

UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST
FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES — DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH

Neo-Victorian Novels and Films — Adapting the 19th Century for a
Contemporary Audience

Elective course · Year III · Semester 1 (2026–2027) · 2 hours/week × 14 weeks
Course instructor: Lecturer Eliana Cristina Ionoaia, PhD · eliana.ionoiaia@lfs.unibuc.ro

1. Course Description

This course examines some of the best-known works of neo-Victorian fiction and film in contemporary Britain. It begins with an overview of the genre and its precursors — Victorian fiction and historical fiction — and proceeds both diachronically, tracing the genre’s evolution, and synchronically, analysing the historical context in which the novels were published and their reception. The approach is that of cultural studies: the course investigates how the Victorian cultural background is rewritten and adapted in these novels and films. A number of theoretical texts, supplied in the course pack, support the weekly discussions.

The course is organized thematically, moving through the Victorian social taxonomy — the Angel in the House; the spinster, the governess and the servant; the fallen woman and the New Woman; prostitution and sexuality; criminality; deviance, freaks and monsters; insanity and doctors; maleness, social status and children; writers and writing; science and empire — and asking of each theme the neo-Victorian question: how is this Victorian construction re-imagined, by whom, and for which present?

2. Prerequisites

Previous readings in Victorian literature and in modernist and postmodernist literature (British context); advanced English (minimum B2).

3. Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- define and interrogate “the neo-Victorian” using the field’s founding and revisionist scholarship, and apply competing definitions to borderline cases;
- describe the Victorian social typologies and the cultural institutions that produced them, and situate each neo-Victorian work in two registers at once — the Victorian construction being re-imagined and the contemporary moment doing the re-imagining;
- analyse novel–screen adaptation comparatively and precisely, treating it as transcoding across media rather than as fidelity failure;
- evaluate the politics of re-vision — gender, sexuality, class, race and empire — in both critical and creative registers;
- produce well-argued academic work in English (MLA style) — presentations, comparative analyses, a staged essay and a creative adaptation project — observing academic ethics and avoiding plagiarism, including undeclared AI-generated drafting.

4. Course Requirements and Grading

Graded component	Weight	Due
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Discussion-leading + one-page response to a theoretical reading	15%	Assigned in weeks 2–4
Comparative scene analysis (novel vs. film, 2–3 pages)	20%	Week 6
Essay-in-parts: thesis statement (5%) + annotated bibliography (10%) + detailed outline (10%)	25%	Weeks 4, 8, 10
In-class timed writing (75 min., prompts provided)	15%	Week 12
Creative group adaptation project + 2-page written rationale	15%	Proposals week 8; presentations weeks 13–14
Participation (exit tickets + contributions)	10%	Weekly

- Readings: theoretical readings (10–20 pages each) are completed according to the weekly schedule, from the course pack.
- Declared edition and page-specific citations are required for all written work; MLA style applies.
- Plagiarism — including unacknowledged AI-generated drafting — brings the grade of the assignment to 1.
- The Friday Film Club (voluntary, ungraded) screens the full films; home viewers submit the same one-page viewing guide.
- All assignments are submitted on TEAMS; late submissions are penalized 1 point per day of delay. Minimum attendance: 50%.

5. Course Outline — The Fourteen Weeks

Wk	Theme	Novel + film (view at home)	Theory (course pack)	Assessment touchpoint
1	What is Neo-Victorianism? Orientation, myths and expectations	—	—	Quiz + icebreaker; Assumption Wall bets placed
2	Adaptation, appropriation, revision, rewriting	—	Showalter, ch. 1; Thompson, “The BBC and the Victorians”	Reading responses begin
3	Women writers: the female tradition; the madwoman in the attic	Jane Eyre (excerpts)	Gilbert & Gubar, chs. 1–2	Close-reading workshop
4	The Angel in the House	Byatt, Angels & Insects + Haas film (1995)	Pearsall 3B/D; Sweet, ch. 7	THESIS STATEMENT due
5	Spinster, governess, servant	Waters, Fingersmith + BBC serial (2005)	Gilbert & Gubar as tools	Thesis peer-review workshop
6	Fallen women and the New Woman	Fowles, The French Lieutenant’s Woman + Reisz film (1981)	Pearsall 3C/D	COMPARATIVE SCENE ANALYSIS due (2–3 pp.)
7	Prostitution and sexuality: vice and the underworld	Faber, The Crimson Petal and the White + BBC serial (2011)	Pearsall 5C–E, 6; Sweet, ch. 12	Viewing guide in
8	Criminality	Ackroyd, The Limehouse Golem + Medina film (2016)	Sweet, chs. 5–6	ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY due; project proposals
9	The deviant: freaks and monsters	Gray, Poor Things + Lanthimos film (2023)	—	—
10	Insanity and doctors	Penny Dreadful S1 + cross-text (Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea)	Scull, chs. 3–4; Pearsall 5A–B	DETAILED OUTLINE due
11	Maleness, social status and children	Cross-text (Rackham on trial)	Sweet, chs. 11, 10	Character trial

12	Writers and writing	Cross-text (Matty, Sugar, Fowles)	Gilbert & Gubar / Showalter as tools	IN-CLASS TIMED WRITING
13	Science and empire	Byatt, Fowles, Gray — clip comparisons	—	Creative project presentations (part 1)
14	Conclusions: how are the Victorians adapted in the 20th–21st centuries?	All — assumption bets settled	—	Presentations (part 2) + evaluations

6. Bibliography and Filmography

A. Primary sources (any edition acceptable):

Ackroyd, Peter. *The Limehouse Golem*. London: Vintage, 2017.

Byatt, A.S. *Angels & Insects*. London: Vintage Books, 1995.

Faber, Michel. *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002.

Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. London: Vintage, 2004.

Gray, Alasdair. *Poor Things*. London: Penguin, 1993.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin, 2011.

Waters, Sarah. *Fingersmith*. London: Virago, 2002.

Films: *Angels & Insects* (dir. Philip Haas, 1995); *Fingersmith* (dir. Aisling Walsh, BBC, 2005); *The Limehouse Golem* (dir. Juan Carlos Medina, 2016); *Penny Dreadful*, Season 1 (creator John Logan, Showtime, 2014); *Poor Things* (dir. Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023); *The Crimson Petal and the White* (dir. Marc Munden, BBC, 2011); *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (dir. Karel Reisz, 1981); *Wide Sargasso Sea* (dir. Brendan Maher, BBC, 2006).

B. Secondary sources (course pack):

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979. Chapters 1–2.

Pearsall, Ronald. *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*. London: Penguin, 1972. Chapter 3 (B–D); Chapter 5 (A–E); Chapter 6 (A–F).

Scull, Andrew. *The Disturbing History of Hysteria*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Chapters 3–4.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*. London: Virago, 2003. Chapter 1.

Sweet, Matthew. *Inventing the Victorians*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Chapters 5–7, 10–12.

Taylor, Miles and Michael Wolff, eds. *The Victorians since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*.

Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2004. Chapter 10 (James Thompson, “The BBC and the Victorians”).