

HL 4037 Writing the Self

Division of English, Nanyang Technological University

Semester 2, AY 2016/2017

Day: Wednesday 9.30am-12.30pm

Location: LHS+TR+11

Seminar Leader: Associate Professor Boey Kim Cheng

Contact Details: kcboey@ntu.edu.sg

Office: HSS 03-62

Pre-requisite: HL1001 Introduction to the Study of Literature

Or

HZ9101 Introduction to Creative Writing

Course Description

Autobiography (from the Greek, *autos* self, *bios* life, *graphein* to write) has become a popular genre in recent years. Memoirs especially, which are an autobiographical sub-genre that focuses on formative themes and periods of the author's life rather than aiming for the autobiography's comprehensive chronological coverage, have consistently featured on literary bestseller lists and have been adopted as academic texts in literary studies modules in many universities. In the cyber age, when what D.H. Lawrence calls the "old stable ego of the character" has long been discredited, the memoir has posed a serious challenge to the novel, with which it has many affinities, as reflected by its wide readership and the number of major literary writers who have turned to the genre. *Writing the Self* will examine why the memoir has become such a popular genre and explore aspects of life- or self-writing that make it compelling. It examines selected literary memoirs and autobiographical poems and probes the impulses and motivations behind the autobiographical acts. As memory is the key to any autobiographical undertaking, the course explores the nature of memory and the process of remembering. It examines the fictional elements and narrative strategies that create a compelling story, and pays attention to the dialectic between fact and fiction, truth and invention, and between memory and imagination. It also explores the themes of childhood, the family, mortality and ethics. The course covers the theory and practice of autobiography through a study of techniques of writing the self, and integrates literary analysis and creative writing in an exploration of the role of memory and imagination in reconstructing and shaping the past. It allows students the option of pursuing for their major assignment a critical task related to themes and texts covered in the course or a life-writing project in narrative prose or poetry.

Learning Objectives

The course will provide:

- a broad understanding of issues related to the shaping of the past in literature
- a detailed understanding of techniques involved in the construction of the self through memory and narrative

- core skills in written and oral communication, in textual analysis and in creative practice.

Content

This course will explore the processes involved in writing about the self, integrating analysis of the autobiographical techniques of major writers with a practical understanding of the resources of the writer through workshop exercises and assignments. Particular attention will be paid to

- The literary tradition of the autobiographical act
- The creation of self and identity in and through narrative
- The fictions that inform "autobiographical truth"
- The nature and role of memory in the structuring of experience
- The motives for memoir-writing

Course Outline

S/N	Topic	Seminar Hours
1	Week One Introduction/Genre/Autobiography and Memoir, Critical and Creative Issues in self-narratives Readings: Essays on memory and imagination by Patricia Hampl, Phillip Lopate etc.	3 hours
2	Week Two Beginnings/Childhood Readings: Tobias Wolff's <i>This Boy's Life</i> . Mary Karr's <i>The Liars' Club</i>	3 hours
3	Week Three Growing Pains Readings: Tobias Wolff's <i>This Boy's Life</i> . Mary Karr's <i>The Liars' Club</i>	3 hours
4	Week Four Father and Son Reading: Paul Auster's <i>The Invention of Solitude</i>	3 hours
5	Week Five Autobiographical/ Confessional Poetry 1: Robert Lowell	3 hours
6	Week Six Autobiographical/ Confessional Poetry 2: Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton	3 hours
7	Week Seven After Confession: Contemporary Autobiographical Poetry: Sharon Olds, Mark Doty etc First Assignment due in class	3 hours
8	Week Eight Going Back/Roots and Origins Reading: Michael Ondaatje's <i>Running in the Family</i>	3 hours

9	Week Nine Turning Point Reading: Martin Amis' <i>Experience</i> Second Assignment due in class	3 hours
10	Week Ten The Journey Narrative Reading: Jenny Diski's <i>Skating to Antarctica</i>	3 hours
11	Week Eleven The Family Album Readings: All primary texts	3 hours
12	Week Twelve Endings/ Beginnings Readings: All primary texts	3 hours
13	Week Thirteen The Future of Life-Writing/ Revision TBA: Final Assignment due	3 hours

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- acquire a knowledge of the history, theory and practice of autobiography.
- an understanding of the memoir as narrative, and the role of memory and imagination in shaping life-narratives.
- be familiar with the techniques and skills of life-writing.
- acquire skills in independent thinking and planning and improve research capabilities.
- acquire a critical approach to academic research.
- acquire experience of textual analysis, academic and creative writing.

Student Assessment

Students will be assessed by 100% Continuous Assessment:

A) 1000-word discussion paper (20%)

Students are required to analyse in detail the nature and role of memory in a specific episode of a set text. Close textual analysis should be supported by relevant critical references and discussion of the narrative scene in relation to the text and genre.

B) 1000-word creative writing assignment (20%)

Recreate a childhood or pivotal memory. Students are required to pay close attention to the character and narrative development. Descriptive and narrative details are vital to bringing the memory to life.

C) Essays / Written Assignments (50%)

This is a 2500-word essay responding to one of the essay topics listed in the critical sections OR 2500-word creative writing assignment or equivalent. The research paper

will be assessed for its thematic focus and development, and its use of critical references in advancing and deepening textual analysis and thematic development. Creative projects should demonstrate use of narrative strategies and techniques in memoir writing to achieve clear, vivid, coherent and engaging narratives of self and memory. Poetry portfolios should demonstrate use of lyric and narrative techniques in autobiographical poetry to create engaging and coherent poems of memory and self.

D) Class participation and presentation (10%)

Participation entails contributions to critical discussions and workshopping of creative work.

Textbooks/References

Primary Readings (Subject to change)

Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life*. New York: Grove Press, 2000.

Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*. London: Vintage, 1993.

Jenny Diski, *Skating to Antarctica*. London: Granta, 1998.

Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*. London: Penguin, 2007.

Martin Amis, *Experience*. London: Vintage, 2001.

Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club*. London: Penguin, 2007.

*Poetry and supplementary readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Secondary Readings

Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *The Turning Key: Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse since 1800*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1984.

Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Fiction Techniques for Crafting Great Nonfiction*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001.

Coe, Richard N. *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984.

Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Evans, Mary. *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

- Forché, Carolyn, and Philip Gerard (eds). *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Instruction and Insight*. Cincinnati: Story Press, 2001.
- Goodwin, James. *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*. NY: Twayne, 1993.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Writing a Woman's Life*. London: Women's Press, 1989.
- Jay, Paul. *Being in the Text : Self-representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes*. Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Marcus, Laura. *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994.
- McCooey, David. *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Miller, Patti. *Writing Your Life: A Journey of Discovery*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001.
- Olney, James (ed.). *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Olney, James. *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Pilling, John. *Autobiography and Imagination: Studies in Self-Scrutiny*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Sontag, Kate. *After Confession: Poetry As Autobiography*. Port Townsend, Washington: Graywolf Press, 2001.
- Spengemann, William C. *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.
- Steele, Peter. *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self on Show*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1989.
- Sturrock, John. *The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. NY: Quill, 2001.
- Zinsser, William (ed). *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

HSS English Division: Definition and Penalties for Plagiarism

Definition

Plagiarism (from the Latin word for ‘kidnapper’) is the deliberate or accidental presentation of someone else’s ideas or words as your own. This includes:

- The unacknowledged use of words, images, diagrams, graphs, or ideas derived from any source such as books, journals, magazines, the visual media, and the internet. Note: cutting and pasting words from the internet into your own essay, even if you reword them, is still plagiarism.
- Copying the work of a fellow student, having another student write one’s assignments, or allowing another student to borrow one’s work.
- Buying and/or copying essays, assignments, projects etc from the internet or any other source and handing them in as your own.

Please bear in mind that your lecturers know the subject and have read widely. They therefore can spot unreferenced quotations, and can tell the difference between university level writing and that of published scholars.

Penalties

- If a first year student is caught plagiarizing, and it is the student’s first offense, the student will have the opportunity to rewrite the paper with one grade reduction.
- After the first year of studies, it is expected that a student thoroughly understands the implications of plagiarism. Thus, after the first year, or if a student is caught plagiarizing a second time, the student will receive an F for the assignment.

Why plagiarism is academically dishonest

- The unacknowledged borrowing of another’s work is theft.
- Independent and creative thinking, as well as intellectual responsibility, are fundamental to a humanities education, and cannot be developed if one simply borrows the work of another.

How to avoid academic dishonesty

Plagiarism

- If you use an author’s exact words, you must put them in quotation marks. If you paraphrase another’s ideas, you again must indicate the source to your reader.
- Facts and statistics that are not “common knowledge” must be referenced.
- Be sure to use the method of citation recommended by your professor.

- If in doubt, it is always best to reference your material.
- Remember that your lecturer wants to see your ideas and interpretations. Avoid excessively quoting secondary sources and show your reader your thinking.

Collusion and complicity

- Ask your lecturer if you are allowed to work on assignments in groups.
- Get the approval of your professor if you want to hand in material that you have already submitted for another course.
- Do not allow students to copy your work (including work from previous semesters).
- Follow the examination rules set out by the university.

If you still have questions, please ask your professors, or consult the website:

<http://www.plagiarism.org>.

Sources for this document: The Little, Brown Essential Handbook. Ed. Jane E. Aaron. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006.