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GSC 40512 / ENGL 40136 / AFST 43175/GSC 60512: Monstrous Mothers of Literature

"We think back through our mothers if we are women..." ~ Virginia Woolf

History has shown us that mother love does not flourish when motherhood is mandatory." ~ Shari L. Thurer

"Mother-love is not inevitable. The good mother is a great artist ever creating beauty out of chaos." ~ Alice Randall

monstrous, adj., adv., int., and n.: Of a thing (material or immaterial): deviating from the natural or conventional order; unnatural, extraordinary (OED)

Images of terrible, horrifying mothers have long abounded in literature and have dominated media portrayals of motherhood for decades. Consider the mothers in *Precious* and the maternal substitutes in Disney films, or real-life examples like Nadya Suleman (the infamous Octomom) or Michelle Duggar: not only do a multitude of examples of "bad" mothering exist, but women's attempts to mother are also scrutinized in excruciating detail. In this course, we will read a selection of texts from the Anglophone and African diasporic traditions to interrogate the literary use of maternal motifs. What purpose is served by making a fictional mother monstrous? What literary effect is created? We will examine contemporary American culture (magazines, blogs, movies, the "momoir") to theorize possible impacts on the role of the modern mother. What does it say about society that these images are so popular? And what is the connection between a woman's reproductive power and the urge to label her "monstrous"?



TEXTS TO BE PURCHASED:

1. Daniel Black, *Perfect Peace* (2010) [US/African American] – 352 pgs. [St. Martin's Griffin; 978-0312571658]
2. Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) [Haiti] – 234 pgs. [Vintage; 978-0375705045]
3. Emma Donoghue, *Room* (2010) [Ireland/Canada] – 384 pgs. [Little, Brown and Company; 978-0316223232]
4. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde* (1994) [Nigeria] – 144 pgs. [Waveland Press; 978-1577664192]
5. Nancy Huston, *Slow Emergencies* (1996) – 208 pgs. [French Canadian] – [Vintage; 978-0375709203]
6. Molly Keane, *Good Behaviour* (1982) [Ireland] – 256 pgs. [Virago UK; 978-1844087624]
7. Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (1989) [Zimbabwe/England] – 144 pgs. [Vintage; 978-0679721826]
8. Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (1998) [Jamaica/US] – 256 pgs. [Mariner Books; 978-0156008297]
9. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) [Dominica/Caribbean creole] – 192 pgs. [Norton; 978-0393311464]
10. Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (1986) [US/African American] – 240 pgs. [William Morrow; 978-0688166434]

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. **Participation** in class discussions – 10%
2. **Scholarship presentation** – you will sign up for a class session and present an area of maternal scholarship at the start of class; topics might include the mommy penalty, mothers using their children as status symbols, mothering children with special needs, etc. Ideally, you will pair your topic to the novel under discussion; please discuss your topic choice with me in advance. This assignment has 2 parts: submit a written bibliography to be shared with the class; and teach this topic to the class – 15% total (5% for works cited, 10% for presentation)
3. **Midterm** – 25% total
4. **Research paper** – topic to be chosen in consultation with me; you may either research a topic related to mothering practices (using one or two of the novels as an example) or do a critical textual analysis of one or two course texts. This will be submitted in two parts: A **critical essay analysis** – you need to find 3 critical essays analyzing your novel/topic; this short essay should summarize the main argument(s) of each article, compare/contrast the three approaches to your novel/topic, and assess the merit(s) and weakness(es) of the essays (4-5 pages). This is due on the last class day and you will receive feedback by Thursday 5/2. The **research paper** is due at the final exam period (undergrads, 12-15 pages; grad students, 20 pages) – 50% (10%, critical essay analysis; 40%, research paper)

GRADE SCALE:

A – 95-100	C+ – 77-79
A – 90-94	C – 73-76
B+ – 87-89	C- – 70-72
B – 83-86	D – 65-69
B- – 80-82	F – 64 or lower

CLASS ETIQUETTE:

- We are all mutually responsible for maintaining a respectful, safe, appropriate learning environment. Actions or comments which detract from this goal will not be tolerated.

Consistent with the mission of the University of Notre Dame, the Gender Studies Program is dedicated to fostering a learning community that represents and builds on a rich diversity of human experiences, backgrounds, cultures, histories, ideas, and ways of living. We also commit to the task of negotiating the dual priorities of authentic free speech and active regard for all others in a safe, supportive, and anti-oppressive classroom environment. An anti-oppressive environment means that we work against language, actions, interactions and ideologies that hurt people. Hate speech of any kind will not be permitted. This includes use of racial, sexual, gender, or abled slurs and personal attacks on others' ideas.

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Photo credit: from the Snite Museum, available online

Plagiarism cannot be tolerated. Please be mindful of the Honor Code pledge – **“As a member of the Notre Dame community, I will not participate in or tolerate academic dishonesty.”** – All assignments are submitted with the implicit understanding that you have done them on your own; any ideas of scholars must be properly cited (use MLA style, **UNLESS** you have made prior arrangements with me). You may discuss the readings with classmates both before and after class meetings, and obviously should take notes during class discussions.

- Attendance – any absence not covered by the University’s policy on excused absences is considered unexcused. My policy for attendance is as follows: for your **THIRD** unexcused absence, you lose half a letter grade; for your **FOURTH**, you lose a letter grade; **if you miss more than FOUR classes (unexcused), you FAIL the class.**
- I use the ND listserv and the Sakai site to communicate with you; check both your ND email and Sakai on a regular basis; I will also post your grades on Sakai.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS:

- This syllabus can be modified to meet the needs (as determined by me) of the class.
- Readings and assignments are due the class day on which they are listed → PLEASE FINISH EACH ASSIGNED NOVEL FOR THE FIRST SCHEDULED DISCUSSION DAY
- [e] (indicates this reading is available through e-reserves at the library)

The standard rule of thumb in academia is that you should spend approximately 2 hours of prep time for each hour of class time (for our class, this translates into spending about 2.5 hours before each of our class meetings). If you find that you are spending significantly more time than this on a routine basis, please see me if you would like to brainstorm some reading/writing/studying strategies.

MONSTROUS PROGENY		
<u>Week 1:</u>	1/15: Introduction	1/17: Judith Merrill, "That Only a Mother" and Alice McDermott, "Our Girls"
<u>Week 2:</u>	1/22: Jean Rhys, <i>Voyage in the Dark</i>	1/24: Rhys, <i>Voyage</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> _____
<u>Week 3:</u>	1/29: Doris Lessing, <i>The Fifth Child</i>	1/31: Lessing, <i>The Fifth Child</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> _____
MIGRATING MOTHERS		
<u>Week 4:</u>	2/5: Buchi Emecheta, <i>Kehinde</i>	2/7: Emecheta, <i>Kehinde</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> _____
<u>Week 5:</u>	2/12: Patricia Powell, <i>The Pagoda</i>	2/14: Powell, <i>The Pagoda</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> _____
<u>Week 6:</u>	2/19: Powell, <i>The Pagoda</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> _____	2/21: the mother-daughter relationship on screen – film to be chosen by the class (from several options) and screening to be held prior to class)
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS		
<u>Week 7:</u>	2/26: Daniel Black, <i>Perfect Peace</i>	2/28: Black, <i>Perfect Peace</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> _____
<u>Week 8:</u>	3/5: Black, <i>Perfect Peace</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> _____	3/7: MIDTERM
<u>Week 9: SPRING BREAK [3/11-3/15]</u>		

<u>Week 10:</u>	3/19: Molly Keane, <i>Good Behaviour</i>	3/21: Keane, <i>Good Behaviour</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>
<u>Week 11:</u>	3/26: Keane, <i>Good Behaviour</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>	3/28: Edwidge Danticat, <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i>
3/31-4/1: Easter break		
<u>Week 12:</u>	4/2: Danticat, <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>	4/4: Danticat, <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>
MORE THAN VICTIMS		
<u>Week 13:</u>	4/9: Nancy Huston, <i>Slow Emergencies</i>	4/11: Huston, <i>Slow Emergencies</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>
<u>Week 14:</u>	4/16: Sherley Anne Williams, <i>Dessa Rose</i>	4/18: Williams, <i>Dessa Rose</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>
<u>Week 15:</u>	4/23: Williams, <i>Dessa Rose</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>	4/25: Emma Donoghue, <i>Room</i> <u>Scholarship presentation:</u>
<u>Week 16:</u>	4/30: Donoghue, <i>Room</i> , cont. <u>Scholarship presentation:</u> Course Wrap-up <u>Critical Essay analysis—due in class</u>	5/2: Reading Day – no class
<u>Final Exam Week:</u> research paper due at the scheduled exam period → Wednesday, May 8 @ 10:30		



Kara Walker, Excavated from the Black Heart of a Negress