

sibling theory

ENGL 383-51
WMST 383-51

SPRING 2020

TUES 1-3 PM

OLB 205

VASSAR COLLEGE



course description

In this course, we examine the portrayal of siblings in literature. We borrow the lenses of feminist and queer theory to analyze both the personal and cultural implications of sibling kinship through a selection of novels, short stories, film, and television. With an interdisciplinary frame, we explore insights in humanist and social science fields from sociology and history to psychoanalysis and anthropology.

While brothers and sisters may be ubiquitous in everyday life, it was not until the 1990s that scholars noticed how absent such relations had been from studies of human identity, society, and politics during the past century. The focus, instead, had been on hierarchical principles of organization: on the genealogies that sustain monarchies, on the inheritance dynamics that govern parents and children. Literary criticism had, at times, called attention to the thematic significance of siblings in works such as *Little Women* and *The Mill on the Floss*, but we are only just now beginning to consider how sibling kinship might open new theoretical tools.

In this class, we'll imagine what siblinghood is, what it does, and what it can mean ...

objectives

During this course, students should expect to:

- Perform perceptive close readings of fictional works, paying attention to rhetorical and narrative elements such as diction, imagery, characterization, narration, syntax, and plot.
- Learn about several foundational kinship studies as well as feminist / queer revisionist approaches to them.
- Engage with a range of materials from various academic disciplines and attend to the nuances of their arguments.
- Develop the ability to see how the lenses of critical and theoretical perspectives can be applied to literary texts.
- Write consistently and frequently in order to improve persuasive and analytical writing skills.

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instructor

Dr. Talia Vestri (she/her)

Office: Sanders Classroom 103

Email: tvestri@vassar.edu

Office Hours:

M 4-5pm @ the Retreat

W 10-11.30am @ office

F 12.30-1.30pm via Email

materials

Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*
Norton 9780393977516

Oyinkan Braithwaite,
My Sister, the Serial Killer
Knopf 9780525564201

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*
Oxford 9780199541898

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*
Anchor 9780385721790

J. D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*
Little, Brown 9780316769020

Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*
Penguin 9780735217690

Sophocles, *Antigone*
Dover Thrift 9780486278049

Access to Texts

Printed editions, new or used, can be purchased from the [College Store](#) or from online retailers, or attained from the library. Copies of most texts have been placed on [Course Reserve](#) at [Main Library](#), and are available for 3-day checkout periods at the Circulation Desk. Other versions remain on the shelves and can be located through the [Library Catalogue](#) or requested from other local area libraries through [Connect NY](#).

moodle



In addition to the texts listed above, other readings and materials will be posted on Moodle. Please print these and bring them with you to class. I will also post assignment sheets, an up-to-date syllabus, and any course announcements on Moodle.

contact: email & office hours

I do my best to respond to email within 24 hours, but please note that I check my inbox less frequently on evenings and weekends. In-person office hours provide the best opportunity for us to communicate, and I invite you to stop by any time Mon. through Wed. – if my door is open, come on in!

requirements

engagement

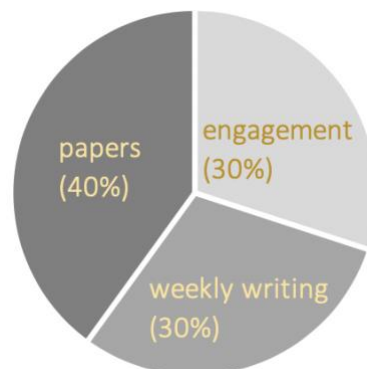
Our seminar sessions will be driven by collaborative discussion. As a student in this course, you will be responsible for presenting thoughtful responses to, and critical analyses of, the assigned readings. You will be asked to make verbal contributions to our conversations each week. Preparing for this level of active engagement will require a careful and considered approach to the texts. We should be reading for more than comprehension. Select and highlight passages that you would like to discuss in class, and prepare some close reading observations. Come to each session ready to share your impressions and interpretations.

weekly writing

In order to help us prepare for our seminar sessions, and to give you an opportunity to bring together some of your thoughts in advance of those meetings, you will be asked to write short comment pieces each week. You must contribute 10 pieces in total for the semester, which means that you may skip 2 weeks of your choosing. Each piece, 300 words or less, should be posted to the corresponding week's Forum on our Moodle site by 9am on Tuesday morning. Posts should raise questions about the readings, suggest links between the fiction and nonfiction assignments, or make provisional interpretive claims. These Forums work especially well when students write comments that respond to other students' posts. Your pieces can be less formal than writing in a paper, but should still be composed in proper English and avoid being overly colloquial, conversational, personal, or tweet-style.

papers

We will write two major papers for this course, one due at the end of spring break and the other due at the end of study period. Each paper (7-8 pages) will provide you with an opportunity to expand upon our work in the classroom by developing your own reading that places our fictional works in conversation with the nonfiction theoretical and critical readings. Details to follow. Late work will not be accepted.



course policies

attendance

Your presence in class is expected at all times. If you need to miss, please alert me in advance if possible—a brief email is adequate; you need not share with me details of your personal wellbeing. If you are aware of upcoming special obligations (religious observance, family travel, varsity athletics, etc.), please notify me as soon as possible. Two absences, whether excused or unexcused, will lower your course grade by one full letter. Three absences will result in your failing the course.

technology

Being fully “present” requires your focused attention, which cannot be shared well with technology. Please store phones, tablets, and computers on silent (not vibrate) and in your bags prior to the start of class.

respect

The classroom can be a challenging space, and our course material may present controversial or sensitive material. As such, we will prioritize respect for our fellow participants. I expect each of you will contribute to the creation of an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome. If you do find yourself feeling uncomfortable with any aspects of our class, I invite you to speak with me or to seek resources that can best support you.

evaluation

feedback

A long-standing practice in the English Department is that individual papers [do not receive quantitative marks](#). This tradition is based upon the theory that a literature course forms a conversation between students and teacher, and that letter grades detract from this conversation. Instead, you will receive substantive comments from me on your two major paper assignments. I will provide occasional feedback on weekly pieces.

grading

Your final course grade will reflect your performance—including efforts, evolution, and improvement—across the entire semester. According to the standards set by both the English department and the College, a passing grade—a C—requires that you be familiar with the content and methods of the course and that you participate fully in it. Performance at a B or A level indicates achievement of a high order or distinction. Further details can be found [on the Department’s website](#).

academic integrity

Submitting a paper with your name on it implies you claim responsibility for all of its words and ideas. Integrating material from other sources, whether online or in print – or the “helping hand” of a friend or family member – violates this policy. Plagiarism, whether intentional or not, will not be taken lightly. Should an issue of plagiarism arise, the Dean of Studies will be alerted and disciplinary action may be taken.

campus resources

[Accessibility and Educational Opportunity Office](#) – OLB 125, aeo@vassar.edu

[Academic Support & Learning Resources](#) – Library Basement, 845-437-7685

[Counseling Service](#) – Metcalf, 845-437-5700, counseling@vassar.edu

[Health Service](#) – Baldwin, 845-437-5800, health@vassar.edu

[Sexual Assault and Violence Prevention](#) – Metcalf, 845-437-7863, email SAVP

[Sexual Assault Response Team](#) – 845-437-7333 (Safety & Security)

[Title IX Office](#) (Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action) – Main, South 182

[Writing Center](#) – Library Room 122, Hours Sun-Thurs 3-11pm, [make appts. here](#)



Romantic Incest & Intimacy

FEBRUARY 4

William Wordsworth, "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" (M)
 George Gordon, Lord Byron, "Epistle to Augusta" and excerpts from *Manfred* (M)
 Percy Bysshe Shelley, from *Laon and Cythna* (M)
 Alan Richardson, "The Dangers of Sympathy: Sibling Incest in Romantic Poetry" (M)

FEBRUARY 11

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*
 Leo Bersani, from *A Future for Astyanax* (M)
 Leila Silvana May, from *Disorderly Sisters* (M)
 Valerie Sanders, from *Brother-Sister Culture in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (M)

FEBRUARY 18

Christina Rossetti, "Goblin Market" (M)
 Claude Lévi-Strauss, from *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (M)
 Gayle Rubin, from "The Traffic in Women" (M)
 Sharon Marcus, from *Between Women* (M)

Rethinking Antigone

FEBRUARY 25

Sophocles, *Antigone*
 Judith Butler, from *Antigone's Claim* (M)
 Stefani Engelstein, "Sibling Logic; or, Antigone Again" (M)

MARCH 3

Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*

Spring Break

Essay #1 Due by midnight on Sunday, March 22

Brother-Sister Revisited

MARCH 24

J. D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*

MARCH 31

Wes Anderson, *The Royal Tenenbaums* (film)
 Sigmund Freud, "Family Romances" and "Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (M)
 Juliet Mitchell, "Siblings: Thinking Theory" (M)

APRIL 7

Jhumpa Lahiri, "Only Goodness" (M)
 Jenny Zhang, "The Evolution of My Brother" (M)
 Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild" (M)

Sisterhoods

APRIL 14

Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*
 Terry Castle, "Sister-Sister" (M)
 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" (M)
 Glenda Hudson, from *Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen's Fiction* (M)

APRIL 21

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

APRIL 28

Oyinkan Braithwaite, *My Sister, the Serial Killer*

MAY 5

Phoebe Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* season 2 (Amazon Prime series)
 William Wordsworth, "The Seven Sisters" and "We are Seven" (M)
 Martha Batiz, "María Times Seven" (M)

Study Break

Essay #2 Due by midnight on Tuesday, May 12

Snow Day Policy: "Spring" term often means winter weather. In the case of a snow event, our class will be moved online to stay on track with the syllabus. Check Moodle for details.