

Phil 2237

Feminist Philosophy: Philosophies of Desire

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(or by appointment)

Course Overview

This course will focus on one theme: desire. We will explore the nature of "desire" by engaging with psychoanalysis, critical theory, existentialism, film, ethnography, poetry and literature. Here are several of the animating questions that underlie both the curriculum and the assignments of the course: can the force of desire change the world? Is there an erotics to reading philosophy? How do our laws affect how we can or should experience desire? What are political and personal dangers of desire? Can desire emancipate us as individuals, and if so, how? How gendered is sexual desire? To what degree does the object of our desire determine our self-identity? How does desire differ across cultures? What is the relationship between morality and desire? Can we and should we judge desire?

Through these questions, we will engage with some of the most impassioned debates in contemporary feminist philosophy.

One premise of this course is that *thinking* about desire is best accomplished while also attending to our own interests, passions, experiences, and commitments. This means that the course will culminate in individual research projects that, ideally, will develop out of the reading material. Everyone is therefore responsible for tuning into what seems most pressing, meaningful, perplexing, or exciting about the readings. As well, since this course is a seminar, we will be listening and responding to each other's projects in the last weeks of the semester.

Course Texts

These are the texts to buy for this class.

1. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*. (Dalkey Archive, 1998)
2. *Plato on Love*. Ed. C. D. C. Reeve (Hackett, 2006)
3. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of a Seducer* (Continuum, 2006).
4. Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*. (Penguin, 2006)
5. Adam Phillips, *Monogamy*, (Vintage 1999)

Course Policies and Assignments

Attendance

The participation grade will result from sincere engagement with the material and from considerate and respectful responses to classmates' comments and reflections. This will be a very collaborative seminar, given the theme and the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum. In this seminar,

everyone's voice will be valuable and necessary. While this is hopefully obvious, it is perhaps useful to say explicitly on the syllabus that arriving late to class is not only disrespectful but highly disruptive, so *please* do your best to arrive promptly to class!

1. Reading Responses

Learning objectives: to be able to read a text closely; to be able to identify the main premises and conclusion of an argument; to be able to explain this argument to the class succinctly and clearly.

The course is divided into three units. During the semester, you will sign up for *one* class period per unit (so three classes all together) for which you will prepare a careful two-page explication of the arguments in the reading(s) of the day. **The two-page response is due in class on the day of the assigned readings.**

The main task in this writing assignment is to clarify exactly what "desire" means in articles/chapters that you read for that day. You are in part *responsible* for the class discussion for that day. This means that you should be prepared to explain what is at stake for our ongoing discussions about desire in the assigned readings. Make sure that you know a bit about the writer (google them before class so that you have some context for what you are reading).

You'll be graded on **two main criteria** for these responses: how clearly you summarized the argument(s) in the reading(s); how well you helped the class to understand what is most at stake in the argument(s).

One word of advice: since you'll be signing up for a specific assigned readings, there isn't going to be an excusable reason for not being prepared. **Read ahead!** Read slowly, take careful notes, and enjoy the tasks involved with understanding a complicated argument. One assumption of this course is that there is real pleasure to be found in the intellectual endeavours of reading, writing, and thinking.

2. Desire Images

Learning objectives: to be able to apply an abstract philosophical question ("what is the nature of desire?) to real-world situations, images and texts.

Since this course focuses on the theme of desire, we will be casting a wide net out in order to locate and analyze a wide variety of conceptions of desire. You will each, therefore, bring an image of desire to introduce to the class. You should choose something that you find *worthy* of discussion—something that is productive for philosophical analysis. It could be something that you find offensive or disturbing or something that you find compelling and attractive. This is your chance to add to the course something that you would like to address.

It is important that you choose an image of desire **that we haven't yet discussed in the course!** You could choose a historical image (ie. a romantic image from the Renaissance), a metaphor for desire used by a canonical philosopher (ie. in what terms does Kant, Hegel, or Descartes portray desire?); an image from another cultural context (ie. arranged marriage situation), an image from a specific age group or other demographic (ie. an internet dating site that has a specific targeted market), or an image from a religious tradition (ie. an excerpt from a sacred scripture or another religious teaching).

If you'd like some guidance, I'm happy to provide contemporary poetry that focuses on desire; **you always have the option to talk about a poem** and explain to us what you find noteworthy, problematic, helpful about the images of desire in the poem.

You'll have around **six minutes** to introduce your image of desire to the class, so you'll have to be succinct! It's probably a good idea to be selective about what you want to point out to the class. For example, you can concentrate on the *object* of desire in the image (is there some prescribed or assumed object of desire?) or on the desiring *subject* (who is doing the desiring and how do you know?) or on the *work* of desire itself (is desire changing the world in some way?).

3. Desire Project

Learning objectives: To further deepen the examination of the theme "desire" through research; to identify a research question that is of personal interest and develop it into a paper.

This project is your chance to expand one of the three short reading responses into a longer analysis or to develop an analysis of one of the images of desire that you (or another student) presented to the class. **The project should be 7-8 pages long**, and you should incorporate some sources other than what we've read in class. If you choose to analyze contemporary media or pop culture, you can possibly incorporate non-academic internet sites (as long as you can justify their theoretical value for your project).

The project should do two things: identify one specific concept of desire and assess its philosophical significance for any broader theme (ethics; morality; law; embodiment; freedom; anti-racist, anti-homophobic, or anti-sexist critique; postcolonial self-reflection; class and consumption). The point is to clarify why it is valuable to study "desire" in a feminist and/or philosophical context.

Grades

Participation: 20 points (required)

Reading Responses: 15 points each (three responses are required, one per unit)

Desire Presentation: 10 points (required)

Desire Project: 25 points

(note: this course has been excused from the requirement of a final exam; in many ways, the desire project serves as a take-home final exam)

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Unit I Jan 10 Introduction

Unit 1 Eros and Philosophy: How Reading is like Falling in Love

Jan 12 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (3-61)

Jan 17 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (62-101); Plato's *Symposium* (26-42)

Jan 19 Plato's *Symposium* (42-87)

Jan 24 Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary of a Seducer*

Jan 31 Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary of a Seducer*

Feb 2 Simone de Beauvoir; "The Woman in Love" (from *The Second Sex*)

Feb 7 Simone de Beauvoir; "The Woman in Love" (from *The Second Sex*)

Feb 9 Simone de Beauvoir; "The Woman in Love" (from *The Second Sex*)
Film *A Single Man*

Unit 2 Sex, Gender, and the Mutability of the Body

Unit 2 Feb 14 Nancy Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance,"

Feb 16 Kim Q. Hall, "Queerness, Disability, and *The Vagina Monologues*,"

- Feb 21 *No class: Family Day*
- Feb 23 *No class: Reading break*
- Feb 28 Jacob Hale, "Are Lesbians Women?"
Alfred C. Kinsey excerpt from "*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948)*"
- March 2 FILM: *Kinsey* (excerpts)
- March 7 Peter Hegarty and Cheryl Chase, "Intersex Activism, Feminism and Psychology"
Judith Butler, "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality"

Unit 3

Unit 3 Cultures, the Law, and the Moralization of Desire

- March 9 Adam Phillips *Monogamy*; Dan Savage podcasts
- March 14 FILM: *This Film is Not Yet Rated*
- March 16 Don Kulick, "Porn;"
Gilbert Herdt excerpt *A Comment on Cultural Attributes and Fluidity of Bisexuality*
- March 21 Theodor Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today"
- March 23 Theodor Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today"
- March 28 Sigmund Freud, Brief Excerpt from *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*
Arnold I. Davidson, "How to do the History of Psychoanalysis";
Michel Foucault, "We 'Other' Victorians"
- March 30 Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*
- April 4 Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*
- April 6 Group symposium on love and desire
- April 11 Group symposium on love and desire
- April 13 Group symposium on love and desire

Grading System

For the purposes of this course the following scale will be used to convert percentages to letter grades and grade points.

Grade	Value	Description
A+ 91-100	3.71-4.00	Excellent - superior performance showing comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.
A 85 – 90		
A- 80-84	3.40- 3.70	
B+ 77-79	3.10- 3.39	
B 73-76	2.80-3.09	Good - clearly above average performance with knowledge of subject matter generally complete.
B- 70-72	2.50- 2.79	
C+ 67-69	2.20- 2.49	
C 63-66	1.90-2.19	Satisfactory - basic understanding of the subject matter.
C- 60-62	1.60-1.89	
D+ 55-59	1.30-1.59	Minimum pass - marginal performance, generally insufficient preparation for subsequent courses in the same subject.
D 50-54	1.00-1.29	
F ≤ 49	0.00-0.99	Fail - unsatisfactory performance.