The reason for writing and reading fiction is to make sense of the world, in this case to make sense of love in a way that is accurate and truthful to the chaotic, manifold, and unpredictable nature of eros. Works of narrative and poetry, if they are to contribute to the understanding of erotic love, must be in constant transformation because what they express is itself not fixed — unlike, say, the speed of light, or the laws of thermodynamics. Constant metamorphosis is its law.

This course explores the idea of love in fiction from 1800 to the present. The element of “critique” operates on two levels: 1) the novel as a form critiques the concept of love, but 2) we as readers also critique the novel, which entails seeing through the clichés, formulas, and other falsehoods about love that bad novels endorse. We will explore the reason exercised in good novels, but we will also explore the reason that informs love and ask this question: To what extent are love and reason compatible?

Introduction:
The heart has its reasons, said Pascal, and certainly one of most powerful of them is erotic desire, the main ingredient in romantic love. But what, exactly, is romantic Romantic love? Is it primarily a matter of biology, a raw fact of nature that we cloak in prettified ideals and pleasant stories? Or might love, as distinct from the underlying urge to mate, serve an evolutionary purpose? Is love what we want, or is it just a technique our gene pool has for getting its own way? We mostly think of erotic love as elemental and direct. But in what sense has our shared notion of love been shaped mediated by history and culture? Or, if love is culturally shaped, then — in whose interest? Is marriage a formal arrangement designed to let love flourish by giving it a protected space in which to grow? Or is marriage rather an institution that serves civilized society because it binds the dangerously chaotic energies of erotic passion? — not so much a protected space as a way of containing and channeling a potentially destructive force into a socially productive domesticity?

In this course we will examine these questions as well as some of the ways in which European and American fiction since the nineteenth century has explored and sought to understand romantic love. At least one common denominator should emerge: individuality is of the utmost significance. Modern love has to do with one autonomous individual recognizing another autonomous being in his or her particular individuality. Erotic attraction is a fact of nature — as natural as gravity even if, unlike gravity, it is not universal. You don’t have a choice about gravity and you don’t have a choice about erotic attraction either. But in the case of eros you do have a choice about whether or not to act on the attraction. Gravity is less compliant, but not by much. To be in love means the freely chosen union of two unique selves bound into a new oneness — traditionally thought of as the union of two souls. Or does it? The findings of evolutionary psychologists suggest that we may be hardwired for certain sexual preferences and desires. Our individuality, they say, counts for little.
The conventional name for a merging of two selves into a unified whole is “marriage.” But when an experience as intimate, volatile, and variably determined as romantic love becomes set in the concrete of the often unforgiving form of a legally binding public institution, conflict may erupt—as it does for Hester Prynne, Emma Bovary, and Anna Karinina, to name only three of the most famous figures who rebel against marriage in the name of love and personal freedom. So another crucial feature seems to emerge: freedom appears to be a decisive element for romantic love. Love must be spontaneous and freely chosen. (Or must it? Arranged marriages often work. . .)

In the twentieth century the battle against wedlock as a grimly rigid institution, one that punishes women especially, has largely been won in the West. An unhappy marriage can be dissolved now with relative ease. Moreover, the ready availability of effective contraception has largely freed erotic desire from the otherwise probable outcome of producing, and then the moral obligation of raising, children. Paradoxically, the ideal of passionate love seems to have suffered under this freedom. That Anna Karenina sacrificed everything for love gives her passion an authenticity that is sealed in suffering, blood, and death. But now the battle appears to have been won. Anna’s modern sisters are at liberty to enter into erotic liaisons as they choose and just as free to end them. Yet somehow all is not well. This freedom has brought with it malaise and disorientation. In fact, it is reasonable to wonder whether or not this freedom has trivialized the kind of love that seemed so vital to Jane Austen’s heroines.

Love has become institutionalized in a different way since the nineteenth century. Images of love are now ubiquitous: on television, in the movies, in romance novels, in advertisements. Magazines and self-help books thrive on the insecurities of people who are lonely or disappointed in love (“Twelve steps to a better love life!” Behold the “Five Pillars of Emotional Intelligence,” get these hot new hacks to “Supersize your love life!”). Moreover, sex, which once was intimately private and individual, has become a spectator sport and a tool for selling everything from cars and cigarettes to power tools, magazines, and office furniture. The media, especially electronic media, are ceaselessly at work on our desires, hammering them into a shape that serves commerce. Contemporary love is more heavily mediated than ever before. Another goal of this course will be to understand the role that mediated images and ideas have on the modern vs. the earlier view of romantic love. Is the novel as a form that mediates romantic desires — for Emma Bovary most conspicuously — significantly different from contemporary electronic mediations? Why or why not?

The hallmarks of passionate romantic love in the nineteenth century—individuality, spontaneity, and exclusivity, and autonomy—seem to have lost their centrality since self-evident status around 1900, and especially since the rise of electronic mass media. From early childhood on, we are indoctrinated into a highly uniform culture of love and sex, but especially of sex. We come of age in a climate shaped by pop songs, television dramas, movies, blogs, YouTube videos, and books that explain to us what to expect, what we are supposed to feel and want. So it is that prior to the experience of romantic love we already have pre-formed ideas of what that experience ought to be like. These expectations have a way of become becoming needs. And if our needs are not being met (as they say) we know where to turn for help. Ask Dr. Oz. Or Dr. Ruth. Or Dr. Drew. Or Dr. Emily Morse or any of the other wellness celebrities. On talk shows and in self-help books and advice columns benevolent health professionals, experts, and smiling therapists hold forth in the authoritative language of psychology about why people are so unhappy and what strategies they might use to win in the game of love.
Poor Anna Karenina! She threw began by throwing herself into love with reckless abandon and ended by throwing herself under an oncoming train. Is a love like Anna’s strictly a historical, storybook phenomenon? Suppose she could have had a good chat with sober-sided Dr. Phil (or watched Rachael Ray and scoured the advice columns in blogs, women’s magazines, life coaches. Might she have learned which of the sixteen personality types she was and so found her way to self-esteem, weight loss, personal fulfillment—, not to mention better “relationships” with men and a happy, “fulfilled” sex life. (The jargon is as endless as it is depressing). More scientific means would be at her disposal now as well. A support group perhaps. Antidepressants? Possibly. Anna tried that solution and developed a soul-crushing morphine addiction. But still, the surrender of her spiritual autonomy and womanly selfhood to a set of supposed medical experts, chemical therapies, and male institutions would have been foreign to Anna Karenina’s sense of herself and her way of life. Freedom, love, and autonomy were important to her.

Or maybe, as one of Michel Houellebecq’s characters fears in The Possibility of an Island (2005), Romantic love was a fiction created by women in order to exercise control over domineering men, to make them feel guilty and so rein in male privilege and ferocity from within. However, now at a time when women are stronger, more powerful, and more independent than ever before, erotic choice has become the ultimate expression of freedom. Sex may still be pleasurable, but only as an end in itself now, not as the expression of a love bond. In this light Romantic love might appear to be the sentimental relic of a no-longer-operative way of life, as obsolete as applying leeches to cure pulmonary disease. Is erotic love one of the deepest, irreplaceable human feelings? Or is it a historically conditioned phase of our cultural development, not deep and not constitutive of the human essence?

Required Texts
Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice (Signet Classic)
J.W.v. Goethe, Elective Affinities (Penguin)
Soren Kierkegaard, The Seducer’s Diary (Princeton)
Marcel Proust, Swann’s Way (Vintage)
Alberto Moravia, Boredom (NYRB)
Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Vintage)
Penelope Fitzgerald, The Gate of Angels (Mariner)
Maggie Nelson, Bluets (Wave)

Reading Assignments
Wed., Jan. 16: Cartesian Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Faust and Don Giovanni
MON., Jan. 21 NO CLASS
Tues., Jan. 22 (Brandeis Monday): Pride and Prejudice vols. I & II
WED., Jan. 23: Pride and Prejudice, vol. III
MON., Jan. 28: Elective Affinities, 19-151
WED., Jan. 30: Elective Affinities, 155-244
MON. Feb. 4: Elective Affinities, concluded
WED., Feb. 6: Babel, “Di Grasso” (LATTE)
MON. Feb. 11: The Seducer’s Diary, 1-115 (FIRST PAPER IS DUE)
WED. Feb. 13: The Seducer’s Diary, concluded
MON. Feb. 18: No Class
WED. Feb. 20: No Class
MON. Feb. 25: No Class
WED. Feb. 27: “Swann in Love,” 205-315, with Prof. Hollie Harder
MON. Mar. 4: “Swann in Love,” 315-415
WED. Mar. 6: The Lady and the Little Dog (LATTE)
MON. Mar. 11: Death in Venice (LATTE)
WED. Mar. 13: Boredom, 3-95
MON. Mar. 18: Babel, “First Love,” and “Guy de Maupassant” (LATTE)
WED. Mar. 20: Boredom, 97-233
MON. Mar. 25: Babel, “The Story of My Dovecote” (LATTE)
WED. Mar. 27: Boredom completed
MON. Apr. 1: The Unbearable Lightness, 1-78
WED. Apr. 3: The Unbearable Lightness, 79-172
MON. Apr. 8: The Unbearable Lightness, concluded
WED. Apr. 10: Gate of Angels, 9-58
MON. April 15: Gate of Angels, 61-100
WED. Apr. 17: Gate of Angels, concluded
MON. Apr. 22: No Class
WED. Apr. 24: No Class
MON. Apr. 29: Bluets
WED. May 1: Bluets (last day of class)

Course Policies

- Attendance
Students will be allowed two unexcused absences. Any other absences will have an impact on a student’s final grade, which will be lowered by one third of a letter grade for each unexcused absence.

- Grading
Your final grade will be broken down as follows: The average grade of your 5 short essays (3-5 pages each) will count for 50% of your final grade. Your oral presentation in class will constitute 25% and your protocol and verbal participation in class discussions will count 25%.

- Student Participation Grades:
A: Students who receive an “A” for participation come to every class. They have not only read the assigned texts and watched the movies, but also thought about them and formulated questions to ask and issues to raise. They take risks in discussion by sharing thoughts or positions about which they are not 100% certain. Moreover, A students listen and respond thoughtfully to issues raised by other students.

B: Students who receive a “B” for participation have completed all the reading and film assignments on time, but do not always come to class with questions in mind and do not put much independent thought into the readings. B students wait for someone else to take the lead. They participate, but only occasionally.
C: “C” students attend class, complete the assignments, and listen attentively to the discussions, but rarely participate unless directly asked a question.

“D” and “E” students eat and chew gum in class (drinks are allowed, but not anything that requires chewing). These students fail to complete the reading assignments, fail to participate in classroom discussion, and are unable to answer questions when called upon; they fail to bring their readings and notes to class or are frequently late, absent, inattentive, or doing work for other classes during seminar time. These students will receive a D or lower for their participation grade.

Preparing a Protokoll:

Students are required to keep a record of the minutes for one seminar meeting. This assignment is a graded writing project. You must observe the same pieties as in any formal paper.
1. Length: about one page, single spaced.
2. Due: The day of the class meeting after the seminar on which you are reporting.
3. Oral Reading: You will read your protocol aloud at the beginning of the next class meeting. At that time your classmates will have the opportunity to ask for corrections or revisions. Once the paper is complete to everyone’s satisfaction, your instructor will e-mail a copy to all seminar participants.

Written Essays: During the term you will write five short essays on topics that will be assigned in class. We will develop these topics in our class discussions. Each essay should be between three and five pages.

Office Hours

I will hold office hours on Mondays 11-12 and Thursdays 1-2 and by appointment. My office is in Shiffman, upstairs in 211. My e-mail address is dowden@brandeis.edu and I can be reached by phone at x63218. You can reach Tara and Matt at

Disabilities:

If you have documented disability on file at Brandeis University, please let me know so that the appropriate accommodations can be reached.