

American Housewives in Literature and Culture

BTP2NA_T_26W 10:00-11:40, Room XX



Dr. Dorottya Mozes

E-mail: mozes.dorottya@arts.unideb.hu

Office Hours: T, Th 5:00-6:00pm and by appointment

Office Location: Room 116/1

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Course Description

This interdisciplinary seminar explores the figure of the American housewife as a complex sociological phenomenon, cultural construct, literary archetype, televisual spectacle, and ideological battleground. From post-WWII domestic ideals to the contemporary reality TV celebrities of Bravo's *Real Housewives* or tradwives on social media, the course maps the transformation of domestic femininity in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, arts, film, TV, and media. By pairing canonical and popular works with theory and scholarship, students will explore how the "housewife" embodies dynamics of power, labor, performance, and emotional affect. In addition, they will investigate how representations of the housewife intersect with changing conceptions of gender, race, class, age, and sexuality.

Students will examine the housewife as both a symbolic role, performative practice, and lived experience—scrutinizing her construction through melodrama, satire, photography, queer memoir, feminist dystopia, romance, and reality television. Course themes include motherhood and family, love and happiness, domestic labor and emotional management, neoliberal femininity, mental health and addiction, racialized and queer domesticity. Emphasis is placed on the relationship between narrative, visibility, and ideology, with particular attention to how the "home" is staged as both a site of repression and creative resistance.

By the end of the course, students will:

- Critically analyze representations of women and domestic roles in North American literature, art, film, media, and television.
- Apply feminist, queer, and critical race theories to empirical and fictional embodiments of housewifery.
- Deconstruct media artifacts using concepts such as emotional labor, performativity, postfeminism, neoliberal femininity, and spectacle (among others).

- Conduct cultural, literary, media, and linguistic analysis in both academic and creative forms.
- Develop nuanced perspectives on reality television as narrative and ideology.
- Understand the changing and socioculturally constructed nature of domestic roles across different historical and social contexts.

****Students are advised that the quality of their written and spoken performance will count significantly toward their final grade.****

Course Requirements and Expectations:

Attendance/Lateness Policy—

This course has a strict attendance policy. More than three absences result in a failing grade. Full attendance is mandatory and will be factored into your final grade. Because the success of this class depends so much on the people within it, I expect you to attend all class meetings and to be on time. Excessive lateness will lower your class participation grade. Unexcused absences will lower your final grade. Except for sickness and emergencies, it is necessary that you see me well in advance of any absence to plan accordingly. Missing class does not excuse you from learning what happened that day, and all assignments must be submitted on time unless you have cleared an alternate due date with the instructor *in advance*.

Academic Integrity—

Knowingly presenting someone else's work as your own constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is one of the most serious offenses in academia because it undermines the community of integrity that supports a scholarly community. As such, the penalties for plagiarism are harsh. Students who plagiarize will fail the course. Institute policy is that the cover sheet of your essay must contain your name, the title of the essay, the name and code of the course, the date of submission, and the following statement: Hereby, I certify that the essay conforms to international copyright and plagiarism rules and regulations. You must sign this statement.

Laptop/Phone Usage—

Social networking, web browsing, texting, or checking email is not permitted during class time. Failure to adhere to this policy will result in a class participation grade of ZERO.

Formatting Guidelines—

Written work should be typed in MS Word. Style requirements are double-spaced essays, with Times New Roman size twelve font with 1-inch margins. I expect you to *edit* and *proofread* all written work. Drafts that contain excessive typos, misspellings, or grammar mistakes will be returned to the author for correction before I offer comments. Please give each piece of writing an original title, use page numbers on multi-page assignments, and include your name, assignment, and the due date in a header on the first page. Sources must be cited *within* all of your written work. Your final paper and project will include a properly formatted list of Works Cited, following a standard citation format (MLA, APA, or Chicago).

NOTE: If you anticipate a need for accommodations due to disability, mental health differences, or life circumstances, please contact me as early in the semester as possible. All communication about these will be kept confidential.

Course materials are available at the Institute library and on eLearning.

SCHEDULE

Week 1, September 10 – Course Introduction

Course overview

Week 2, September 17 – Family Trouble

Katherine Mansfield, “Bliss” (1918)

Theory pod: Sara Ahmed – Happiness & the Feminist Killjoy

Reading Response 1 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 3, September 24 – Gender Trouble

Radclyffe Hall, “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself” (1934)

Theory pod: Judith Butler – Gender Performativity

Reading Response 2 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 4, October 1 – Postwar America and the Return to Domesticity

Mildred Pierce (1945)

Theory pod: Laura Mulvey – Visual Pleasure and Narrative

Reading Response 3 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 5, October 8 – The American Housewife

Tillie Olsen, “I Stand Here Ironing” (1956)

Theory pod: Betty Friedan – The Feminine Mystique

Reading Response 4 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 6, October 15 – Dystopia in the Domestic

Stepford Wives (1975)

Theory pod: Jean Baudrillard – Simulacra and Simulation

Reading Response 5 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 7, October 22 – Consultation Week – No class

Week 8, October 29 – Contemporary Housewives

The Hours (1998) or *The Hours* (2002) dir. Stephen Daldry

Theory pod: Lauren Berlant – Cruel Optimism

Reading Response 6 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 9, November 5 – Childless by Choice or Barbie*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “Chiamaka” from *Dream Count* (2025)

Reneé Cox’s *Discreet Charm of the Bougie*

Theory pod: Audre Lorde – Uses and Power of the Erotic

Theory pod: Angela McRobbie – Postfeminism

Reading Response 7 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 10, November 12 – Satire and Suburban Housewives

Season 1 of *Desperate Housewives* (2004)

Reading Response 8 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 11, November 19 – The American Housewife in Reality TV I

Episodes from *Real Housewives of NYC*

Theory pod: Michel Foucault – Surveillance & Discipline

Reading Response 9 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 12, November 26 – The American Housewife in Reality TV II

Episodes from *Real Housewives of SLC*

Theory pod: bell hooks – The Oppositional Gaze

Reading Response 9 due Tuesday 11:11PM

Week 13, December 3 – Creative Project Presentations

Week 14, December 10 – Evaluation

*Instructor reserves right to amend syllabus as needed.

Grade Breakdown: Class Participation (20%), 4 Reading Responses (40%), Housewife Project (20%), Presentation (10%), Mini-Theory Pods (10%).

Class participation (20%)

Active participation goes beyond mere attendance. It requires engagement with assigned readings, including annotating texts—writing comments, noting questions, and marking significant words or phrases. Additionally, students are expected to bring their texts to class and contribute thoughtfully to class discussion.

The use of streaming services, social media, web browsing, texting, or checking email during class is strictly prohibited. Violating this policy will result in a **class participation grade of ZERO**. If I observe a student using a device in a way that is not constructive, I may ask them to put it away. Persistent misuse will result in the loss of device privileges in my classroom.

4 Reading Responses (40%)

Students are required to submit four reading responses (500 words each) to the University of Debrecen E-Learning system at elearning.unideb.hu. These responses will be graded, and late or incomplete submissions will receive a lower grade. Each response should be treated as a mini-essay, written with care, precision, and thoughtful analysis.

Responses must be submitted by 11:11 PM on Tuesdays, according to the schedule outlined in the Reading & Discussion Schedule.

Reading responses serve to spark and extend the critical discussions we engage in during class. Your writing should go beyond simple reactions; you are expected to provide a deeper analysis, raise thought-provoking questions, and explore themes that may become part of our class conversations. Proofreading for spelling and grammar is essential, and each response should **include an original title and incorporate at least two quotes from the text**.

Reading your peers' responses each week is highly encouraged, as it will enrich our collective discussions and broaden your perspectives on the material.

Housewife Creative Project (20%)

For this assignment, you will create a first-person performance or narrative that brings to life the perspective of a *housewife* figure—whether drawn from literature, history, film, (reality) television, or (social) media. You may choose a creative format that best suits your vision, such as: a short film; a podcast episode; a TikTok- or IG-style video; a “confessional” or mock interview etc.

Your project should:

- Use the body, voice, style, and perspective of the chosen housewife figure.
- Incorporate visual and cultural cues that reinforce the character and genre.
- Engage with critical vocabulary (e.g., *emotional labor*, *performance*, *domestic ideology*) where relevant.

You may work individually or in groups. Options may include, for example, enacting a scene, staging a reunion or “after show” conversation, or performing a confessional monologue.

Grading will focus on: creativity and originality; engagement with course concepts; creative use of the medium.

Presentation (10%)

Each week students will introduce a supplementary text. They will pick their topics on the first day of class. They will teach the assigned material, leading and moderating dialogue through discussion questions, interactive tasks, and group exercises etc. They will be graded according to the following criteria: content, structure, originality, degree of interactivity, oral and nonverbal delivery, inclusive language, multisensory aids, assigned tasks and exercises. They are required to upload their PowerPoint to Elearning intended to help students comprehend the reading covered in their teaching practice.

Students must send me their presentation in advance. Late submissions will result in an automatic 10% deduction from the grade.

Except in cases of emergencies, there will be no opportunity to redo the presentation.

On citing sources in an oral presentation, read the following guide: <https://www.bucks.edu/academics/departments/lang-lit/conference/citing/>

Mini-Theory Pod (10%)

Students will present 5–10 minute digestible spotlights on key theorists that provide conceptual scaffolding for deeper engagement with weekly themes. In this assignment, you will create a 5–10 minute mini-podcast-style presentation that introduces one key theorist and their central ideas. These “theory pods” serve as conceptual spotlights that give the class accessible entry points into complex theoretical texts.

These theorists provide conceptual frameworks for analyzing housewifery as a socioculturally and politically mediated identity where spectacle, suppression, and self-fashioning converge. These theorists include: Betty Friedan (*The Feminist Mystique*), Judith Butler (gender performativity), Sara Ahmed (happiness and the feminist killjoy), bell hooks (the oppositional gaze), Lauren Berlant (cruel optimism), Angela McRobbie (postfeminism), Jean Baudrillard (simulacra and simulation), Laura Mulvey (visual pleasure and narrative cinema), Audre Lorde (Black feminist erotic power), Michel Foucault (biopolitics, surveillance, and discipline), and others.

Your task is to:

- Identify the theorist’s main concept(s).

- Explain them in plain, digestible terms (imagine you're teaching it to a smart friend outside class).
- Connect the ideas to our course themes of housewifery, performance, domesticity, spectacle, or cultural identity.

Supplementary Readings

- Creeber, Glen (Ed.) (2023) *The Television Genre Book*. Bloomsbury.
- Edwards L. H. (2013). *The Triumph of Reality TV: The Revolution in American Television*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Feasey, R. (2012). *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television*. Wimbledon Publishing Company.
- Gammage, Marquita Marie. (2016) *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kaplan, E. Ann (2013). *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. Routledge.
- Kathleen, Anne McHugh. (1999) *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama*. New York: Oxford.
- Kraszewski, Jon. (2017) *Reality TV*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Lagerwey, Jorie. (2017) *Postfeminist Celebrity and Motherhood: Brand Mom*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Lee M. J., Moscowitz L. (2013). The "Rich Bitch": Class and Gender on the *Real Housewives of New York City*, *Feminist Media Studies*, 13, 64-82.
- McHugh, K. A. (1999). *American Domesticity: From How-To Manual to Hollywood Melodrama*. Oxford University Press.
- Murray S. and Ouellette L. (2009). *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (2nd ed.). New York: New York University Press.
- Silverstone, Roger (1994) *Television and Everyday Life*. New York: Routledge.