HST 362: Women in United States History, 1820-1920
4 Credits
Ecampus, Oregon State University
generic syllabus

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To reach me, try email first. If at first you don’t succeed, try again, and then use my mobile phone. Be sure you persist; even if I seem delinquent, I do want to be available to address your concerns. Remember that our email system will sometimes put unknown addresses into the SPAM folder. It’s best to write to me through the ONID system. This is the system that delivers stuff from Blackboard.

Course description:
[Catalogue description:] Women in the United States—their roles in and contribution to American political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual life. This course sequence (Women in U.S. History) pays particular attention to the diversity of American women’s backgrounds and experiences.

[Expanded description:] Between 1820 and 1920, American women experienced and participated in conflict over United States territorial conquest and settlement, the redefinition of gender roles in families across ethnic and economic spectra, a bloody and agonizing Civil War, industrialization and the growth of cities, dramatic changes in American demography through immigration, particularly from Europe, and at the end of this period, the political enfranchisement for which so many women had struggled in many different ways.

Exploring the experiences of American women in this era changes and enriches older versions of U.S. national history. Focusing on differences among women’s experiences and activities underlines the diversity of viewpoints on American politics and culture, both among contemporaries and in retrospect. Focusing on the overall subordination of women as a class of people, and the commonalities of this subordination across economic classes, ethnic and religious groups, helps us understand the history of intergroup power dynamics and discrimination in the United States.
The philosophy animating this course sequence is the importance of recognizing the diversity of women as actors or agents in their own lives, as well as the different degrees of their subordination and exploitation. We will draw most of our information from women’s own voices describing their status and life experiences. The field of women’s history has burgeoned in the last thirty years, and we will rely both on earlier primary source documents, both fiction and nonfiction, and on secondary authorities on women’s history.

A few notes on the reading:

This term we will be reading several books by and about Louisa May Alcott. I have found that studying Alcott, her life, her work, and her world of the Transcendentalist movement in Concord, Massachusetts, offers a rewarding set of reflections on mid-nineteenth century turning points for women: turning points in middle-class self-concepts, in girls’ education, in gender role norms, in Northern culture during and after the Civil War, and in family history and family ideals.

In 2009 PBS teamed with author Harriet Reisen to produce a new biography of Louisa May Alcott that we will read this term. Some of you may have caught the special on PBS the evening of December 28, 2009. I’ve looked for reruns but haven’t found any yet – I will keep you informed. There is one more major consideration that guides my choice of this author as a kind of fulcrum for the course, and that is how many generations of American girls and women (and some men, of course) Alcott’s work touched and shaped. There are few authors as iconic, in this way, as Alcott. She became one of the bestselling American authors of the nineteenth century, and her sales, of course, have continued to the present day.

In addition to this biography (now available in a Kindle edition for those of you who want to save a few bucks or a few ounces), you will read Alcott’s famous Little Women, in any edition (many editions are free or nearly free not only in the library, but online in Gutenberg or Kindle versions). Be sure to choose an unabridged edition with BOTH halves of the book available. For an essay, I will have you read a second book by a nineteenth-century woman writer – of your choice. You may read a second Alcott novel, or branch out and read a novel or another kind of book (household advice, for example), by someone else. I’ll provide a list of suggestions on the Blackboard site, but you won’t be limited to that choice.

We will also read one of the most moving and seemingly incredible memoirs of slavery available: Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. This memoir takes the student inside the psychological as well as physical agony that was slavery. Jacobs contends that slavery was worse for women than for men, because of the inescapable component of sexual exploitation and abuse. You may ponder for yourselves whether that is a fair claim.

The final monograph, Looking Good, I choose for you students who are forging your own relationships with your friends, your minds, your bodies, and your health during your
college years. I have found in the past that male students think that my questions about *Looking Good*, and the issues it raises about body image among early college women, excludes them and their concerns – far from it! But you will see for yourselves.

The textbook, DuBois and Dumenil’s *Through Women’s Eyes*, creates a rich context for these more narrowly focused monographs. Don’t slight that reading. The book is thick, but the authors are articulate and smart. Always assume that the graphic sections and sidebars are part of the assignments in the text.

This may seem like a LOT of reading. While I don’t want anyone to drop the course (stay, stay – it’s fun!!), I do want you to look at the volume and timing of the reading and start finding your way through it as sensibly as possible. Having said this, I will add that much of the reading is VERY PLEASANT and proceeds quickly. Also, much of it is available as audiobooks or on the Kindle (which you may also read on the iPhone or Blackberry now – look into it!), and that can make getting it and reading it much easier and more efficient.

**Student learning outcomes:**

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- (conceptual skills)
  - place the experiences of American women in a broader historical context, recognizing factors of social class, race, region, and economic/political conditions that bear upon these experiences and activities;
  - think like historians, recognizing that personal biases and preferences may animate research and argument, but must be supported by the weight of evidence. The further caveat attached to this dynamic is that historians’ personal biases and preferences may change as the weight of evidence becomes clear.
    - Students will practice these somewhat intangible skills and approaches by participating in Blackboard discussion forums, as appropriate, and they will demonstrate their degree of mastery of these skills through the longer written assignments in the course (see below).

- (reading and research skills) Students will be able to
  - find information on women’s history not just on the library shelves, but also on the internet and through library databases;
  - identify the reliability and bias of various sources of information;
  - read historical monographs critically, noting the authors’ sources, bias, and central arguments.
    - Students will demonstrate these skills in the preparation phases of writing assignments.
• (writing skills) Students will be able to
  
  o write a short argumentative statement, one or two sentences long, that cuts to the heart of an issue to take a position based on evidence and analytical thought. Students will demonstrate this skill in informal in-class writing assignments, and/or in responses to assigned discussion board questions.
  
  o write a short analytical paper; this paper offers a central argument and supports the argument with evidence from the readings and other sources as appropriate. Students will demonstrate this skill in completing the writing assignments in this course.
  
  o write grammatically, following standard rules of sentence and paragraph construction, punctuation, and subject/predicate agreement. Students will demonstrate this skill set in the formal writing assignments in this course.

\textit{Required readings:}

1. Dubois, Dumenil, \textit{Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents}
3. Louisa May Alcott, \textit{Little Women} (1868-1869)
4. One additional book by an American woman author of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century

For textbook accuracy, please check the textbook list at the OSU Bookstore website [http://www.osubeaverstore.com/]. Syllabi may not have the most up to date textbook information!

\textit{Assignments and grading:}

The writing assignments will be offered in more detail on Blackboard. Papers should be submitted through Blackboard using the Assignments button. Students may then view their edited and graded essays through the “My Grades” function on Blackboard.

1. \textbf{MONDAY}: At the beginning of week 3, students will submit a short essay (500 words +) on how we might best understand the emergence of the “ideology of true womanhood” in the early nineteenth century and compare it to ideologies of womanhood today. (10%)

2. \textbf{MONDAY}: At the beginning of week 5, students will submit a short essay (1000 words +) on Harriet Jacobs, \textit{Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl}. (20%)
3. **MONDAY:** At the beginning of week 7, students will complete an online essay set on Louisa May Alcott’s novels – particularly *Little Women*. (10%)

4. **MONDAY:** At the beginning of Week 9, students will submit a short essay (1000 words +) on the cultural and political world of Louisa May Alcott, based on reading *Little Women*, an additional Alcott novel, and the Harriet Reisen biography (listed above). (20%)

5. **FRIDAY:** At the end of week 10, students will offer presentations, *to be posted on Blackboard*, about TWO or more interconnected biographies of nineteenth-century American women. The heart of the assignment is locating and analyzing the connections, which may also be connections of opposition and antipathy. Students will consult with me (the instructor!) in choosing their subjects. Please see the Assignments listing for more details on how to conceive and complete this presentation. The Linked Lives should be captured as PowerPoint presentations (20%).

6. **TUESDAY:** During exam week, students will submit a set of short critical essays on Lowe’s *Looking Good*, about college women’s body images. (10%)

7. **THROUGHOUT THE TERM:** You have FIVE discussion board forums (fora?) to complete, for two points each. Be sure to keep up with these! The dates will be listed BELOW, as well as on the Due Dates sheet and under the Assignments. (10%)

**An additional note on writing:** I really value clear and correct diction in writing. I want you to write accurately as regards spelling and grammar. I want you to state your points in the simplest, clearest language possible. Don’t believe that because you’re writing at the college level you need to clutter up your writing with passive voice locutions or fancy footwork around plain ideas. The plain ideas are fine! Sentences all need to have subjects and predicates – nouns and verbs. Most adverbs and adjectives are unnecessary. Most modifiers (very, extremely, terribly, wonderfully, etc.) are unnecessary. If you’ve chosen the right verbs, they should carry the burden of expression. Write in ACTIVE VOICE. Don’t be afraid to make the noun bear responsibility for doing the verb. (“He said,” instead of “It was said by him.”)

My very favorite book on writing is by Stephen King, and it’s called – drum roll!! – *On Writing*. You’ll LOVE it; read it. It doesn’t matter that the book is primarily about writing fiction. It will sharpen the way you view all your reading AND writing. Another great, and brief, book is Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style* (any edition). That title helps you carve down your writing to just the essentials.

The bottom line is that I WILL grade on writing, so spell check and EDIT FOR CLARITY AND ACCURACY. Thanks!
Please carefully read the statement below on Academic Dishonesty, embedded in the Expectations for Student Conduct. There is no room for plagiarism. I want you to understand plagiarism and avoid it.

Statement Regarding Students with Disabilities:
Accommodations are collaborative efforts between students, faculty, and Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). Students with accommodations approved through SSD are responsible for contacting the faculty member in charge of the course prior to or during the first week of the term to discuss accommodations. Students who believe they are eligible for accommodations but who have not yet obtained approval through SSD should contact SSD immediately at 737-4098.

Link to Statement of Expectations for Student Conduct:
http://oregonstate.edu/admin/stucon/achon.htm
I expect you all to understand plagiarism and avoid it. Please click on the link above, which explains the categories of academic dishonesty recognized at OSU and other universities. In this kind of course, the major temptations to academic dishonesty arise around writing critical essays. While I encourage you to collaborate with one another (insofar as that is practical) and consult outside sources, I also expect that you will never use the words of the outside sources, or of another student, in a way that implies that they are YOUR words. If you ever have any doubts about what that might mean, please don’t be too embarrassed to ask me. You must put quotation marks around words used by your source, even if it is a brief phrase. You must avoid borrowing from your source any distinctive combination of words relevant to your subject. Some of the distinctions between recognizing sources and doing original thinking are very fine, indeed.

Course Evaluation
We encourage you to engage in the course evaluation process each term – online, of course. The evaluation form will be available toward the end of each term, and you will be sent instructions by Ecampus. You will login to “Student Online Services” to respond to the online questionnaire. The results on the form are anonymous and are not tabulated until after grades are posted.