

Fresher/Sophister Module Description Template 2026-27

Full Name: Writing Lives: Early Twentieth-Century Auto/biography and Biografiction

Short Name: Writing Lives

Lecturer Name(s) and Email Address(es): Dr Melissa Alexander, alexanmr@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester Taught MT/HT: Michaelmas Term

Module Outline: Since the 1980s, many scholars have suggested that auto/biography is an essential vehicle for articulating the critical values and concerns that define literary representation and interpretation. This module explores the evolving conventions of life writing from the turn of the twentieth century through the modernist period, tracing continuities and innovations in how writers used the genre to grapple with the limits of understanding the self and the challenges of representing others. Key topics include shifting conceptions of selfhood, the relationship between biographer and subject, the genre's invocation of the life of solitude and the life of society, as well as questions of authenticity, performativity, and privacy, temporality and memory. The course begins by exploring key examples of modernist and contemporary theories about life writing, moves from auto/biographical material and autobiografiction to various types of biografictions, and concludes with a reflection on how the ideas underpinning biography might propel our work as literary scholars.

Learning Outcomes:

Upon successful completion of this module, learners will be able to:

- Critically discuss generic fusions between the categories of auto/biography, biography and fiction.
- Evaluate a range of theoretical and practical approaches to life-writing and develop original insights by challenging, extending, or synthesizing these perspectives.
- Analyse the role that expectations about and responses to auto/biography play in the construction of popular and scholarly approaches to literature and literary criticism.
- Compare diverse approaches to the phenomenological, existential, epistemological, temporal, affective, and rhetorical dimensions of life-writing, spanning the late-nineteenth century to the late modernist period.
- Explore how the issues that life-writing raises intersect with critical values regarding the nature of literature and modes of interpretation.
- Analyse texts through close reading and appropriate use of scholarly terminology and secondary criticism.

Assessment Details:

This module will be assessed by a combination of two essays:

1. 1 close reading + a reader response, 1000-1500 words (20% of overall mark)
2. 1 comparative essay (at least 2 texts), words 2000-2500 (80% of overall mark). The essay topic may be of the student's own choice, developed through consultation with the lecturer.

Primary Reading List:

Week 1: Theorising Life-writing: “The New Biography” (Virginia Woolf, 1927) and “Preface” to *Eminent Victorians* (Lytton Strachey, 1918), “Autobiography” in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (Elizabeth Bowen, c.1951), “Autobiography and the Novel” (Storm Jameson, 1931)

Week 2: Memory and Childhood: “Sketch of the Past” in *Moments of Being* (Virginia Woolf, 1939)

Week 3: Perception, Memory, and Aesthetic Autobiografiction: Excerpts from *Swann’s Way* Vol.1 of *Remembrance of Things Past* (Marcel Proust, 1913)

Week 4: The Novelisation of Auto/Biography: *Lost Writings: Two Novels by Mina Loy* (Mina Loy, 2024)

Week 5: Ecological Autobiografiction: *All the Dogs of My Life* (Elizabeth Von Arnim, 1995)

Week 6: Reading Week

Week 7: Travel Writing and Autobiography: *Journey Without Maps* (Graham Greene, 1936)

Week 8: Anti-Bildungsroman: *The Three Sisters* (May Sinclair, 1914)

Week 9: The Novelization of Biography: *I Live Under a Black Sun* (Edith Sitwell, 1937)

Week 10: Counterfeit Lives: *The Moon and Sixpence* (Somerset Maugham, 1919)

Week 11: Satire: *Some People* (Harold Nicolson, 1927)

Week 12: “The New Biography”: *Orlando: A Biography* (Virginia Woolf, 1928)

Most of these texts are available online via Gutenberg or archive.org or at the Eavan Boland Library, but any material that is in limited circulation will be provided on Blackboard.

Recommendations for Secondary Reading

Boldrini, Lucia, and Julia Novak. *Experiments in Life-Writing*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Bradford, Richard, ed. *A companion to literary biography*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

Dhúill, Caitriona Ní. *Metabiography: Reflecting on biography*. Springer Nature, 2020.

DiBattista, Maria, and Emily O. Wittman, eds. *Modernism and autobiography*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

France, Peter, and William St Clair, eds. *Mapping lives: The uses of biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Hoberman, Ruth. *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in English Biography, 1918-1939*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Marcus, Laura. *Auto/biographical discourses: Criticism, theory, practice*. Manchester University Press, 1994.

Saunders, Max. *Self impression: Life-writing, autobiografiction, and the forms of modern literature*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Please note:

- **Curricular information is subject to change.**
- **Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.**