

GASLIGHTING:

Sex, Gender, and Mental Illness in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Literature and Film

ENGL 3924/WGST 3720 ♦ THURS. 6:30–9:30 PM ♦ GAB 114 ♦ FALL 2023

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Office: LANG Building 408-E
Office hours: Mon. 12:00–2:00 pm

Course Description:

The term “gaslighting” has reentered the popular lexicon with a vengeance in recent years, making its way into countless headlines and conversations about sex, race, politics, medicine, and emotional abuse. The term has a very specific origin that some of its present-day users may not be aware of, however: it comes from Patrick Hamilton’s 1938 play—and, more famously, the 1944 Hollywood adaptation of the play—*Gaslight*, the plot of which is set in Victorian London and focuses, as many works of Victorian fiction do, on the relationship between sex, gender, power, and (self-)perceptions of mental illness. In this class, we will consider fictional texts from three distinct periods: the Victorian era itself; the post-World War II era, during which *Gaslight*-inspired films became a genre unto themselves (known as “gaslight noir”); and the past two decades, during which a number of neo-Victorian novels and films have taken a number of neo-gaslighting turns.

Required reading (please either purchase or order through ILL the editions listed):

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847): Oxford, ISBN 9780199535590
Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966): Norton, ISBN 9780393352566
Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831): Penguin, ISBN 9780140437492
Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862): Oxford, ISBN 9780199577033
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) – pdf provided on Canvas
Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (2002): Penguin, ISBN 9781573229722
Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic* (2020): Del Rey, ISBN 9780525620808

Required home viewing (watch films on as big a screen as you can!):

Rebecca (1940, dir. Alfred Hitchcock): <https://discover.library.unt.edu/catalog/b7559684>
Gaslight (1944, dir. George Cukor): <https://discover.library.unt.edu/catalog/b7667391>
Experiment Perilous (1944, dir. Jacques Tourneur): <https://archive.org/details/experiment-perilous-1944->
The Spiral Staircase (1946, dir. Robert Siodmak): <https://discover.library.unt.edu/catalog/b7667399>
So Evil My Love (1948, dir. Lewis Allen): <https://discover.library.unt.edu/catalog/b7684848>
The Innocents (1961, dir. Jack Clayton): DVD on reserve in Chilton; in-class screening on 10/12
Crimson Peak (2015, dir. Guillermo del Toro): <https://discover.library.unt.edu/catalog/b7577130>
Lady Macbeth (2016, dir. William Oldroyd): <https://discover.library.unt.edu/catalog/b7667392>
The Handmaiden (2016, dir. Park Chan-wook): https://archive.org/details/img-2754_202303

GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Participation/attendance: 25%
Canvas discussion board posts: 20%
Article explication paper: 10%
Article explication presentation: 5%
Close reading assignment: 10%
Research assignment: 10%
Final paper brainstorming conference: 5%
Final paper: 15%

Participation: This course is discussion-based. Your verbal contributions and active engagement are crucial to our collective success. To that end, your participation grade is determined not only by attendance, but also your involvement (or lack thereof) in discussion. Excellent course participants will make quality contributions, which demonstrate they have completed all viewings assigned (as well as any supplementary readings or handouts). They are attentive to the nuances of the text and discussion prompts. They show genuine engagement with others (in other words, they don't talk "at" people—they talk *with* them). Remember not to conflate participation with domination: excellent discussion participants make the space necessary for others to think and to speak.

Attendance: Regular attendance is crucial to your success and to the success of this course. Class discussion (and the ad hoc lecture material provided during class) is not merely supplementary—it's where the learning happens. That said, I do not want you coming to class if you are feeling sick and may potentially cause others to become sick as well. If you are sick, please let me know ASAP (**prior to class** except in cases of emergency) so I can help you to stay on track. Missing six or more class meetings will result in automatic failure of the course unless you have been in **proactive contact** with me and we are on the same page about the seriousness of what has been causing you to miss class. The main thing is, in all things course-related: communicate, communicate, communicate!

Canvas discussion board posts: In lieu of reading or viewing quizzes, you will demonstrate to me that you have completed all assigned readings and viewings by responding to discussion prompts in Canvas. Due to the new realities of A.I., at the beginning of the semester I will be asking you to bring a laptop or other personal device to class so that you can answer the discussion board question in person, during the first 10-15 minutes of class. (I have a few options in mind for those of you with "time and a half" accommodations; we'll find one that works for you.) We may pivot to pre-class discussion board posts later on in the semester, depending on how things are going. The purpose of these posts is twofold: to prove to me that you're doing the assigned reading and/or viewing, and to get you to formulate ideas in written form about the texts we are considering. Each of your posts should be 5-6 sentences long and should cite concrete, specific details from the text(s) at hand to support your points. More detailed instructions for these posts will be provided.

Article explication paper/presentation: I have posted on Canvas one scholarly article about each of the books and films we'll be reading and watching this semester. Anyone who would like to read these articles in full will be able (and encouraged!) to do so, but each student will only be **required** to carefully read one of the articles over the course of the semester. On your own, you'll write a 750-1000 word "explication" of your assigned article, due on the day we discuss the book or film that the article is about. In this explication, you will summarize and evaluate the key points that the article's author is making, using some brief direct quotes from the article itself (properly cited) but putting

most of the author's ideas and arguments into your own clear, concise words. At the end of the paper, you must also express your opinion of the article, mentioning at least one point that you felt was particularly convincing and one that you felt was problematic or faulty in some way.

In addition to this individually-written paper, you will also have to present the main arguments and key points of the article to the rest of the class along with several other students who have been assigned to the same article. Please be as equitable in dividing up the presentation duties as possible, and contact me if you encounter any groupwork-distribution difficulties. More detailed instructions for this two-part assignment will be provided.

Close reading assignment: Because close textual analysis is one of the primary building blocks of literary criticism, you will practice this important skill roughly halfway through the semester by performing a detailed reading of a passage from one of the texts we have read up until that point. (I will provide you with 4 passage options and you will select one of them to analyze in this way.) This writing will also take place in class (on 10/5) and will be done in blue books; it will serve as a “midterm” of sorts, but will feel more like an in-class short paper than like a test.

Research assignment: Outside of class you will also be asked to write one other short paper, for which you will perform different kinds of historical research to learn more about a historical figure, a historical event, or a material object that's referred to in one of the books/films we read or watch. More details instructions for this assignment will be provided.

Final paper brainstorming conference: As you begin to think about what you want to write on in your final paper, each of you will sign up for a brief (10-15 minute) one-on-one zoom call with me, during which we'll have a targeted conversation about potential final paper topics for you and I'll be able to provide you with customized feedback and recommendations for the paper moving forward. This is a required—not optional!—meeting and will count toward your final grade.

Final paper: The big assignment of the semester is a 5-7 page, thesis-driven essay on one or more of the course texts. I will go over pointers and expectations for this assignment closer to the time it's due, and will leave some class time for peer workshopping of paper introductions on 11/30. More details instructions for this assignment will also be provided.

COURSE POLICIES/RESOURCES:

Class discussion protocols and expectations: In this class we will be dealing on a regular basis with issues related to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, disability, religion, and other categories of social and personal identification. While there will certainly be room for multiple perspectives and opinions in our verbal and written discussions of the course materials, what there will be no room for is racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, religious intolerance, or any other form of bigotry or hate speech, and I will actively work to foster a classroom environment that is welcoming and respectful to all. (Course-wide content alert: many of our assigned texts contain implicitly and/or explicitly disturbing content. If there is a certain kind of subject matter that is particularly difficult for you to read or watch, please contact me privately to discuss alternatives.)

Office hours/one-on-one communication: If you have questions or concerns that you'd like to discuss with me one-on-one, I'll be holding virtual office hours from 12:00-2:00 pm on Mondays at <https://unt.zoom.us/j/88121517464> . (I'm happy to meet with you in person if you'd prefer, but

have found in recent years that many more students show up to my office hours when they're primarily offered remotely.) You are also, of course, welcome to email me (at nora.gilbert@unt.edu) at any time with questions or concerns and I will always try to reply to your message within 24 hours, except on weekends. Please also be sure to check **your** UNT email **and** Canvas accounts at least **once a day** to make sure you're seeing all announcements and info from me as well!

Course modality: This course has been officially approved as a partially remote course, which means that up to 49% of our class sessions may be conducted remotely via Zoom and at least 51% of them will be held in person. That said, I only plan to hold classes remotely when I am feeling sick myself or out of town for professional reasons (e.g., attending a conference). I will always try to let you know as early as possible when I need to move the class online, and will notify you through email and on the Canvas announcement page. On the days when we do meet via Zoom, you will need to have your camera turned on unless you've contacted me beforehand to let me know a specific reason why that is not possible for you.

Academic integrity policy: Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences. According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

A.I. policy: The use of generative A.I. writing tools (such as ChatGPT, GrammarlyGO, GPT-3, GPT-4, BERT, or others) is prohibited in this class. Assignments for the course have been designed to help you develop as a writer without the use of these technologies. You will generate ideas, read, revise, and write on your own and/or in consultation with peers, me, or Writing Center tutors, and you will not use A.I. at any stage of your writing process. You are the author of your work for the course and authorship means you take responsibility for your words and claims. Any use of AI technologies in your work will be considered a [violation of UNT's academic integrity policy](#) and addressed accordingly. *Statement composed by Annette Vee, under CC-BY-NC (Creative Commons By-Noncommercial license).

Accessibility: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for all students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the [ODA website \(https://disability.unt.edu/\)](https://disability.unt.edu/). I am deeply committed to facilitating your success in this course; please don't hesitate to contact me about any accessibility issues.

Sexual harassment and assault: UNT is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and harassment, including sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and stalking. If you or someone you know experiences any of these acts, UNT has staff members trained to support you in accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more. You can receive immediate

assistance by contacting SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or 940-565-2648. The Denton County Friends of the Family 24-hour crisis line at 940-382-7273 might also be of help in cases of emergency.

Student support services: UNT provides mental health resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus that can support your academic success and mental well-being:

- Student Health and Wellness Center (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center>)
- Counseling and Testing Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- UNT Care Team (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care>)
- UNT Psychiatric Services (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry>)
- Individual Counseling (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling>)
- Academic Resource Center (<https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources>)
- Academic Success Center (<https://success.unt.edu/asc>)
- Writing Lab (<http://writingcenter.unt.edu/>)

DISCUSSION SCHEDULE:

8/24: Course introduction; student introductions
In-class viewing: *Gaslight* (1944)

8/31: **Pre-class reading:** *Jane Eyre*, Vol. I, Ch. I – Vol. I, Ch. X (pp. 7-91)
Pre-class viewing: *Rebecca* (1940)

[Model presentation: “Black Satin: Fantasy, Murder, and the Couple in *Gaslight* and *Rebecca*”]

9/7: **Pre-class reading:** *Jane Eyre*, Vol. I, Ch. XI – Vol. II, Ch. VIII (pp. 91-214)
Pre-class viewing: *Experiment Perilous* (1944)

[Model presentation: *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*]

9/14: **Pre-class reading:** *Jane Eyre*, Vol. II, Ch. IX – Vol. III, Ch. IV (pp. 214-349)
Pre-class viewing: *The Spiral Staircase* (1946)

[Article presentation #1: “Something Beneath the Flesh: Music, Gender, and Medical Discourse in the 1940s Female Gothic Film”]

9/21: **Pre-class reading:** *Jane Eyre*, Vol. III, Ch. V – end (pp. 349–440)
Pre-class reading: *Wide Sargasso Sea*, first half (beginning to p. 86)

[Article presentation #2: “The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness”]

- 9/28: **Pre-class reading:** *Wide Sargasso Sea*, second half (p. 86 to end)
Pre-class reading: *The History of Mary Prince*, incl. preface/supplement/appendix (pp. 3-70)
Pre-class reading: “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (sections on *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 243-54)

[Article presentation #3: “Fighting Mad: Between Sides & Stories in *Wide Sargasso Sea*”]

- 10/5: **Pre-class reading:** *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Vol. I (pp. 7-132)
Pre-class viewing: *So Evil My Love* (1948)
In-class close reading assignment

- 10/12: **Pre-class reading:** *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Vol. II (pp. 133-261)
In-class screening: *The Innocents* (1961) – Go directly to RTFP Bldg, Room 184 @ 6:30 pm

- 10/19: **Pre-class reading:** *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Vol. III (pp. 263-380)
Pre-class reading: “The Yellow Wallpaper”/“Why I Wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper”” (pdf)

[Article presentation #4: “Disclosure as ‘Cover-up’: The Discourse of Madness in *L4S*”]

- 10/26: **Pre-class reading:** *Fingersmith*, Part One (pp. 3–184)
Pre-class viewing: *Crimson Peak* (2015)

[Article presentation #5: “Challenging the Victorian Nuclear Family Myth: The Incest Trope in Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak*”]

- 11/2: **Pre-class reading:** *Fingersmith*, Part Two (pp. 187–416)
Pre-class viewing: *Lady Macbeth* (2016)

[Article presentation #6: “Three Lady Macbeths and a Critique of Imperialism”]

- 11/9: NO CLASS (required one-on-one Zoom call to discuss final paper ideas, on 11/6 or 11/7)

11/12: Research assignment due @ 11:59 pm via Canvas

- 11/16: **Pre-class reading:** *Fingersmith*, Part Three (pp. 419–582)
Pre-class viewing: *The Handmaiden* (2016)

[Article presentation #7: “Secondary Pleasures, Spatial Occupations, and Postcolonial Departures: Park Chan-wook’s *The Handmaiden* and Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith*”]

- 11/23: THANKSGIVING – NO CLASS

- 11/30: **Pre-class reading:** *Mexican Gothic*, Ch. 1 - 18 (pp. 3–198)
• In-class peer-workshop of paper introductions

- 12/7: **Pre-class reading:** *Mexican Gothic*, Ch. 19-27 (pp. 199-301)

12/10: Final paper due @ 11:59 pm via Canvas