LISS1001 British Literature and The Brontës

Module Syllabus

Module leader: Victoria Clarke
Email: V.Clarke@leeds.ac.uk
**Module summary**

This module will provide students with an introduction to British Literature with a particular focus on well-known authors from the region, including the Brontës. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë lived at Haworth Parsonage, only a few miles from Leeds, which will be visited as part of this module. During the 1840s and 50s they wrote some of the most original and challenging fiction of the Victorian period, which retains its popularity and still inspires criticism, fiction, popular culture, and film adaptations. Other British authors including Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, and the Pre-Raphaelite poets may be included in the curriculum. Throughout the course you will read a range of texts by these authors and explore these writings each day in class by means of group discussions and a workshop on writing a critical commentary. Please note you must read the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde before the start of the summer school.

**Objectives**

This module will provide students with an introduction to British Literature with a particular focus on well-known authors including Wilde, the Rossettis and especially the Brontë sisters. It will extend students' knowledge of nineteenth-century literature across three forms – poetry, drama and the novel. It will ask students to make thematic cross-references between the texts studied.

**Learning outcomes**

Students will gain knowledge of a range of British writers. They will have participated in workshops, discussions, and field trips that will foster analytical, interpretative and creative responses. Students will have developed skills in close reading and research. The dual assessment, by reflective log and commentary, will develop individual writing research and writing strategies and foster capacities for working with others.

**Teaching methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Delivery type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Length hours</th>
<th>Student hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-line Learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldwork</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Contact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total hours (100hr per 10 credits)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Private study**

Pre-course preparatory work (materials available on the VLE): 15 hours. Students will be encouraged to undertake further reading during non-class time using the 'Suggested further reading' on the module syllabus as a guide; they may also be set preparation tasks.
Methods of assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment type</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>% of formal assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written Work</td>
<td>700 word commentary (critical response to a particular passage)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial Performance</td>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective log</td>
<td>500 words</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Late Penalties
University rules on penalties for late submission of coursework require 5 full marks to be deducted for each calendar day that passes after the date of required submission. If coursework is not submitted by the end of 14 calendar days following the prescribed deadline, a grade/mark of zero will be returned for that component.

Module outline

Day 1: Introduction to Nineteenth-Century British Literature
We will begin with an introductory lecture, followed by a group discussion and an introduction to the task of a reflective log.


Some questions for consideration:

- What are our preconceptions of Victorian literature? What terms do we tend to associate with the concept of Victorian Britain?
- What is the significance of our decision to use or not to use ‘Victorian’ to describe this body of literature?
- Why do you think this module focuses specifically on British literature of the nineteenth century, as opposed to literature from any other period?
- Why do modern readers return to these texts? What makes Victorian literature (in particular the novels of the Brontës – Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall) so popular and enduring? What is at the heart of our modern-day fascination with Victorian literature and culture?
- Why do you think there have been so many film, television, and stage adaptations of Victorian novels? Why do you think the genre of neo-Victorian fiction is so popular today?
- What important changes took place during the nineteenth century? What changes took place in the literary and publishing worlds during the nineteenth century?
Today, you will also be introduced to some of the remarkable items in the Brotherton Library Special Collections, which include a wealth of material from and relating to the nineteenth century. These include first editions of Charles Dickens’s serial publications and 170 autograph letters from the author, a collection of letters from the Tennyson family, a substantial collection of manuscripts written by Algernon Charles Swinburne, and papers relating to the Arnold family, Bram Stoker, and Aubrey Beardsley. Perhaps most importantly for us, the Brotherton Collections also contain a substantial number of items relating to the Brontë family, and to Branwell Brontë in particular. They include the little books written and bound by Branwell during his youth, stories from Charlotte’s and Branwell’s shared fictional world of Angria, Charlotte’s French exercise book from Brussels, and Anne’s commentary on the Bible.

You will have the opportunity to view some of these items today, and you are encouraged to return and explore this material on your own, and to make use of it in your annotated bibliographies and presentations.

Suggested Contextual Reading:


**Day 2: Charlotte, Emily, Anne**

We often group Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë together as writers, but remarkable as it is that the same Yorkshire family produced three of the most popular and enduring English novelists of the age, in fact each has her own unique literary style. This seminar will be devoted to close reading of extracts from Charlotte’s *Villette*, Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne’s *Agnes Grey*.

The close reading assessment task will be distributed during this session.

Some questions for consideration:
• What concerns does each writer have?
• How does their use of language differ – their individual vocabulary, syntax, use of imagery?
• How does each deal with dialogue – which characters speak, and how much?
• How are the different novels narrated? Do we hear a character’s thoughts? How much information do they share with us? Is there use of techniques such as free indirect discourse?
• How realist are the texts – are they presented as real scenes? Do they ever draw attention to the fact that they are fictional?
• What are the feminist concerns of the texts? What attempts do they make to address women’s issues and other cultural concerns?
• Which author’s style do you prefer? Why do you think this is – can it be explained by any of the elements questioned above, or is there some other reason?

Suggested further reading:

4. Rachel K. Carnell, ‘Feminism and the Public Sphere in Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Novel 30 (1996), 32-55
8. Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857)
15. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess, eds., New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë (2001)

**Day 3: Poetry & Painting: The Pre-Raphaelites**

We will have a discussion of the development and the aims of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), with an emphasis on the relationship between word and image. We will then discuss poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, Robert Browning, Algernon Charles Swinburne and others.

Some questions for consideration:

- What were the aims of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood?
- How might we define their success or failure with regards to these aims?
- In what ways might we compare painterly strategies with poetic strategies?
- Is it significant that the PRB was an all-male group? How would you describe their relationships with their female associates (for example, Christina Rossetti and Lizzie Siddal)?
- Is it useful to consider Swinburne and Browning in relation to the Pre-Raphaelites?

Today, we will visit the Leeds City Art Gallery, where you will see several Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

**Suggested further reading:**

1. Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (1999)
Day 4: Drama: Oscar Wilde
Today, we will discuss Wilde’s popular 1895 comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In preparation for this session, and in addition to reading the play, please familiarize yourself with other works by Wilde. You might want to read one or more of Wilde’s other comedies: *An Ideal Husband*, *A Woman of No Importance*, or *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Please also read through the supplementary material on Wilde for Day 4 in your module booklet.

Some questions for consideration:

- How fluid is morality in Wilde’s plays?
- What is the significance of the figure of the dandy, and what does that role bring to the plays?
- How and why are Wilde’s plays comic?
- How does Wilde configure relationships between the sexes and between the generations in his plays?
- What types of masculinity are evident in Wilde’s play?

Suggested further reading:


Day 5: Field Trip to Haworth
We will tour the Brontë Parsonage Museum in nearby Haworth and receive a special presentation on the lives of the Brontës and the work of the museum from the staff. There will then be a chance to explore the town and its surroundings.
Day 6: Writing Workshop
Following on from the close reading exercises in Days 2 and 3, we will work on writing exercises which compare the styles of the Brontë sisters. You will apply what you have learned about their distinct styles and personal concerns and produce your own descriptions, dialogue, and internal monologues, in order to help you identify the elements that are most relevant for your close reading assessment exercises. We will also attempt a practice close reading to prepare for the assessment.

Day 7: The Lives of the Brontës
We will begin with a short lecture on the Brontës, their lives, literature, and cultural legacy, before moving on to focus on Charlotte’s Jane Eyre. We will have a group discussion about Jane Eyre and about popular perceptions of the Brontës. We will also read extracts from Elizabeth Gaskell’s The Life of Charlotte Brontë. In addition to reading the novel, please identify one or more passages that depict acts of reading (this can be a moment during which a character reads a book, or it can be a moment during which a character performs another kind of reading, such as reading someone’s character or face).

Some questions for consideration:

- Who were the Brontës? What myths have grown up around them?
- How does Charlotte take us inside Jane Eyre’s childhood consciousness?
- Why and how is Jane different from other children? What is the effect of the narrator being such a character?
- What might psychoanalytic or biographical approaches bring to the text? What are their limitations?
- How does our reading of feminist or post-colonial criticism impact on our understanding of Jane Eyre?
- What role does religion play in the text?
- Why is education an important theme in the novel?
- What is troubling about the relationship between Rochester and Jane?

Day 8: Jane Eyre on film
We will view an adaptation of Jane Eyre (the 2011 film directed by Cary Fukunaga) and this will be followed by a discussion of this particular adaptation and the adaptation of other nineteenth-century texts.

Day 9: Brontë Controversy
Jane Eyre was wildly successful, but it was also an extremely controversial text. It was followed by the publication of Emily’s Wuthering Heights and Anne’s Agnes Grey. The appearance of these three
novels (which dealt with violence, bigamy, and alcoholism, subjects that were considered shocking to Victorian audiences) written by authors who shared the same surname (the pseudonym Bell), resulted in heated debates about the morality of the texts, the identities (and especially the gender) of the authors, and whether the authors were related. One of the most controversial aspects of *Jane Eyre* was the section on Lowood, which was partly based on Charlotte’s experiences at the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge. We will perform close readings of this section of the novel, of Elizabeth Gaskell’s treatment of Charlotte’s school days at Cowan Bridge, and of a vindication of the school (just one of the many important nineteenth-century documents in the Brotherton Special Collections). We will also watch some extracts from Sally Wainright’s biodrama ‘To Walk Invisible,’ (2016) based on the Brontës’ lives in the run up to the publication of their debut novels, and examine the ways in which morality and ‘coarseness’ were criticisms levelled both at the Brontës and Wainright. We will discuss some of the early reviews of the Brontës’ novels and consider the controversy engendered by Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.