Course Description: Freud famously asked, "What does woman want?" and claimed that the question was unanswerable. This course explores the ways in which three classic novels, each an outstanding example of twentieth century women's fiction, offers a response to his question. Our central purpose is to consider notions of "fiction," "the feminine," and "desire" in relation to one another. What is "fiction," and what uses of language make it different from "non-fiction"? What do we mean by "the feminine"? How is gender inscribed in fiction written by women, and by what signs might we best recognize it? Finally, in what ways might these novels represent a specifically "feminine desire," one that poses alternatives alternatives to regnant, patriarchal norms? We will examine the ways in which novels by Chopin, Morrison, and Winterson respond to these questions, and to the issues they provoke.

Structure of Each Session:
1. Overview of the work under consideration, discuss central themes and issues.
2. Close reading and discussion of specific passages.
3. Preparation for next week's text with an overview of the themes that we will be encountering and the literary techniques and strategies that will help us understand it.
4. Time for student questions and discussion throughout the class.

I have included a sample of quotations from each work so that you may acquaint yourselves with its style and major themes before you begin to read it. I've also written "study questions" for you to ponder before class discussion. Don't feel any need to "answer" them! They're here to stimulate and enhance your reading, and to give you a sense of each work's central issues.

Outline of Topics and Readings:

January 25: Introduction to the class and to each other; overview of the novels we will read and to the literary techniques and strategies that will help us understand them. Discuss how fiction differs from non-fiction, the importance of style and narrative strategy, and the importance
of "close reading." We'll begin discussing The Awakening, with particular attention to the first few paragraphs. Please read the novel before class.

February 1: The Awakening: Waking Up at the End of the Line
We'll continue and conclude our discussion of The Awakening. Brief introduction to Sula.
Below are quotations from the novel for you to consider, followed by questions to reflect upon as you read.

Quotes:
1. “The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude.”

2. “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.”

3. “…but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself.”

4. “I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give up my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.”

5. “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.”

Questions:
1. To what does Edna "awaken"? What other word does the word "awakening" contain and how does it pertain to the novel's main themes and images?

2. What does the book's first paragraph suggest about "birds" and "imitation" or "copying"? What kinds of birds are "speaking" and why are their names significant? How does the novel's beginning complicate assumptions complicate the differences between nature and culture, life and art?
3. How many "voices" does the novel portray? What is "the voice of the sea," and what does it say? How and why is it "seductive"?

4. Do you agree with Mme. Reiz' definition of "the artist"? Does the novel problematize the claims she makes?

5. What roles do race and class play in this novel?

6. What sentences does the novel repeat, where are they repeated, and why?

7. What is "the essential?" Does Edna "give up" or become "herself?" Is there a difference?

8. At the beginning of the novel Edna spends too much time in the sun. Her husband, Monsieur Ratignolle, tells her that she is "burnt beyond recognition." Quite literally, Edna's skin has changed color: she begins to grow darker. Notice the other "women of color" in the novel and ask how the colors of their skin or hair function metaphorically?

**February 8 and 15: Sula: "Outlaw women are fascinating..." (Toni Morrison)**
Read and discuss *Sula*. Class on 2/15 concludes with an introduction to *The Passion*.

**Quotes:**
1. "It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters...The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake."

2. "Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it."

3. “It was a fine cry - loud and long - but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.”

4. “In a way, her strangeness, her naïveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings, had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided
her with all she yearned for. And like an artist with no art form, she became dangerous.”

6. “The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over.”

7. “There in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning.”

**Questions:**

1. In the Prologue, Morrison describes the changes taking place in the Bottom as rich whites move into the area. How does her description imply that things are not what they appear to be on the surface?

2. How does the narrative about Shadrack and "National Suicide Day" frame and set a tone the novel? Is Shadrack a prophet? Is he a madman? Or a surrogate figure for the novelist? What role does he serve in the community?

3. What is the significance of Shadrack's "always"? In what context does the word first appear and why isn't its meaning explained until near the end of the novel?

4. When and why does Nel use the words "aesthetic" and "rapport"? Why are these words important?

5. The chapters are titled according to years. What might the purpose of this be?

6. Stereotypes about female sexuality, "blackness," and evil coalesce in the figure of Sula. Does the novel undermine these stereotypes and suggest an alternative?

**February 22 and March 1: The Passion: "Trust me. I'm Telling you Stories" (Jeanette Winterson)**

Read and discuss *The Passion*. On March 1, conclude with an overview and discussion of the course.
Quotes:

1. “I think now that being free is not being powerful or rich or well regarded or without obligation but being able to love. To love someone else enough to forget about yourself even for one moment is to be free.”

2. “There is no sense in loving someone you can never wake up to except by chance.”

3. “You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play. It’s the playing that’s irresistible. Dicing from one year to the next with the things you love, what you risk reveals what you value.”

4. “Hopeless heart that thrives on paradox; that longs for the beloved and is secretly relieved when the beloved is not there.”

5. “There is no sense in loving someone you can never wake up to except by chance.”

6. “You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play. It’s the playing that’s irresistible. Dicing from one year to the next with the things you love, what you risk reveals what you value.”

Questions:

1. Consider the words and phrases that Winterson repeats throughout the novel in relation to themes of passion, love, value, risk, and chance.

2. Why is the protagonist's name "Villanelle?" What is a villanelle and how does Villanelle (and her story) resemble one?

3. Consider Winterson's representations of sexuality in the novel and ask what if any differences Villanelle's sexuality and desire for women implies.

4. Why does Villanelle ultimately refuse the Queen of Spades? How does her refusal shed light on Winterson's portrayal of risk, play, and value?

5. By the end of the story, how was Henri changed?

6. What does the novel say about love?

7. Should we "trust a story-teller," and if so, why?

Books:

*The Awakening*, Kate Chopin (1899)

*Sula*, Toni Morrison (1973)

*The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson (1987)