

EN 4/6990.02: Special Topics

“Damned Mob of Scribbling Women”:

Best-Selling Novels by American Women Writers, 1850-1870

Dr. Bonnie Carr O’Neill

Summer I, M-F 10:00 a.m.



America is now given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I succeeded.
–Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1855

This infamous comment by Nathaniel Hawthorne highlights a tension at the heart of nineteenth-century American literary studies: the most popular works of the period usually are not the works that modern students are asked to read in classes. Now regarded as a masterpiece, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* sold fewer than 10,000 copies within the author’s lifetime. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, on the other hand, sold 10,000 copies within the first *two months* of publication and tens of thousands more within its first year on the market. Other novels by American women writers were also astonishingly successful, thanks to their lively writing, exciting plots, appealing characters, and unabashed sentimentalism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term “best-seller” was coined in the decades covered by this course, and we will read several of the best-selling novels of the time. We will consider the works’ literary merits as well as their popular appeal. How significant is a book’s popularity—what does it tell us about the culture that celebrated it? Does a work’s success in the marketplace trade economic value for literary or artistic value? In what ways do these works appeal to values and interests rampant in the culture at large? In addition, we will consider these works as examples of what critic Nina Baym famously termed “woman’s fiction”: that is, novels “by, for, and about American women.” In what ways do these works create and/or challenge the ideologies of gender identity that govern the lives of contemporary women?

Requirements:

All students will be required to lead class discussion and submit two essays, including one research paper, and the class will include both a midterm and a final exam. Assignments will be modified for graduate students as appropriate.

Texts:

Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850)
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)
Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall* (1855)
E.D.E.N. Southworth, *The Hidden Hand* (1859)
Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868-9)

