

REALIST FICTION

The Girl with the Sensible Shoes

COLT 345, 22026D, Tuesdays, 2:00-4:50 pm, VKC 210

The critic Raymond Williams once wrote “There is a kind of novel which in fact creates and judges the quality of a whole way of living in terms of the qualities of persons,” and he famously compared the “social” novel (a novel like George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* or, the novel which is so “real” it is no longer even a novel, *War and Peace*) to the “personal novel,” a novel like Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, in which “all the furniture and even the physical bodies have gone out the window.” This might be appealing to anyone who has ever wanted to throw a long 19th century novel out the window (and who hasn’t?) but as Williams himself admitted, this distinction is arbitrary: we go to the novel for the “real world,” a copy of a world we could step into, feel, taste, smell, touch – but also for the “reality” of how individual people see that world. We step into a novel to step out of our own lives – and it is that impulse which this class will explore.

Our seminar will take its keynote from this question and from another statement of “realism” from the same critic, Raymond Williams, who commented elsewhere that when people say “Be realistic!” they don’t just mean step into the world of hansom cabs, imaginary gardens with real frogs, buttons and bustles and miners and coal mines, they mean be sensible. Don’t spend more money than you earn; don’t buck the system; don’t break the rules; accept the world as it is. This seminar will explore novels that give us the “real world”: books that explore women without money trying to marry men who have more; miners striking for their rights; orphans begging for their suppers; armies going to war. But we will also enter the worlds of people who refuse to be realistic: people who ask for more: women who dream of fulfilling lives beyond marriage and children; science fiction heroines who dream of utopian futures; a young child who is born, dies, lives again, dies, is born again, who lives another life, and a life after that, and who goes on to experience “life after life.” Realism, in short, is not a boundary for what we can expect – it is a promise that there may always be more beyond the next page... we will not listen to our sensible shoes! To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing, Williams wrote, and this is our theme.

Among the texts we will be reading might be Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Our Mutual Friend*, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Emil Zola’s *Germinale*, Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, Borges’s *Ficciones*, the short stories of Chekhov, Flaubert and Alice Munro, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Illyich*, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life*.



COLT L/M/CT Track: This is a **Literature** concentration course. This course eligible for Narrative Studies credit under the Contemporary Fiction and Drama category.

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