Expository Writing 20: Modern Love

Course Overview

“Reader, I married him.” As this famous line from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* reminds us, writers have long been preoccupied with matters of the heart. Courtship plots are everywhere, from the novels of Jane Austen to the “rom-coms” of the 1980s and 1990s to essays in the “Styles” section of the *New York Times*. For centuries, marriage was primarily an economic relationship, and love outside of marriage ended in humiliation or even death. But what happens when society expands the options for living and loving? What happens to the courtship plot when women can choose not to be wives, or when people who once couldn’t marry now can? When couples are as likely to meet through Tinder as they are through mutual friends? In this course, we’ll explore what courtship plots can tell us about changing concepts of gender, sexuality, family, and freedom. We’ll start with fiction by Edith Wharton, one of the American literature’s keenest social observers (and, incidentally, one of the inspirations for the TV show *Gossip Girl*). By closely analyzing her accounts of love and marriage in New York’s high society at the turn of the twentieth century, we’ll ask what stories about eligible bachelors and old maids can tell us about a society’s values and beliefs. In our second unit, we’ll turn to more recent courtship plots that trouble traditional conceptions of romance, marriage, and the family. Our texts will include the story “Brokeback Mountain” (and the Academy Award-winning film), short fiction from Pulitzer-prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri, and the viral *New Yorker* short story “Cat Person.” Using feminist theory, queer theory, literary criticism, and recent sociologies of dating, we’ll examine what new romantic possibilities—and problems—exist for couples today. Finally, in our third unit, students will pick a modern love story of their choosing—a novel, a memoir, a film—and, drawing on the work of critics and scholars, make an argument about what this story shows us about our society’s sexual mores.

We’ll work to understand the trials of love by discussing, and practicing, the principles of good academic writing. Over the course of the semester, you’ll learn the elements of an academic argument, develop a vocabulary for talking about writing (both yours and your classmates), and practice refining your ideas as you revise your written work. Each unit will have specific goals, and units build on each other over time. By the end of the course, you’ll be a stronger writer, with a better sense of your strengths, and with a new set of skills with which you can address challenges. You’ll also find yourself to be a more creative and supple thinker; after all, writing is simply a mode of thinking. You’ll be well prepared to meet the intellectual challenges that await you at Harvard and beyond.

Required Reading and Schedule of Assignments

The course is divided into three units. In addition to all assigned reading and any class preparation (e.g. reading excerpts, providing feedback for workshop, etc.), each unit will require you to complete:

- 1-2 response papers
- 1 essay draft (including a cover letter)
- 1 draft conference
- 1 essay revision (including a revision letter)
A packet with the assignments and deadlines will be handed out before the start of each unit.

**Read the unit packet and mark your calendars! You are responsible for remembering assignment due dates.**

Here’s how the units break down:

**Unit 1: Doomed Love**
Our first text this term will be Edith Wharton’s 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*. Wharton’s novel is a biting, memorable account of Lily Bart, a twenty-nine-year-old beauty who is on the hunt for a man to marry. In describing the trials and tribulations of Lily’s courtships with various men, Wharton tells us much more about the social attitudes and values of New York’s upper-class in the early twentieth century, a world in which social hierarchies are firm, marriage is a foregone conclusion (at least for women), sex outside of marriage is scandalous, and people are generally discouraged from marrying outside their social class. This novel will serve as a foundational text for us, as we’ll see, in later units, how American ideas about sex, dating, and marriage have changed. The goal of this unit is for us to develop our ability to analyze texts closely.

**Unit 2: Contemporary Courtship and its Critics**
In this unit, we’ll look at different examples short fiction through the lens of contemporary theories about gender, sex, marriage, and dating. We’ll start with Annie Proulx’s short story “Brokeback Mountain” about cowboys in love and the Ang Lee film in inspired, drawing on queer theory to inform our interpretations. Using literary critics’ theories about the courtship plot, we’ll analyze Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories about marriages in trouble. We’ll then discuss Kristen Roupenian’s short story “Cat Person,” a story about a bad date and breaking up over text, in the context of recent popular sociology and cultural history about the way we date now. The goal of this unit is to learn how to use a secondary source to inform and develop an argument about a primary source.

**Unit 3: Choose Your Own (Romantic) Adventure**
After examining the different ways courtship plots represent the trials of modern lovers, you’ll be ready to scrutinize a love story of your choosing. You’ll be free to select a film, a novel or collection of short stories, a TV episode (or several episodes), personal essays or other nonfiction writing, etc. You’ll then engage in independent research, using Harvard’s library resources, to help contextualize whatever love story you’ve chosen. The goal of this unit is to draw on secondary sources to develop an argument that is in dialogue with the work of other scholars.

**Readings:**

There is only one book you must buy or borrow for class: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. This book will be available at the COOP as well as at other bookstores and through online vendors. You can also borrow it from the Harvard libraries. If you have any trouble obtaining a copy, please let me know.

Additional readings will be posted on the course website, where you can print them in advance, and they will be distributed in class in advance of discussion. You’ll be expected to bring the assigned book or reading to class on the day it’s discussed. The film *Brokeback Mountain* will be screened...
separately from class. Students will receive an extra one-day extension if they attend the screening; otherwise, they may watch the film on their own.

Conferencing, Workshopping, and Revising

Writing is a process, and this course gives you the opportunity to pursue this process fully. After you turn in each draft, you’ll set up an appointment to meet with me, one-on-one, and discuss how to revise your writing. I’ll send you comments on the draft before our meeting, and I’ll ask you to 1) read those comments and 2) come prepared with some specific ideas or questions.

Each of the first two units will include an in-class workshop, which include a peer review and a workshop with the entire class. The purpose of these workshops is for you to learn how to recognize strengths and weaknesses in your own writing and to find inspiration for your revision.

For our third unit, you’ll work in research teams based on shared research interests. You’ll do some in-class peer editing, and you’ll participate in a group draft conference, with my presence and feedback.

Your revisions will be due seven days after your draft conference. The revisions will be substantial, so build in time to reflect on feedback, experiment with new approaches, and, of course, to proofread your work.

Grade Breakdown
Your final essays are your only graded assignments. They compose the majority of your final grade. Essay 1 is worth 25% of your term grade, Essay 2 is worth 30%, and Essay 3 is worth 35%. The expectations for each paper increase as the term proceeds, since you’ll be building off skills you developed in the prior unit. The remaining 10% of your grade reflects your thoughtful completion of response papers, your cover letters, your participation in class discussion and in workshops, and your preparation for class and for your draft conferences.

Course Policies

Attendance and Lateness
Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. It is an official program-wide policy that if you are absent without medical or religious excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed. On your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation.

You are expected to let me know promptly if you have missed or will miss a class; you remain responsible for the work due that day and for any new work assigned. Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In those circumstances, you should contact me before class (or within 24 hours); you may need to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or from your Freshman Dean. Absences because of special events, such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences, letting me
know in advance. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you must directly petition the Director of Expository Writing, who will grant such a petition only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

**Class begins promptly on the hour or half hour. Three late arrivals will be counted as an absence. A missed draft conference will also count as an absence.**

**Completion of Work**
Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, it is an official Writing Program policy that you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course (not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind). If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements. The letter will specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date (unless you have documented a medical problem), you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed.

**Once** during the course of the semester, you may turn in one assignment, a response paper OR a draft, 24 hours after it is due. (All revisions are due on the stated deadline.) You must request this extension in advance of the deadline. No other extensions will be granted outside of emergency circumstances.

**Electronic Submission**
You will submit most of your work electronically this semester. Most often, you’ll upload it to the course website. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx). It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.

**Policy on Collaboration**
The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students or through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the Student Handbook, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

**Academic Honesty**
Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite sources and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless that is explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to disciplinary action by the Administrative Board.

In each revision letter, include a statement affirming your awareness of the honor code and testifying to the originality of your work.
Electronics
As some of our readings show, technology has changed the way we talk to each other. We’re often talking to one person while also texting another person, DMing a third person, checking email, refreshing Twitter, etc. (I am guilty of this too!) But as you probably know, this way of talking can sometimes make it hard to hear or remember what someone says to you, or to think clearly yourself. So, **during our discussion periods, please close/turn off all electronics.** You won’t need to take too many notes during discussion, and for many of you, a pen and paper will suffice for note-taking. During other periods of class—taking notes on one of my presentations or taking minutes during group work, or during periods of free-writing—you may use your computers. I will usually be circulating during these periods, and if it looks like there are one-too-many tabs open on your computer screen, I will gently suggest that you return to a Word or Pages document.

Phones, on the other hand, should be out of sight and out of mind for the entire class period.

**NB: If you have a note from the Accessible Education Office about your electronics use, please let me know.**

If you’re using an e-text, please email me in advance.

Resources

Office Hours
In addition to meeting during your draft conferences, you should feel free to come meet with me during my office hours, which will be Thursdays 3-5PM and by appointment. My office is located at 1 Bow Street, #224. If you’re going to drop by, please give me a heads-up (in person or over email) so you don’t find yourself waiting!

Writing Center
The Writing Center (located on the garden level of the Barker Center) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. I can’t stress strongly enough the benefit of the service they provide; regardless of the "strength" or "weakness" of the essay, any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. Visit the Writing Center's web site at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr to make an appointment. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours at other campus locations; see the Writing Center website for details.

Harvard Guide to Using Sources
I’ll ask you to consult the *Harvard Guide to Using Sources* several times during the semester. It’s available online: http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do.

MLA Style Guide
For this course, you’ll use the Modern Language Association’s Style Guide. (Your other courses may require different citation formats.) You can find a hard copy in the library or find it online through university websites. I’d also recommend a style guide like Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style.*

Final Recommendations
Read attentively and take notes as you do; save and backup your work; keep a calendar of assignments and deadlines; check your email; eat well; sleep enough; move your body; hang out with
friends and with no agenda; be generous with your peers and with yourself. Your time at Harvard will be very rewarding; it will also simply be one phase of your life, not your entire life. I'm always available as a sounding board, a first reader, or a reality check. Feel free to email me at any time.