

**Sex Without Consequence:  
Modern Fiction and Femininity  
From *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* to *Fifty Shades of Grey***

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 11am-12pm & by appointment

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Tuesday 12-2:50pm  
Rolfe 3120

This class considers the consequences of sex for the modern woman. We will begin by reading six novels by female authors of the American interwar period (1915-1929). We will end the course by comparing these novels to two more recent narratives of feeling, femininity, and female sexuality: the 2008 film *Sex and the City* and the 2011 novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (initially, and infamously, a work of *Twilight* fan fiction). In most of these texts, unmarried female characters have sex without dying, getting pregnant, derailing their careers, or otherwise falling from grace. These characters also travel abroad, pursue higher education, and nurture creative ambitions. Several narratives end with maternity, but these, too, repudiate conventional depictions of female sexuality and desire. The interwar-era plots may seem unremarkable by contemporary standards, but they were shocking enough to interwar readers to inspire book bans, best-seller status, and, in one case, a syndicated comic strip, a Broadway musical, and a Hollywood film. In other words, the tumult caused by *Fifty Shades of Grey* (also a controversial best-seller that has inspired book bans and an upcoming movie) is hardly new.

Despite this abundant initial popular and critical attention, these innovative literary projects have been largely ignored by scholars of the past eighty years. We will consider the myriad reasons for this oversight. We will look at the novels' original reviews, often a mixture of acclaim and condemnation. We will also consider the works' cultural and historical contexts, from the rise of pink-collar labor, suffrage, birth control, and free love advocacy to the Great War, prohibition, and emergent modernism. We will also examine the period's antipathy towards nineteenth-century mores of femininity and sexuality, often linked under the sign of "sentimentalism"—a literary mode associated with hyperbolic displays of emotion, religious morality, and women writers and readers. How do these modern female authors grapple with assumptions about "women's literature"? How do their modern works reinvent as well as critique this tradition? Finally, when considered in relation to *Sex and the City* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, how do the paradoxes, double standards, and double binds these novels register persist in contemporary expectations of female sexuality, femininity, and literature by women writers?

Reading list

(In order of course reading)

Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915)  
Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* (1923)  
Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925)  
Frances Newman, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926)  
Edith Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927)  
Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929)

Michael Patrick King, *Sex and the City* (2008)\*

\* Based on the book by Candace Bushnell, a dynamic we will discuss

E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011)\*\*

\*\* Based on the episodic fan fiction “Master of the Universe,” by Snowqueen’s Icedragon (the pen name of Erika Leonard, subsequently known as E. L. James), a dynamic we will also discuss

We will also look at a few choice non-fiction texts that discuss women, sex, and modern literature. Examples include excerpts from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1898), Margaret Sanger’s *What Every Girl Should Know* (1916), and H. L. Mencken’s *In Defense of Women* (1918). These supplementary readings will be provided each week.

### Assignments and grading

Classwork (includes presentation) 25%

Paper One (4-6 pages) 25%

Paper Two (6-8 pages) 30%

Participation 20%

### Classwork

We will do small, weekly writing assignments as building blocks towards each of the two papers. We will work with these assignments in class on their due date, so they must exist, in hard copy, at the start of each class period.

Students will also be responsible for a short (5-7 minute) oral presentation on a single novel. These presentations will initiate class discussion that day and thus should focus on raising questions rather than providing answers about the given work. I will deliver an example presentation at our second meeting.

### Papers

Both papers will be analytical essays about at least one course novel. Topics will be distributed well in advance of the due date and are always flexible (translation: if you have an exciting idea/question/hunch/puzzle, just ask!). Papers should include a well-formulated, argumentative, focused thesis and ample, pertinent textual support. They must also be typed, double-spaced, MLA-formatted with a proper heading, margins, and Works Cited.

The second paper should briefly consider the novel’s original reception and cite at least two reviews that speak, in some way, to the essay’s overarching claims. To that end, we will dedicate an early class session to a library orientation to archival research. I will be happy to discuss additional tips for archival research throughout the quarter.

### Additional requirements

The success of our seminar depends upon the active participation of every student. Participation constitutes a large portion (20%) of the final grade for the course. I will calculate it as follows: I will not keep track of the number of times you raise your hand; I will attend to the evidence that you actively, regularly engage with the material, share

your insights and questions with the class, and incorporate these thoughts as well as my feedback into the course assignments.

### Weekly schedule

Please note that, although each week highlights main topics, these themes and issues recur throughout the novels we will read. Once a topic has been introduced, it is fair to expect it to reappear (and reconfigure) in future weeks.

#### Week 1: Contexts

Topics include the New Woman, birth control, suffrage, and the changing field of women's labor, from domestic work and factory positions to stenography and department store clerkships.

Reading (in class): excerpts from Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* and Sanger, *What Every Girl Should Know*

#### Week 2-3: Cather, *The Song of the Lark*

Topics include the sentimental tradition and the bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel).

Note: the second half of class in week 2 will be dedicated to an orientation to archival research at YRL (we will focus on Cather's early journalism and *Song of the Lark* reviews).

#### Week 4: Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements*

Topics include socialism, immigration, urban issues, and ethnic literature.

#### Week 5: Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

Topics include satire, the free love movement, the Jazz Age, prohibition, and the flapper.

Additional reading: excerpt from Mencken, *In Defense of Women*

#### Week 6: Newman, *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*

Topics include emergent modernism and New Psychology.

Additional reading: "The Importance of Not Being Earnest"

#### Week 7: Wharton, *Twilight Sleep*

Topics include emergent modernism and New Psychology.

#### Week 8: Fauset, *Plum Bun*

Topics include the Harlem/New Negro Renaissance, New Negro femininity, racial passing and modernist primitivism.

#### Week 9: King, *Sex and the City* and first 50 pages of James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Topics include all of the above, and more.

#### Week 10: James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and course summary

Optional class fieldtrip to see *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015 film).