctions and taboos. Women, it seems, bartered genius away in order to acquire the protection of Juno Lucina, the goddess of childbirth. Ironically, Wollstonecraft died after having given birth to her daughter, Mary Godwin who would grow up to write *Frankenstein*, a book about a man who defrauds genius.

In this class, I would like to suggest that Wollstonecraft’s new genus is actually a genre, one which has room in it for female geniuses. As a genre, it will have its own traits and
characters. One of these traits, as we will see, may be the occasional sundering between mothers and daughters – Juno’s revenge.

There are so many female writers of genius that it has not been easy choosing some key figures for Wollstonecraft’s new genus, and what we have here is really only a partial survey – but as we go through this course, we will be noting how the female genius fits into no paradigm, how it is always outside, Other, uniquely monstrous and beautiful – how it is, in fact, a genus of its own.

This course fulfills the CS, UG, and GP requirements.

**Learning Outcomes**

- Articulating and evaluating unexamined assumptions and paradigmatic ways of acquiring knowledge.
- Analyzing critically fundamental beliefs, cultural practices, and competing truth claims.
- Developing greater self-knowledge and wisdom, the ability for meaningful dialogue, social responsibility and understanding.
- Appreciating questions that lead to deeper insights into our actions and the reasons for them.
- Explore the media, genre, craft and presentation of art, and in particular, of an art form that aspires to the status of a new genus.
- Understanding what diversity means – developing a theory of diversity that is based on the individual.

**Work**

Ten postings worth 20% of the grade
Three thesis-driven papers, worth 20%, 20%, and 40%. Papers one and two will be 3-5 pages. The final paper will be 5-6 pages.
Work will be graded on the basis of critical content, comprehension of the material, and a comprehensive approach to it. Students will learn a critical method in this class and will be expected to write in clear, consecutive and critical sentences. **All work will be a blend of critical and personal inquiry.**

**Readings**

There is a lot of reading in this class. The first five books on the syllabus are required reading, and then, near the end of the course, students will be asked to choose one book from the following three suggested texts for the topic of a final paper. I would advise students to take
their time before choosing their final text. Around mid-semester, I will present an overview of what one might expect from Robinson, Morrison, Le Guin and Cisneros.

**Grading scale:** A comprehensive explanation of grades will be issued when course commences.

- **A – A-** Excellent work with fully fledged sentences, paragraphs, and ideas. “A” work has great depth, is excellent in most, if not all of its parts.
- **B+ – B-** Good, to very good work -- with room for improvement in the areas of writing or clarity, content, depth and purpose.
- **C+ – C-** Adequate work which fulfills assignment but lacks depth and care.
- **D+ – D-** Marginal work which nods to the assignment but really doesn’t fulfill it.

**Incomplete:** A grade of Incomplete (I) is given only in emergency situations. The student must request an Incomplete in writing and must obtain my permission. All uncompleted work must be completed within the time limits I set. If you simply don’t turn in the final assignments or the final exam, your course grade will be calculated with the missed portion counting for 0 points.

**Academic honesty:**

We are looking at a lot of material in this class, and some students may want to look at outside websites in order to get a sense of plot and all. In doing so, students must be careful to not borrow from other sources without proper citation. Plagiarism, presenting another person’s material as if it is one’s own material, is not acceptable. Students who plagiarize will receive no credit on their assignment, and will not have an opportunity to revise.

All students should familiarize themselves with Linfield’s Academic Integrity Policy as defined in the catalog. I would like to draw students’ attention to the following two passages from it.

“Academic work is evaluated on the assumption that the work presented is the student’s own, unless designated otherwise. Anything less is unacceptable and is considered a violation of academic integrity. Furthermore, a breach of academic integrity will have concrete consequences that may include failing a particular course or even dismissal from the college.”

“Plagiarism: Submission of academic work that includes material copied or paraphrased from published or unpublished sources without proper documentation.” [http://www.linfield.edu/catalog/academic-policies-and-procedures-all-campuses/other-policies-and-procedures/academic-integrity.html](http://www.linfield.edu/catalog/academic-policies-and-procedures-all-campuses/other-policies-and-procedures/academic-integrity.html)
Students with disabilities

Disability Statement:
Students with disabilities are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. If you are a student with a disability and feel you may require academic accommodations contact Cheri White, Assistant Director of Learning Support Services (LSS), within the first two weeks of the semester to request accommodations. LSS is located in Walker 126 (503-883-2444). We also recommend students communicate with their faculty about their accommodations and any special needs of which an instructor should be aware.