

**Certificate in Combined Studies 2004/5
MODULE SPECIFICATION
Faculty of Humanities**

1. **The title of the module:** Contemporary British Fiction, 1969 – 1999: from *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to *Tipping the Velvet*.
2. **The Department which will be responsible for management of the module:** School of English
3. **The start date of the module:** September 2004
4. **Level of the module:** C
5. **Number of credits:** 30
6. **Teaching pattern:** Michaelmas and Lent term
7. **Pre-requisite and co-requisite modules:** none
8. **The programme of study to which the module contributes:** Certificate in Combined Studies (CCS)
9. **The intended subject specific learning outcomes and, as appropriate, their relationship to programme learning outcomes:**

Having completed the course, participants will:

- have gained an informed understanding of the theoretical concerns and narrative possibilities available to writers of fiction in contemporary Britain and be familiar with the critical debate on the state and function of the novel today;
- have acquired the ability to recognise and respond to a variety of narrative approaches to issues of personal/cultural identity in contemporary Britain and to assess the role of fiction in the creation and/or critique of particular models of identity;
- have developed a broad knowledge of the aesthetics of postmodernism and of its potential and shortcomings with respect to feminist, queer, postcolonial and Marxist perspectives;
- be able to explore the ways in which contemporary British writers engage themselves with their literary tradition (e.g. the Victorian novel, the comedy of manners *à la* Jane Austen, etc.) and/or recuperate and adopt the conventions of popular genres (e.g. the fairy tale, the Gothic novel, the picaresque novel, etc.).

10. The intended generic learning outcomes and, as appropriate, their relationship to programme learning outcomes:

Having completed the course, participants will:

- have developed analytical skills through the close reading of the primary texts as well as the investigation of their literary and ideological context;
- be able to uphold and communicate critical ideas, both in seminar discussion / oral presentations and in written essays;
- show evidence of an inquiring and independent approach to literary texts and their underlying assumptions, as well as demonstrate an aptitude for the application of this increased critical awareness to further literary and cultural studies.

11. A synopsis of the curriculum:

The course provides a survey of late twentieth-century British fiction, spanning a thirty-year period, from a contemporary classic such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) to end with Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1999), one of the most recent literary cases on the British scene.

The chosen texts, listed below in chronological order, will offer a comprehensive outlook onto postmodern literary practices and focus in particular on contemporary deviations (and innovations) from the 18th – 19th century novelistic tradition of classic realism. The course will set off with a couple of introductory seminars in which students will familiarise themselves with the structural and thematic features of 18th – 19th century realist novels, through a close reading of selected passages from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jane Austen's *Emma* (the opening chapters of both texts are particularly useful in the illustration of techniques and devices such as first vs. third person narration, limited point of view vs. omniscient narration, etc.). This preliminary analysis will find an ideal support in Ian Watt's accessible and concise definition of classic realism in the first chapter of *The Rise of the Novel* (excerpts of which will be made available to the students).

The selection of primary sources includes overtly experimental texts, such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which consciously set out to innovate the formal conventions of classic realism, as well as more traditional narratives, whose subversive and original charge lies primarily in their bold treatment of thought-provoking, controversial themes: students will be encouraged to discriminate between these two broad poetics/attitudes, and to investigate their merits and popularity with the reading public. The general nature of this initial approach is meant to provide the participants to the course with an immediate and engaging invitation to exercise their critical skills.

The progress of the course will draw attention to a contemporary tendency to privilege historical or non-realistic (e.g. fantastic, formulaic or parodic) narratives in the examination and/or construction of notions of identity: students will be required to address the implications of this trend through a constant commitment to the cultural and literary contextualisation of the fictional works under analysis.

Some of the chosen texts focus specifically on issues of gender, ethnicity and class, raising questions of complicity/resistance to culturally determined definitions of subjectivity: this emphasis on political concerns will complement what might otherwise appear to be a pre-eminently aesthetic perspective adopted by this course. The analysis of those texts with a recognisable political agenda will provide the students with an opportunity for an initial confrontation with feminist, postcolonial, queer, Marxist concerns and the way they find expression in contemporary British fiction.

12. Indicative reading list:

Primary reading:

John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)

David Lodge, *Changing Places* (1975)

Angela Carter, selected stories from *The Bloody Chamber* (1979)

Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981)

Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (1983)

Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (1989)

Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)

Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (1997)

Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (1999)

The study of each core text will be accompanied, wherever possible, by the analysis of a non-fictional piece on the subject of storytelling (or, alternatively, an interview) by its relative author (see below for examples).

Secondary reading (to be provided in class):

Malcolm Bradbury (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*, London: Penguin, 1988 (selected short stories)

John Barth, 'Dunyazadiad' in *Chimera*

John Fowles, 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel' and John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion' in Malcolm Bradbury, *The Novel Today*

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (selected essays)

13. Learning and Teaching Methods, including the nature and number of contact hours and the total study hours which will be expected of students, and how these relate to achievement of the intended learning outcomes:

Students will attend a weekly two-hour seminar for a total of 40 hours over two terms. Each seminar will focus on one of the primary texts, which the students will be expected to have read before taking part to the class: this preliminary, individual reading will be directed and aided by handouts containing questions and suggestions of specific areas of potential analytical interest. Each weekly seminar will open with a short presentation by the seminar leader, providing some introductory information about the text and indications about the critical responses it may elicit: this overture is aimed at initiating and facilitating group discussion, which will then take place, guided by the seminar leader and stimulated, when necessary, by references to the appropriate handout.

Occasionally, in the case of particularly long or demanding texts, the analysis of a single novel will be spread out over more than one seminar; the weekly workload will be further balanced by the insertion of 'lighter' (in terms of the required reading) sessions, revolving on the analysis of selected short stories (for instance, a careful choice from Bradbury's anthology will be used to introduce the main themes of the course) or focusing on theoretical issues prompted by non-fictional pieces (see secondary reading for further examples).

The total study hours expected of students will be 170, i.e. 8.5 hours per week. Approximately three and a half hours a week will be taken up with reading of the core text of this course and other groundwork towards an informed participation to the seminar; students will be expected to devote the remaining 100 hours on the assessed long essays.

14. Assessment methods and how these relate to testing achievement of the intended learning outcome:

Assessment: two written essays (2,500 – 3,000 words in length, one per term)
seminar contribution (including oral presentations) typically this is 10% of the final mark

In accordance with the learning outcomes described in (9) and (10) above, the formal written assessment, as well as the contribution to seminar discussion and the occasional oral presentation of short papers, besides involving the knowledge and analysis of primary sources, all require the refinement of critical awareness and the development of formal and structured communication skills.

Statement by the Director of Learning and Teaching: "I confirm I have been consulted on the above module proposal and have given advice on the correct procedures and required content of module proposals"

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Director of Learning and Teaching

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Date

Statement by the Head of Department: "I confirm that the Department has approved the introduction of the module and will be responsible for its resourcing"

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Head of Department

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Date

| Revised August 2002; [Revision 2 in 2003](#).

The course provides a survey of late twentieth-century British fiction, spanning a thirty-year period, from a contemporary classic such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) to end with Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), one of the most recent literary cases on the British scene. In particular, we will explore the fascinating variety in the mood, style, artistic intentions and literary models adopted by British writers in the late twentieth-century, a time of thought-provoking contradictions within a multi-cultural society in constant evolution.

The aim of the course is to introduce the notion of postmodernism as a way to describe the ingenuity with which contemporary authors rewrite traditional genres, such as fairy-tales, historical romances or adventure stories. The provocative playfulness of the comic texts in the course (Lodge, Rushdie, Waters, Winterson) is well balanced by the presence of dark, gothic tales (Carter, McEwan) and narratives that questions the very meaning of storytelling (Fowles, Ishiguro, Phillips). By the end of the course, students will have gained an understanding of how these apparently very different texts all aim to entice the reader to take responsibility for part of creative process as the narrative unfolds.

The course will begin with a short introduction to the historical development of the novel, in order to enable students to familiarise themselves with the literary traditions that contemporary British fiction seeks to challenge and renew.

John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969)

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