

American Women's Fantastic Fiction

Dr Dara Downey (downeyd@tcd.ie)

Year: Junior Sophister

Term: Hilary Term

ECTS: 10

Module Outline

Contemporary anthologies and studies of “non-realist” or speculative genres like fantasy, science fiction, and gothic horror are all too often guilty of overlooking or even actively ignoring the central and long-standing contribution made to these genres by women writers. These culturally undervalued forms are too easily dismissed as minor works of escapism. As the stories covered in this module illustrate, however, working outside of a strictly realist mode can function as a useful strategy for critiquing the position of women in society, defamiliarising a status quo so pervasive it is all but invisible.

“American Women's Fantastic Fiction” therefore focuses on the variety of ways in which, since the mid-1800s, women writers from the United States have made use of non-realist genres and modes within short fiction as a means of both protesting and celebrating women's positioning in what was still a self-consciously new and ostensibly utopian nation. It introduces students to the imaginative and discursive breadth displayed in texts produced by female writers prior to the 1970s. In doing so, the module explores the developments and continuities in fantastic fiction by women writers from the American Civil War, through the fin-de-siècle period, and into Modernism and its immediate aftermath. In this way, the module problematises rigid periodisation, in particular by highlighting the formal innovation and conceptual range of writers who employ a range of fantastical genres to explore issues from racism and oppression to infidelity and financial ruin, from science and the senses to the very nature of reality itself.

Class Schedule

Week 1. Introductory Class

Week 2. The Femme Fatale

Harriet Prescott Spofford, “The Amber Gods” (1863)

Louisa May Alcott, “A Pair of Eyes; or, Modern Magic” (c.1864)

Week 3. Permeable Spaces

Emma Frances Dawson, “An Itinerant House” (1878)

Madeline Yale Wynne, “The Little Room” (1895)

Week 4. Ontological Horrors

Elia W. Peattie, “The Shape of Fear” (1898)

Mary Wilkins Freeman, “The Hall Bedroom” (1905)

Week 5. Science Fiction

Francis Stevens, “Friend Island” (1918) and “Unseen – Unfeared” (1919)

Week 6. Folktales and the Oral Tradition

Zitkála-Šá, “The Trial Path” and “The Widespread Enigma of Blue-Star Woman” (1921)

Week 7. READING WEEK – NO CLASS

Week 8. The Big House 1

Edith Wharton, "Afterward" (1910) and "All Souls" (1937)

Week 9. The Femme Fatale 2

Zora Neal Hurston, "Spunk" (1925)

Eudora Welty, "Circe" (1955)

Week 10. Surrealism

Leonora Carrington, "The Debutante" (1937) and "White Rabbits" (1941)

Week 11. The Big House 2

Shirley Jackson, "A Visit" (1950) and "The Story We Used to Tell" (published posthumously)

Week 12. Psychological Terrors and Module Conclusion

Sylvia Plath, "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" (published posthumously)

Assessment

The module will be assessed by one final essay (5,000-6,000 words).

Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this module, a student should be able to:

1. Identify and describe critically the primary characteristics of fantasy, science fiction, and horror fiction as evidenced by the texts covered in the module.
2. Employ a range of interpretive strategies to analyse these texts using appropriate critical vocabulary and theoretical frameworks.
3. Describe the role played by US culture and history, as well as by related authors and literary movements, as key contexts for the texts discussed on the module.
4. Generate original research questions through the identification of an engagement with relevant critical and primary sources.
5. Evaluate American women's writing in non-realist genres via written work and oral contributions to class discussions.

Suggested Secondary Reading

Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*

Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*

Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*

Wendy K. Kolmar and Lynette Carpenter (eds.), *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*

Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*

Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Men and the Flight from Commitment*

Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

Judith Fryer, *The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century American Novel*
Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*
Glenwood Irons, *Gender, Language and Myth: Essays on Popular Narratives*
Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*
Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920*
Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830 – 1980*
Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*
Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*
Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*
Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book*