

ENGL 705: War, Gender, and Domesticity

So, why this particular class with these particular books and writers?

-- When I was teaching a class on 9/11 literature, I was struck by an interesting contradictory response:

--One of the immediate reactions to the terrorist attacks was an outpouring of poetry.

--“By the end of September 2001, New York City was awash in poetry.

--People pasted poems on lampposts, bus shelters, subway stations, restaurant windows. They mailed poems to newspapers and to fire and police stations, they published them on websites....

--But not only poetry. Other cultural responses began flooding in as well—popular songs addressed the attacks, as did tv shows like *The West Wing* and *Third Watch*, which scripted special episodes focusing on 9/11. The first documentaries and feature films were released in 2002. The first novels began to appear in 2003.

--Yet, at the same time, there was all this talk from well-known poets, writers, and critics about the inability to speak, about the attacks being “unspeakable” or “unrepresentable,” about the inadequacies of language.

--Some examples:

--James Berger

--Jacques Derrida

Toni Morrison Example

--9/11 reignited questions concerning the relationship between trauma and literature that arose especially in relation to Holocaust writing.

--Can we and should we make art in a time of atrocity?

--If a trauma is so great as to be “unspeakable,” does art simply cheapen it, reduce its scope, wrongly present trauma as something that can be controlled and contained?

--So, there was a contradiction between the absolute need to speak, the impulse to create art, on the one hand, and the impossibility of doing so on the other.

--Soon, a whole new body of criticism arose that focused on 9/11 literature.

--By about 2016, 15 years after 9/11, at least 8 single-authored full-length studies and at least 3 collections of articles had already appeared).

--Only more since then

--Over and over, critics emphasized the novel nature, the “newness” of both the terrorist attacks themselves and of the literature produced in response to the attacks. The dominant critical response was to view the attacks as ushering in a new kind of world that we had to live in and a new kind of literature to accompany this new world.

--Some critics, such as Richard Gray, in his study of 9/11 literature, even asked, “Are words any use at all” after the “unspeakability” of the attacks.

--But perhaps what struck me most strongly about reading and teaching 9/11 literature and the body of criticism that developed in response to it, was the fact that I had heard these things before.

--Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, for instance, muses on the emptiness of words such as “sacred,” “glorious,” “sacrifice” and “in vain” and their lack of relevance in relation to what he actually witnessed in WWI, which he says resembled the stockyards in Chicago.

--Similarly, Vonnegut, in his classic WWII novel, *Slaughterhouse-five*, explains to his editor that his book is so short and jumbled because “there is nothing to say about a massacre.”

--And Tim O’Brien, in his moving Vietnam War novels, frequently expresses his deep suspicion of war writing, particularly histories, when he claims that he must invent things to get at the real truth of what happened.

--So, this course will be about not only the differences between representations of war over the last 100 years, but also about the **continuity** of concerns in American war literature from the 20th C through 9/11

--These shared concerns, it seems to me, exist mainly in two areas: 1) the way that **gendered interests** are both constructed and played out during war, and 2) the struggle to find a **meaningful form** in which to tell war stories.

--I’ll talk for just a few minutes about some of these similarities.

--First is the way that war stories are gendered and who gets to tell them.

--There’s been a lot of work done about gender and cultural responses to 9/11. Susan Faludi is perhaps the best-known critic in this respect. Faludi argues that the popular response to 9/11 involved a reinforcement of traditional, conservative gender dichotomies, in which heroic men, particularly first responders, reacted courageously to protect “damsels in distress,” or women victims endangered by the attacks.

--Such a view, though, as Faludi and other feminist critics have pointed out, reinforces gendered boundaries between public and private space—in which the “front lines” are deemed “masculine domains” and the home front is the realm of women. In the American cultural imagination, men go to war to protect home: wives, mothers, and daughters who need defending. (Of course, the irony of this

view, when 15% of the current U.S. armed forces are women, shouldn't be overlooked!)

--Here are some images of war posters that illustrate this idea

--These posters suggest the idea of women being raped and ravished by the enemy. Men go to war to protect the virtue and purity of their wives, sisters, and mothers on the homefront.

--Interestingly, the phrase "homefront" was first used in *Time* magazine in April 1917, so it arises early in the 20th C, out of the first World War. While, on the one hand, the term works to link home and war, implying that the war effort was not solely the responsibility of those on the front line, it works even more strongly, I'd argue, to reinforce the notion of separate spheres. The domestic qualifier "home" attached to the "front" bolsters the notion of an intrinsically masculine battle front and a feminine home front.

--Ideas about who gets to tell war stories were also coalescing during this period (the First World War). There was a valorization of the soldier-author point of view in which what the actual "bodily pain of warfare" is what gave a writer the authority to speak about war. Of course, one of the results of this was that women were denied the right to speak authentically about war.

--And this emphasis on the soldier-author p-o-v has persisted throughout the 20th C. "If you weren't there, you can't possibly understand" has become an almost clichéd assertion in much of the American fiction about the Vietnam War.

--As feminist Vietnam War critics such as Susan Jeffords and Lorrie Smith have argued, such admonitions are frequently used to silence women readers, in particular, who are not validated to speak about war when war is presented as a purely masculine domain.

--So why a class on war, gender, and domesticity with almost no women writers??

--I wanted to focus specifically on the most iconic writers associated with three of the major 20th C wars that Americans were involved in—Hemingway and the First World War, Kurt Vonnegut and the Second World War, Tim O’Brien and the Vietnam War. We’ll end by examining selected 9/11 literature in the context of these earlier writers.

-- I chose these particular 20th C writers not only because they represent a wide time span, from the beginning, middle, and end of the century, but also because of their enduring popularity and because each writer was so influential on how we interpret war.

--Hemingway’s terse despair about a lost generation in a changing world, Vonnegut’s dark irony, playful understatement, and unconventional plots, and O’Brien’s metafictional ponderings on the moral choices made by decent human beings in unbearable situations all ushered in new styles of war literature.

--But one thing often overlooked is that these writers all challenge traditional gender expectations, especially beliefs about masculine heroism and feminine domesticity that continued to appear and also to be challenged in post 9/11 America. These gender expectations, however nuanced or elaborate, crystallize from the basic notion that boys become men by going to war and girls become women by building a home.

--The writers we’ll focus on, however, all depict male characters who struggle against the expectations of heroic masculinity often associated with war:

--The notion that true masculinity entails embracing war and a warrior culture

--The notion that Western history and cultural mythology can teach men how to behave courageously in wartime

--The frequently repeated truism that one good outcome of war is that it builds a sort of brotherhood among soldiers, a masculine bonding that trumps relations between the sexes and that women cannot possibly hope to understand.

--Instead, the male characters in the American war fiction we'll examine long for domesticity.

--They want to build homes and create safe domestic spaces where they can escape the chaos and destruction they've witnessed in war.

Examples

--Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* deserts the war for Switzerland where he builds a temporary home with Catherine Barkley

--Poor, war-damaged Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* fantasizes about being abducted by space aliens and living in a zoo on another planet with a former porn star as his Eve

--Paul Berlin in Tim O'Brien's *The Great Gatspy* who patiently imagines and spins out a story about fleeing the war to build a home in Paris with a young Vietnamese refugee

--These male characters repeatedly imagine or forge domestic spaces; they try to create homes in the midst of war

--As these American war writers question conventional tropes of heroic masculinity, they also challenge traditional feminine stereotypes that completely remove women from the world of war and war literature or that imagine the domestic realm as a sort of pre-lapsarian place of innocence.

--Their women characters do not remain safely at home, separate from the supposedly masculine arena of war, and they are often more war damaged or even more war savvy than their male counterparts.

--The last part of the course will focus on 9/11 lit, on what happens when the front lines actually come home, when war literally invades the domestic space.

--As in the earlier works, 9/11 writers critique gendered visions of home and war, a critique especially cogent in light of the retrenchment of traditional views of masculinity and femininity in the wake of the attacks.

--Finally, all of the writers we'll focus on in this course are also preoccupied with how best to represent war trauma, how to find the words to talk about war.

--Thus, they all focus on language and storytelling—they are all interested in how trauma gets shaped into art, on who can tell war stories and on how these stories are told.

From James Dawe's *The Language of War*:

--Two views of language:

1) Language of violence

--coercion through language

--language shapes and directs violence through propaganda, patriotic speech etc.

--allied with the post-structural view of the inadequacy of language—i.e: *The Prison-house of Language*

2) "Emancipatory" language

--language can be used to prevent or contain violence.

--Language acts such as witnessing and storytelling curtail violence

--Acts of speaking or speaking out are acts of free agency that combat the coercive force of violence

--Truth and reconciliation committees, for instance.