

The Essay: Women Essayists from the 17th Century to the Present

ENG 4285

St. Joseph's University

Spring 2008

Instructor: Dr. Jenny Spinner
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Office Hours: M, 4:30 – 6:15 p.m., T, TH 9:45 a.m. – 11:30 a.m, and by appt..
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Required Texts/Materials

- [*The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*](#), Virginia Woolf (available as e-book)
- *At Large and At Small*, Anne Fadiman
- *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion
- *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard
- *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker
- Course Packet (to be picked up at the University Press/Copy Center next to Wendy's on City Avenue)
- BLACKBOARD: You are required to have access to Blackboard and are responsible for checking our course Blackboard site regularly.

Objectives

This course wrestles with a long-standing, or at least unexamined assumption in the academy: that women are relative latecomers to the essay genre. Certainly, in our present time, women and men share the essay stage, and so comfortably so that it seems silly to suggest that there ever was a time in which women did not write essays with the freedom that they now enjoy. In fact, the participation of women in the essay tradition is complex, and hard-won, particularly in earlier centuries when the essayist's project of discovery and disclosure was off-limits to women writers. Women who did succeed in the form, many of whom were well-respected and hugely popular among their contemporaries, have often been ignored by editors and scholars who have overlooked their work for reasons ranging from ignorance to blatant sexism.

We'll begin with a general history of the essay, charting its changing shape and popularity as it moves from century to century, decade to decade. As we go, we'll ask specific questions about the contributions of women to the genre during each major shift of the form: *What do women essayists write about? How do they establish authority in their essays? In what ways do they bring experience and personal observation to the essay? What language conventions do they employ? How do they convey voice?*

As we go, we'll discover that women have participated in the tradition of the essay since its modern beginnings in the late sixteenth century, beginning with the early attempts of Montaigne's editor Marie de Gournay, arguably the first modern woman essayist, and Margaret Cavendish, the first woman essayist writing in English. We'll look at periodical essayists of the eighteenth century; familiar essayists and newspaper columnists of the nineteenth century; popular genteel essayists at the turn of the twentieth century; early modern essayists; and contemporary essayists writing in the last half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.

The goals of this course are three-fold. Our first goal is to better understand the history of the modern essay and women's contributions to and within that history. We'll accomplish that goal by reading widely, mostly essays, but also literary criticism. Our second goal is to write our own essays, asking of ourselves the very questions we posed about the essays and essayists we read: *What do we write about? How do we establish authority? How do we convey voice?* Our third goal is to make real contributions to the scholarly field of the essay by participating in [Quotidiana](#), an online anthology of classical essays.

Writing Projects

Literary Essay (60%) You've read and read and read—now try your hand at your own full-length literary essay, employing some of the stylistic techniques you've picked up along the way. The subject is up to you. In addition to the essay, which we will workshop in class, you will also submit a self-analysis of your piece, examining your work and the writing of it in light of the issues we've discussed in class throughout the semester. (~15-20 pages, plus analysis)

Quotidiana Project (30%) For this project, you will choose from a list of relatively unknown women essayists writing before 1900 and write a short biography of that writer. You will also need to scan or key in one or two of the writer's best and/or most representative essays, which you will select after reading from her oeuvre. That biography and those essays will eventually be included on Quotidiana, which bills itself as "a website dedicated to the essay" and an "online compendium of . . . public-domain essays."

Quotidiana Presentation (10%) You will introduce the rest of the class to the essayist you selected for the Quotidiana project. In addition to giving us a short synopsis of the writer's life and a summary of her work, you will provide some analysis of the writer in terms of the larger questions we will examine in the course: *What does she write about? How do she establish authority in their essays? In what ways does she bring experience and personal observation to her essay? What language conventions do she employ? How do she convey voice?* Finally, you will read an excerpt from the essayist's work in order to give us a taste of her voice and style. Please provide a handout for your presentation, which should be about 20 minutes in length.

Contractual Fine Print

- **Attendance**

Please attend every class. As you know, a graduate writing community needs all of its members to healthfully (and happily) function. Missing more than one class will impact your final grade. Missing more than two classes will result in an FA (Failed for Absence) on your transcript.

- **Code of Ethics**

As a writer, as a graduate student in a professional writing studies program, you are held to a crucial but also unforgiving standard of ethics. Passing off someone else's work as your own or inventing material that you promise to be true is a violation of the University's Academic Honesty Policy. **Such violations will result in failure of the course** and likely dismissal from the University. For more information, please refer to St. Joe's official policy on Academic Dishonesty: <<http://www.sju.edu/registrar/policies.html>>.

- **Additional Resources**

For those students who have or think that they may have a disability (learning, physical or psychological), contact Services for Students with Disabilities, Room 113, Science Center, 610-660-1774 or 610-660-1620 as early as possible in the semester. Please note the following: 1) Accommodations can only be provided to students with current (within three years) documentation. 2) Students are encouraged to discuss their instructional and accommodation needs ("reasonable academic adjustments") with their professors early in the semester. 3) All student requests for extended time to take examinations in a distraction-free environment must be discussed with the professor a minimum of one week prior to the scheduled date of the exam; the student must complete the Extended-Time Request Form and obtain the professor's approval and submit the form to the Services for Students with Disabilities office a minimum of three days prior to

the date of the scheduled exam. Failure to follow these procedures could result in a denial of the request.

4) Exceptions to exam schedules require prior written approval of the professor.