

ENGL 2312.004: The Manic Pixie Dream Girl

Professor: Dr. Kendall Dinniene (“duh-NEEN”)

Course Description

Although film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term “manic pixie dream girl” in 2007, this stock character and her permutations have seemingly been around for much longer. Quirky, cute, and a little anxiety inducing, the manic pixie dream girl violates just enough social norms to attract and transform her strait-laced, cynical male beau. This course will examine literary and filmic representations of the manic pixie dream girl, considering the ways she might affirm (or resist) whiteness, binary gender, neuronormativity, and bodily norms. We will supplement our fictional readings and viewings with scholarly arguments from the fields of Black feminist theory, disability studies, feminist film theory, and fat studies that can help us to better analyze the function of the manic pixie dream girl in American cultural production past and present. Some questions we will consider: What does this trope really do? How might we situate her alongside concepts like the “pick-me” and internalized misogyny? Is this trope nothing but a sexist fantasy, or could she also evidence the ways that a patriarchal society interprets representations of complicated women? Should we wash our hands of this dream girl, or do we still have something to learn from her?

Required Course Texts (hard copies only)

Daisy Miller by Henry James (1879)

The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway (1926)

Passing by Nella Larsen (1929)

Sula by Toni Morrison (1973)

Fight Club by Chuck Palahniuk (1996)

Required Films

Elf (streams on Amazon for about \$4)

Gone Girl (streams on Amazon for about \$4)

If you have trouble procuring any of the required course texts/films please email me ASAP so that I can help. Please note that you must have a hard copy of the required course texts (not digital), but I don’t care which edition you purchase. I will provide hard copies of all additional readings for free.

Student Learning Outcomes

Language and Literature (UC 2016):

Students will demonstrate how symbolic systems communicate meaningfully within their language communities. Students will analyze and create meaningful texts such as analytical essays, literary works, computer code, logical proofs, musical compositions, and films. Students must take one course from the Language and Literature division.

Literary Analysis and Interpretation (Common Curriculum):

Students will be able to analyze texts through close reading, and demonstrate an understanding of the text's underlying historical, social, political, and cultural contexts, in pursuit of an individually-developed, well-argued analysis and interpretation.

What You'll Learn

- To evaluate and analyze written and visual texts and to situate them within their contexts.
- To generate ideas about what you read/view and to support those ideas with evidence.
- To communicate your ideas clearly and compellingly, both verbally and in writing.
- To think critically about dominant narratives of race, gender, body weight, sexuality, and (dis)ability in the US.

Assignments

- Twelve weekly pop quizzes and a variety of pre- and in-class activities including annotated readings, vocab exercises, and writing workshops.
- A collaborative podcast episode submitted with an individual reflection.
- Two 4-5-page essays, each on two course texts and submitted with a reflection.
- An in-class final exam.

Weighted Grades

- Daily Participation 20%
- Weekly Pop Quizzes 15%
- Essay 1 15%
- Podcast 15%
- Essay 2 15%
- Final Exam 20%

Teaching Methods

This course utilizes mini-lectures, instructor-led discussion, close reading and writing workshops, pop quizzes, activities including free writing and think-pair-share, and student-led discussion. I will not spend the majority of our time together lecturing at you; expect to participate generously in shaping this class and contributing to your own and others' learning each day.

Tech-Free Classroom Policy

In an effort to eliminate distractions that could hinder your success, our classroom will be tech-free. That means that we will not be using phones, tablets, laptops, smart watches, or anything else with access to the internet during our class meetings. These items must be silenced and stowed away in your bag or backpack. Please bring a hard copy of the relevant reading(s) to class each day, as well as a pen or pencil and paper for taking notes and completing in-class assignments.

Communication

The best way to communicate with me is via email or by speaking with me during in-person or virtual office hours. You can expect a very prompt response when you email me within my working hours, which are 8:30am-4:30pm Monday-Friday. If you email me outside of those hours, expect a response on the next working day.

Grading

I will grade most assignments within 48 hours, though I reserve the right to grade more complex assignments, like papers and exams, within one week from the due date.

I use rubrics to grade major assignments, and those rubrics are available to you on our Canvas course site. As you will see when you review the rubrics, I grade based on the quality of the work you submit, and not on the effort that you have put into the assignment (which I can't know or assess anyway). If you would like in-depth feedback on an assignment in addition to your marked rubric, see me in office hours. Please note that grades are not negotiable, but I am happy to discuss your progress in the course and strategies for improvement as needed.

Daily Participation

I welcome and expect robust student participation throughout each class meeting. In addition to contributing generously during in-class discussion, you will also take part in activities, in collaboratively annotating readings, and in writing and textual analysis workshops with your peers over the term. I will drop your two lowest scores in this category automatically, *not to include in-class discussion participation*.

Annotated Readings

You will be annotating the readings you complete in this class. Annotations should help you understand and organize the ideas in each text and come up with questions and comments for in-class discussion. You will be graded on the annotations you make on our secondary texts, and we will discuss expectations for these annotations early in the term.

Weekly Pop Quizzes

Once per week, you will complete a timed, five-question reading quiz, with the option to answer a sixth question for extra credit. I will drop your two lowest quiz scores automatically.

Collaborative Podcast

In small groups, you will record and produce a video podcast episode in which you analyze an assigned film using a secondary source. Podcast episodes should be conversational and highlight group members' critical insights, as well as your ability to incorporate textual evidence in analysis and to respond thoughtfully to the insights of others.

Analytical Essays

In 4-5 double-spaced pages, you will make an original, specific argument based upon significant close readings of textual evidence drawn from two fictional course texts. You must submit a complete draft of both papers to be workshopped in class prior to the final paper due dates.

Final Exam

The last major assessment in this course is a cumulative, in-person final exam that will require you to closely read and analyze passages from course texts, demonstrating your knowledge of the texts, the major ideas, themes, and theories that we have examined over the term, and your own robust critical thinking skills.

Please note that the final exam in this class *cannot* be rescheduled, made up, or submitted late. To take the exam, you must be in class for the duration of our official final exam period, which is **Thursday, December 11th, from 3pm-6pm.**

Attendance Policy

If you want to do well in the course, *you should attend class pretty much all the time*. On those rare occasions when you must miss a class, use the resources posted on our daily modules and talk to your peers to catch up on what you've missed. I do not record or recreate lectures and in-class activities cannot be made up.

Late/Missing Work

In-class assignments (including quizzes, activities, workshops, exams, etc.) *cannot* be made up or submitted late. Papers and the podcast can be submitted up to 48 hours after the deadline without a late penalty. After the 48 hours have passed, however, the assignment will close and you will receive a zero, so use your time wisely. *I will not reopen closed assignments for any reason.*

Paper Policies

Your analytical essays must be typed, double-spaced, and use a clear and legible font (like Times New Roman, Calibri, etc.), no larger than 12pt. Use MLA style for formatting and citation.

Papers must be submitted as Word docs via the appropriate submission portal in Canvas. It is your responsibility to ensure that you have submitted the correct file. Last-minute tech or internet issues will not qualify for an extension.

Academic Integrity Policy

A student's first instance of plagiarism or other academic dishonesty (fabrication, for example) will result in an F on the relevant assignment. Particularly egregious first-time violations may also result in an academic integrity violation filed against you with the university. Any additional instance will result in an F in the course and an automatic academic integrity violation filed against you with the university. See SMU's Student Handbook for a full list of academic integrity expectations as well as information about the student conduct review process.

Please come talk with me if you find yourself tempted to commit academic dishonesty due to feeling stressed, confused, inadequate, etc. I'm here to help

Generative AI Policy

The use of Generative AI in this course is strictly prohibited and will be handled according to the academic integrity policy outlined above. Not only is AI use antithetical to the collaboration, learning, and honest exploration that are central to this course, it is absolutely unethical. Generative AI pulls content from a variety of sources without attribution (plagiarism), and it also uses a significant amount of [water and energy](#) and relies upon [labor exploitation](#). Please do not use Generative AI to cheat yourself out of real learning while harming your planet and your fellow human beings.

In return, I promise you that I will never use an LLM to grade your work, provide you feedback, or do any other parts of my job. The only time we will deal with AI-generated material in this class is during our AI paper workshop in week 4.

Testing Policy

All exams and quizzes will be taken on paper using a pencil or pen and a highlighter. Laptops, phones, smart watches, and any other tools that have access to the internet must be stowed away in your bag or backpack. Violation of this policy, however brief, will result in an F on the assignment and a possible academic integrity violation filed against you with the university.

Please note that I return graded quizzes so that you can use them as study aids, but I do not return graded exams. If you would like to discuss your performance on an exam, please see me in office hours.

Classroom Conduct

I want you to feel respected and valued during our time together. This means that we must all refrain from behavior that alienates and disrespects others, including but not limited to: using unapproved tech during class; raising our voices; making belittling comments; and being unwilling to engage with ideas that unsettle our own beliefs. If your behavior distracts or disrespects others, you will have to leave the classroom and return when you are able to participate respectfully in our community of learning.

Warning! Adult Content

Some course materials may contain troubling, challenging, problematic, frightening, and even obscene ideas/concepts/histories/images, etc. You must be able to engage with these in a thoughtful and mature manner to be successful in this course.

Tentative Schedule of Assignments

Unit 1: Manic Pixie Dream Girls Past

M 8/25: Syllabus; introductions; in-class reading, annotation, and discussion: Rabin's "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy, Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*"

W 8/27: Read and annotate hard copy of Pergadia's "The Manic Pixie Dream Girl in the Attic: On Netflix's 'Love Is Blind'"

M 9/1: James, *Daisy Miller* through pt. 1

W 9/3: James, *Daisy Miller* through end

M 9/8: Read and annotate hard copy of "Disability," from *Keywords for Disability Studies*; essay 1 assigned

W 9/10: Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* through book 1

M 9/15: Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* through ch. 12

W 9/17: Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* through ch. 17

M 9/22: Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* through end
W 9/24: **Draft of essay 1 due**; mandatory writing & revision workshop

Unit 2: Manic Pixie Dream in 21st Century American Film

M 9/29: **Essay 1 due**; Read and annotate hard copy of Rabin, “I’m Sorry for Coining the Phrase ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’”

W 10/1: Read and annotate hard copy of Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”; podcast assigned

M 10/6: Read and annotate hard copy of Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* and watch *Elizabethtown* via Canvas

W 10/8: Read and annotate hard copy of McRuer, *Crip Theory* and watch *Garden State* via Canvas

M 10/13: Watch *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* via Canvas

W 10/15: Watch *Gone Girl* via Amazon or other streaming service; **podcast outline due**

Unit 3: Manic Pixie Dream Girls(?) in Black Women's Literature

M 10/20: Fall break—no class

W 10/22: **Podcast due**; read and annotate hard copy of Hill Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images”

M 10/27: Larsen, *Passing* through pt 1; essay 2 assigned

W 10/29: Larsen, *Passing* through end

M 11/3: Morrison, *Sula* through pt. 1

W 11/5: Morrison, *Sula* through end

M 11/10: Brady, *Manic Pixie Dream Girls Aren't Black*

W 11/12: **Draft of essay 2 due**; mandatory writing & revision workshop

Unit 4: Manic Pixie Dream Boys

M 11/17: **Essay 2 due**; watch *Titanic* via Canvas

W 11/19: Palahniuk, *Fight Club* through ch. 6

M 11/24: Palahniuk, *Fight Club* through ch. 12

W 11/26: Palahniuk, *Fight Club* through ch. 19

M 12/1: Palahniuk, *Fight Club* through end

W 12/3: Watch *Elf* via Amazon or other streaming service; mandatory final exam review

M 12/8: No class

Final exam: Thursday, December 11th, 3pm-6pm in Dallas Hall 120