

**English 5030: Topics in Women's Studies**  
**Coming-of-Age Narratives**  
**Fall, 2006**

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Section # 001, 3 credits  
6-9 p.m. Thursdays  
0262 Manoogian

Office Hours: T/TH 1:20-2:30  
TH 4:30-5:30

Course Description

“Coming of Age” traditionally refers to the transition between adolescence and adulthood. It is often a *Bildungsroman* (“bildungs,” formation; “roman,” novel), a novel about the psychological and emotional journey to maturity. Originally, the *Bildungsroman* was a male quest narrative in fictional form. In this class, we will use these terms more broadly to examine the female quest for maturity, as she and her culture define it, and we will be reading creative non-fiction in the form of memoir and autobiography (and one legend, which we might consider the memoir of a particular culture). Here, “coming of age” and *Bildungsroman* refer to any significant character development that occurs over time (even the span of a single day, or even an hour) as a result of a conflict, challenge or crisis to the character’s sense of “identity.” “Coming of age” in this class refers specifically to (1) an awareness of the significance of time’s passage to the character’s sense of self and (2) the character’s eventual acceptance of the need to move on, leaving aspects of the previous self behind. Since these periods of awareness and acceptance occur periodically throughout one’s life (not just in adolescence) and are sometimes, though not always, initiated by age-related changes in mind or body, we will study texts that address women’s lives over time – childhood, adolescence, adulthood, midlife, and late life. We will use a wide-angle lens to get a better sense of the shape and feel of a woman’s life during this time in American social history (late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century).

In literary terms, the classic *Bildungsroman* was a novel with identifiable characteristics:

- Focused on the journey from (male) childhood to adulthood
- journey was initiated by loss or discontent
- the narrative focused on development through education within a specific social order
- the main character moved from a small sphere (family, community) to a larger sphere (city, foreign country, world at large)
- the main character endured repeated internal and external conflicts between his needs/desires and the expectations of others

- in the end, the main character resolves these conflicts, adjusts, and finds his place in the social order, using what he has learned in his journey from one social sphere to another

As we will see, women writers have resisted and revised this version of coming of age in an effort to represent their own development. We will use the texts in this class to identify and explore the ways in which women's narratives are similar to and different from the classic male version of the *Bildungsroman*.

Our texts for the class include films, as well as memoirs, and we will analyze these texts through the lenses of autobiographical and feminist criticisms. We will discuss common themes across women's coming-of-age narratives, including internal and external conflicts between individual and group identities, mother figure and daughter, father figure and daughter, relationship and career, as well as conflicts over body image, gender and sexual identity.

#### Course Texts (Available at Marwil Bookstore):

Required:

1. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
2. Christy Rishoi, *From Girl to Woman: American Women's Coming-of-Age Narratives*. New York: SUNY Press, 2003.
3. Jill Ker Conway, *True North*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
4. Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000.
5. Doris Grumbach, *Fifty Days of Solitude*. Boston: Beacon, 1994.
6. Velma Wallis, *Two Old Women*. New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

Choose One for Group Presentation:

1. Katherine Tarbox, *A Girl's Life On Line: My Story*.
2. Liz Perle, *Money, A Memoir: Women, Emotions and Cash*.
3. Michelle Herman, *The Middle of Everything: Memoirs of Motherhood*.
4. Anne Herrmann, *A Menopausal Memoir: Letters from Another Climate*.
5. Carolyn Heilbrun, *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond 60*.

#### Assignments and Grading

Your grade will be determined by your performance in four areas: in-class involvement, the group presentation, two five-page essays in multiple drafts, and a final exam.

*Involvement: 15 %*

Attendance and participation are required each week that class meets. You are expected to be present during the entire three-hour class period. If you arrive late (20 minutes or more) and/or leave early (20 minutes or more) you will be marked absent, unless you discuss the situation with me before class. You are allowed one absence; any more than

that will affect your final grade.

*Group Presentation: 20%*

You will work in a group of four or five students to do a one-hour class presentation on the book you have selected from the optional reading list. (You will all read the same book.) The purpose of the presentation is to introduce your classmates to a book they have not read and to discuss it in terms of the autobiographical and feminist criticism we have been reading in class. You will receive a group grade and an individual grade. The group grade will be assigned by both me and your classmates. The individual grade will be based on a one-page memo each group member submits, detailing his/her contribution to the presentation.

Group grade, 5%; Individual grade: 15%

*Essays: 40%*

You are required to write two five-page essays in multiple drafts. These are meant to be useful exercises in practical criticism. That is, you will be applying key aspects of autobiographical and/or feminist criticism identified by Smith, Watson and Rishoi.

Essays must be typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins, in standard 12-point type. No outside sources are necessary or expected, other than the film for Essay 1. Use the texts from the course to develop your critique. To receive a grade on an essay, you must:

- (1) attach the workshop draft and the Group-Suggestions Form, signed by your workshop members, to the back of your essay.
- (2) Attach a clean copy with your name and the title of the essay to the front.

Essays are due at 6 p.m. on the due date. **I do not accept late papers (after 6:20 on the due date), and I do not accept electronic submissions.** Each graded essay may be revised once for a higher grade. Revisions must be submitted on the date listed in the syllabus.

Essay 1: Summary and Critique of a Coming-of-Age Film – 20%

Since most Hollywood films are produced and promoted within a culture that privileges youth, attractiveness, able-bodiedness, and social adaptation, I have selected films that work against this paradigm in one or more ways. The approved film list (see attached) includes experimental, independent, and international films, as well as mainstream films, that are available on video or DVD. Many provide counter-cultural perspectives that include graphic language and sexual content. Viewer discretion is advised.

Essay 1 due for workshopping: October 19

Essay 1 due for grade: October 26

Essay 2: Summary and Critique of a Coming-of-Age Book – 20%

Essay 2 due for workshopping: November 28

Essay 2 due for grade: December 7

*Final Exam: 25%*

A three-question final exam will be given on the last day of class. The exam will cover all texts discussed in class, including those introduced in group presentations. The questions will be short-essay form, with each question worth 10 points. English 5030

**Paper 1: Questions for Film Analysis**

1. How would you describe the protagonist at the beginning of the film?
2. How would you describe her at the end of the film?
3. What educational experiences have led her to this shift in consciousness? What “painful contradictions,” per Rishoi, has she dealt with?
4. What are some of the “webs of significance” that surround and constrain the protagonist?
5. How does the protagonist identify herself in relation to others? Are these identifications liberating, constraining, or some combination of the two? (Do her relationships cause productive tensions? That is, do they motivate her to come to terms with herself?)
6. In what ways is the character marginalized in terms of mainstream identifications? How does she deal with this sense of marginalization at the beginning and end of the film?
7. If the body is written into this narrative, how does it function in the coming-of-age process?
8. Where does the protagonist assert power and agency in constructing her own identity?
9. Would you say that the protagonist is *in medias res* at the end of the film? Why or why not?
10. In what ways is this narrative specific to a time and place in history? In what ways does it reflect common themes or tropes in women’s coming-of-age that are timeless?

**English 5030: Class Calendar**  
**Fall, 2006**

Week One – September 7, 2006

Introduction to class and classmates

Week Two – September 14

Discuss *Reading Autobiography*, Chaps. 1 and 2

Criteria for Essay 1

Criteria for Group Presentations

Sign up for Group Presentation

Week Three – September 21

Discuss *Reading Autobiography*, Chaps. 3, 6 and 7, and pp. 101-109

Week Four – September 28

Discuss *From Girl to Woman*, Chaps. 1, 2 and 3

Week Five – October 5

Discuss *From Girl to Woman*, Chaps. 4, 5, and 6

Group Presentation: *A Girl's Life On Line*

Week Six – October 12

No class meeting. Read and work on Essay 1. Contact professor via email with questions.

Week Seven – October 19

Essay 1 due for workshopping.

Discuss *True North*, Chaps. 1, 2 and 3

Week Eight – October 26

Essay 1 due for grade

Discuss remainder of *True North*

Group Presentation: *Money, A Memoir*

Week Nine – November 2

Discuss *Bequest and Betrayal*, Prologue, Chaps. 1, 2 and 3

Group Presentation: *The Middle of Everything*

Week Ten – November 9

Essay 1 returned

Discuss *Bequest and Betrayal*, Chaps. 4, 5, 6 and Epilogue

Group Presentation: *A Menopausal Memoir*

Week Eleven – November 16

No class meeting. Read and work on Essay 2. Contact professor via email with questions.

Week Twelve – Class meets on Tuesday, November 21

Essay 2 due for workshopping

Group Presentation: *Last Gift of Time*

Week Thirteen – November 30

Essay 2 due for grade

Discuss *Two Old Women and 50 Days of Solitude*

Review for final exam.

Week Fourteen – December 7

Paper 2 returned

Final Exam

Course Evaluations

Week Fifteen – December 14

Study Day – No class meeting.

Revisions of Paper 2 due in my office

Week Sixteen – December 21

Final grades will be posted on Pipeline by the end of the day