

## Major Women Writers: Captivity, Seduction and Domesticity

English 465

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### Required Texts:

Mary Rowlandson, *The Account of Mary Rowlandson and Other Indian Captivity Narratives*, Horace Kephart, editor (Dover Publications)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories* (Dover Publications)

Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, (Rutgers UP)

Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple* (Oxford UP)

Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; Or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (Penguin)

Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings* (Rutgers UP)

Elizabeth Stoddard, *The Morgesons*. Eds. Lawrence Buell & Sandra Zagarell (Penguin).

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Pocket Books)

### Course Description:

In the course, we will investigate the ways literary conventions and forms in women's writing are shaped by and give shape to or unsettle social norms and social history. In order to become more alert to this process as it unfolds over time in changing contexts, we will study the writings of North American women authors from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will study narratives focused on captivity, seduction and/or domesticity as both genres and culturally determined themes that have long informed the literary imagination and experiences of diverse American women.

We will begin with three autobiographical captivity narratives: Mary Rowlandson's 17<sup>th</sup>-century, Puritan narrative of her abduction and confinement, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century deposition entitled "The Capture and Escape of Mercy Harbison, 1792," and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sioux writer Zitkala Sa's linked stories "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" and "The School Days of an Indian Girl" (1900). The first two are autobiographical accounts from the perspective of European colonial women whose stories cast the captive white woman as representative of an embattled European colony on the pre-national North American continent; the latter two by Zitkala Sa are short fictionalized autobiographical works that re-conceive the captivity narrative as a vehicle for articulating a counter-memory by exposing the implications of assimilative practices in the later stages of U.S. continental imperialism. Having become familiar with the conventions of the captivity narrative, we will finish out the first third of the course by returning to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century to read an early seduction novel, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, in order to examine the role such stories played in locating women's behavior and bodies, and, in particular, their sexuality at the center of social, economic and political conflict.

With the rise to prominence of domestic fiction in the first full century of American national history, narratives of captivity and seduction become often secondary sensationalist plot-lines used to police or challenge the boundaries of home and of sanctioned, gendered action in novels and stories written by women who both embrace and resist the now-dominant domestic ideal of womanhood. Texts by Catharine Sedgwick, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Harriet E. Wilson and Fanny Fern grapple with the dictates of a culture that confine women and men within specified and narrow social roles while arguing for social justice and social, political and economic equality. In the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, fictionalized appeals for social reform give way in some women's writing to radical critique and, in the process, the idealized domestic space of the American cultural imaginary is recast as a prison-house from which only drastic measures can effect release. Hence, the anti-sentimental narratives we will read by Elizabeth

Stoddard, Charlotte Perkin's Gilman, and Susan Glaspell expose the institutionalized forces in operation (inscribed in religion, medicine, and the law) to limit women's individual and collective agency, revealing domesticity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be both fractured and killing.

The last novel we will read is Alice Walker's excruciating and beautiful, late 20<sup>th</sup>-century novel *The Color Purple*, a work that incorporates problems and protests, themes and conventions from earlier American women's fiction, and that, with the practical idealism of second-wave feminism of the 1980s, uncovers the systemic violence inherent in local and global hierarchies of power while also proposing strategies of refusal and grounds for social transformation—critical tools for combating individual and historical trauma. By the end of the course, it is my hope that we will all be much more attuned to the links between the long history we will have studied and its legacies in contemporary culture.