Graduate Liberal Studies at Wesleyan University

Auto/biography: Writing and the Self
Syllabus for Summer, 2016 (subject to change)
Pamela Burger
Visiting Assistant Professor, English
pburger@wesleyan.edu
Information below subject to change without notice.

This course will explore a broad range of texts that can fall into the category of "autobiography," including memoir, poetry, essays, graphic novels, and digital media. Questions of interest will include: How can the self be reconstructed through language? What is the relationship between memory and truth, and should authors privilege subjective experience or objective narration? We will also examine the ways such texts construct the reader: is the reader the witness, the confessor, or simply a bystander? Finally, we will consider how life-writing can be a political act, either through overt discussion of issues or through its implication of what experiences should be deemed meaningful. As part of their investigation, students will have opportunities to write both autobiographically and critically.

Texts: Autobiography Linda Anderson
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, James Joyce
Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal Jeanette Winterson
A Small Place, Jamaica Kincaid
Fun Home, Alison Bechdel


Tentative outline of schedule for readings and writing assignments:

Week 1: What is Autobiography? Fact and Fiction
Day 1: (in class) Excerpt from Augustine’s Confessions
Day 2: Tim O’Brien “The Things They Carried”
Anderson, Introduction and Chapter 1

Week 2: Self/ Portraiture
Texts: Anderson, Chapter 2
Gertrude Stein, selected portraits
James Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
Cindy Sherman, Untitled photograph series

Writing Assignment: (4-5 pages broken into 2 stages) Stage 1: Write your self-portrait (2-3 pages). Stage 2: A (1-2) page reflection on the experience of
writing a self-portrait. (i.e. How does your portrait fit into our discussion of the genre? How was this experience different from other forms of writing you have done?).

**Week 3: Confession and Memoir**
*Texts:* bell hooks “writing autobiography”
Selected Poems (Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, Sharon Olds)
Jeanette Winterson *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal*

*Writing Assignment:* Critical essay (3-4 pages)

**Week 4: The Personal [Essay] is Political**
Rebecca Solnit “Men Explain Things to Me”
Nora Ephron “The Story of My Life in 3500 words or Less”
Jamaica Kincaid *A Small Place*

*Writing Assignment:* Personal Essay (3-5 pages)

**Week 5: Hybrid Forms**
*Texts* *Anderson,* Chapter 3
*Fun Home,* Alison Bechdel
Selected blogs/digital life-writing

*Final Writing Assignment:* Choice of genre (i.e. creative non-fiction, critical analysis, hybrid form, etc.) 6-8 pages