

# **Introduction to Women's Studies: A Personal Journey Through Film Course Syllabus**

## **What you will learn in this course**

### **Introduction to Women's Studies: A Personal Journey Through Film**

This course, although looking specifically at the experiences of women, is not for girls only. If you are student interested in exploring the world through film and open minded enough to be interested in social change, this course is for you.

### **Unit 1: Using Film as a Vehicle for Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is a way to approach understanding the world around you, whether in everyday life or for academic purposes. To think critically, it is important to analyze, interpret, evaluate, and explain information in a thoughtful and intelligent manner. A critical thinker has a sense of curiosity and a willingness to examine her perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs. It's important in critical thinking to raise questions and come to considered and thoughtful answers. This course is structured around both written content and film for the purpose of exploring content and fostering critical thinking skills. To approach the films intelligently and with academic purpose, it will be important to use literary terms and apply them meaningfully throughout the various units. In this initial unit, we explore the necessary literary terms.

#### **What will you learn in this unit?**

- Understand the process of developing critical thinking skills.
- Understand the personal and academic purposes of thinking critically.
- Apply literary terminology in the analysis of film.
- Connect your personal experiences to the content of this unit in order to further develop understanding.
- View the film *Mona Lisa Smile* while critically applying content of the unit.

### **Unit 2: Defining & Exploring the Concept of Feminism**

Today's women have a radically different sense of opportunity and possibility than women had before the feminist movement. A women's studies course could not exist without the intellectual and emotional convictions of feminism, which is the belief in equality between the sexes. It's important to explore the history of feminism and to consider different forms of global feminist thinking and action. In consideration of that history, you will have the opportunity to reflect personally on fundamental beliefs and values behind the theory of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes as well as the organized activity behind women's rights and interests. Through the use of film, the applications of feminist thinking will be explored, connecting the situations in the text to personal understanding and experiences. This unit will ultimately serve as the theoretical foundation for the remaining units in the course.

### **What will you learn in this unit?**

- Define the concept of feminism.
- Discuss several significant feminist moments and activists.
- Detail the organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.
- Connect your personal understanding and experiences with the knowledge gained in this unit.

### **Unit 3: What Is Women's Studies?**

The need for women's studies courses in academic settings is a result of the feminist belief in raising social **consciousness**. As second wave feminists responded to the oppression of women in society and became increasingly organized and socially active by taking part in protests and informative gatherings, the public became more receptive to the need for feminism. It's important to consider both the general curriculum and the interdisciplinary approach to women's studies and to see how it's evolving (in some cases) in relation to gender studies. Crucial to the work of feminists and the curriculum of women's studies courses are empathy and personal reflection. Empathy will be considered through the exploration of the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* and when considering the implications of empathy on raising social consciousness and engaging social activism.

### **What will you learn in this unit?**

- Explain the catalyst for women's studies courses being offered.
- Understand the curriculum and approach in a women's studies course.
- Understand the importance and apply empathy to life and to examining film.
- Connect your personal experiences to further develop the understanding of the content of this unit.
- View the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* while critically applying the content of this and previous units.

### **Unit 4: Interlocked Forms of Oppression**

Feminism is the response to discrimination against women, but the attitude and practice of oppression is not limited to gender discrimination. To understand the relevance of other forms of discrimination and social action in regard to the women's movement, it's important to consider the Civil Rights movement. Beyond racism and sexism are numerous types of discrimination that stem from narrow-mindedness, social and cultural stereotypes, and an imbalance of power that results in prejudice because of a person's age, social class, abilities, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation. As society grows frustrated by the abuse of power and becomes aware of the importance of treating all of humanity with empathy, equality, and mutual respect, the world grows increasingly inclusive, celebrating differences rather than segregating or oppressing because them.

### **What will you learn in this unit?**

- Understand the significance of the Civil Rights movement regarding feminism.
- Recognize the connectedness among forms of discrimination.
- Explain various forms of diversity and the exclusion and prejudice that can result socially.
- Consider your own personal perspective in response to the content of the unit and apply it to promote greater awareness and understanding.
- View the film *Far From Heaven* while critically applying the content of the unit to your analysis of the film's significance.

## Introduction to Women's Studies Midterm Exam

- Review information acquired and mastered from this course up to this point.
- Take a course exam based on material from the first four units in this course (Note: You will be able to open this exam only one time.)

## Unit 5: The Nature or Nurture Debate

The debate as to whether the characteristics of each **gender** are **predetermined** or cultivated through life experiences is an important issue to consider in women's studies. It's worthwhile to address where notions of what it is to be a girl come from and how those ideas impact the experiences to which girls are introduced and exposed. Children's literature has an undeniable influence on its audience's social awareness and understanding of moral issues as well as **gender** roles in society. Young girls are susceptible to the ideas conveyed through the literature to which they are exposed, so it's relevant here to consider some of the messages about the expectations of women in society suggested through Disney's animated films, a well-known and popular creator of content for children worldwide.

### What will you learn in this unit?

- Understand the issues in the nature versus nurture debate of gender-role development.
- Consider the influence of gender socialization on a person's life experiences and choices.
- Critically view films evaluating feminist theory regarding the animated world of female characters in Disney.
- Reflectively connect your personal experiences and understanding to the content of this unit.
- Apply the content of this unit while viewing the films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

## Unit 6: Growing Up Girl

The power of socialization is not to be underestimated. It gives strength, affirmation, and control over the stereotypes that often shape our roles and identity in society. Within society, there is an undeniable **social hierarchy** that promotes a certain status to some and discriminates against others. This system of valuing and empowering certain groups while **alienating** (isolating) and disempowering others is grounded in stereotypes and labeling that are ultimately restrictive and that limit the experiences and opportunities of individuals. Within this hierarchy, beauty has an

undisputable importance. **Unattainable** standards of beauty are set by society, projected by the media, and **internalized** by individuals, which inevitably have a negative impact in some very serious and detrimental ways. As is social consciousness, **media literacy** is an essential component in feminism because it encourages society to look closely at the **idealized** concepts of what it is to be a girl and how those definitions are damaging and destructive in their impact on gender roles and identity for young girls and women.

### **What will you learn in this unit?**

- Understand and discuss social stratification and the process of social hierarchies.
- Consider the impact of socialization on stereotypes that define and limit individuals.
- Reflect on the standards set for girls and women regarding beauty.
- Connect your personal understanding and experiences, develop media literacy, and apply that knowledge to the content of the course.
- View the film *Mean Girls* while critically applying the content of the unit to the text.

## **Unit 7: Challenging Stereotypes with Role Models & Mentors**

Although stereotypes clearly limit and hinder us socially and individually, there is also a sense of security and comfort that comes from identifying with commonly shared ideas. Eve Ensler looks at the ideas of security in another talk she delivered at TED Talks. This speech will serve as an active viewing exercise for considering the content of the unit and the course thus far and for personal reflection. Eve Ensler is a fitting speaker for this unit, in particular, because of the nature of her feminist social activism, which has placed her in the positions of both role model and mentor. These are two critical components for changing social and cultural stereotypes. Progress in any form requires risk takers—people willing to challenge the expectations and roles with which society has restricted them.

### **What will you learn in this unit?**

- Understand the subconscious and conscious nature of stereotypes.
- Consider the impact of our need for security on the individual and on society.
- Examine the function of role models and mentors in society.
- Connect your personal experiences with the content of the unit to discover relevance and meaningful understanding.
- View the film *The Help* while critically applying the content of the unit.

## **Unit 8: Those Who Inspire and Empower Social Change**

This course has attempted to inform you of the various forms of adversity apparent in the lives of women and other members of society throughout history and in contemporary culture. The obstacles of stereotypes, labels, prejudice, oppression, and socialization restrict and limit the opportunities of individuals as well as the possibilities for humanity. In this unit, the focus is on those who have faced their own adversities and gone on to be inspirations to others. Reflecting on the contribution of these historical icons is not meant to overwhelm, but rather to inspire. The qualities necessary to make a difference in the world are within each one of us. Individually, it's

extremely unlikely that a person would reach the level of fame or even recognition of the individuals included here; however, the desire to influence the world around us, to better humanity and our society in some manner, relies on determination, perseverance, and passionate ideals.

### **What will you learn in this unit?**

- Understand the Apple Think Different ad campaign.
- Understand the qualities of inspirational thinkers.
- Apply the understanding of the qualities of inspirational thinkers to your own personal reflection.
- Connect previous units of study with the ideas and examples raised to explore the final themes of the course.
- View the film *A League of Their Own* critically while applying the content of the unit.

### **Introduction to Women's Studies Final Exam**

- Review information acquired and mastered from this course up to this point.
- Take a course exam based on material from units five to eight in this course – the last four units. (Note: You will be able to open this exam only one time.)

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