

# The CEA Forum

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A STUDY OF FAMILY MEMOIR AND  
IDEOLOGIES OF GENDER:  
APPLICATION TO THE INTERSECTION  
OF THE CREATIVE AND THE SCHOLARLY  
IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

[Elly Williams](#)

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Part One:

Tales of a Grandmother's Commonplace Memoir

In 1974, my maternal grandmother, known to all the family as Damma, presented her grandchildren with a private commonplace memoir, *Annals and Anecdotes*, about both our wealthy and educated family background and her life, which began in June 1899 in Clinton, New York, a picturesque Upstate college town. It was her duty to teach us about her family history and values. This was an ever-recurring theme in our lives and family

gatherings that were always in honor of Damma and my highly accomplished grandfather, Bah. My brother Charlie and I called them the “homages.”

When Damma gave this memoir to me, I was twenty-one years old and I loved her with all my heart. I saw her commonplace as a gift of love. Being part of Damma and Bah's enchanted world meant servants and silver, monogrammed linen and ironed sheets, cocktails and a bartender, private bathrooms and bedrooms smelling of lavender. I understood that both came from wealthy families and that family funds had established trusts to pay for the private college educations of all of their grandchildren and, eventually, all of their great-grandchildren, too.

It is now 2004, and Damma and Bah are both dead. Bah died in 1988, Damma just three years ago at age one hundred and one. For the last ten years of her life, Damma did not speak to me and informed other family members that if they spoke to me, they need not speak to her. I was not invited to her funeral. My name was not included in her obituary. I was not mentioned in her will. Until those last ten years, I had attended every homage. I had honored my father and my mother and my grandparents by emulating them and taught my children to do the same. What could have happened between 1974 and 1991 to sour relations between me and my beloved grandmother?

Divorce. My 1991 divorce.

Only when I informed the family that I wanted a divorce did I realize the depth of my misunderstanding of who Damma was. Divorcing my husband cost me my place in the family. I lost my inheritance, too, but, I think, far more damaging to me was that I lost my grounding because if I didn't know who Damma was, how could I possibly know who I was? I began to remember how despite the fact that I had attended my mother's college, gone to church, been a helpmeet to my husband, raised my children, and taught public school for years, the fact that I worked outside the home was never mentioned within the family. It was not part of my family-constructed-gendered identity. I remembered that whenever I overheard my mother speak of me, I was always referred to as Eleanor, my married daughter with children in Maryland.

I learned that, with the exception of two siblings out of five, my family valued Damma's cultural pedagogy and its financial benefits over making space for a divorced me in the family system.

Examining the rhetorical strategies of Damma's memoir this past year, I discovered that it constructed the gendered life I was supposed to lead—forever. There was no space for the real me in the text. I had transgressed the family code: you act like a lady, you have a perfect marriage and children, and there will be no family conflict. My scholarship now transgresses public academic and scholarly boundaries by crossing into the private sphere.

Susan Miller, in her book *Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing*, keeps her objective distance, telling of letters and memoirs written by upper-class Virginian families in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Although my family is Northeastern, I do not think after reading Miller that the Southern upper-class mentality is different from the way my family thinks about education and class. What is different, however, is the rhetorical stance my grandmother takes in her memoir and those taken by the writers of whom Miller speaks. Miller tells of a commonplace written by Jennie Stephenson about her father after the Civil War. This memoir succeeds in creating a new discursive space for the displaced, once wealthy, landowning, “hero” father (277). Her “hero” father becomes a sad figure for whom his family feels great compassion. (290). Stephenson's text creates a new discursive space that makes way for “Hero” Father to become “Pitiful” Father. In both spaces, he is loved and understood. Stephenson uses rhetoric to make a place for her entire family's life after the Civil War, a life that no longer includes a plantation, slaves, or vast wealth. Key to Miller's analysis is the concept that rhetoric can provide movement within a particular family and/or society, movement meaning space for changes in both roles and feelings.

Damma writes for purposes similar to Stephenson in that she wants to re-create and honor a certain world of the

past and the members within it for her grandchildren. The clue as to where Damma stood in terms of a value system is in her prologue. She quotes Plutarch: "It is indeed a desirable thing to be well descended but the glory belongs to the ancestors." Damma sees our ancestry as worthy of passing down to future generations, and she feels that our role as lesser descendants of these glorious ancestors is to worship them, including her and especially Bah. However, it is the reference to Plutarch that I find most telling as to how Damma came to construct herself as conveyor of knowledge in the family.

Plutarch, a Greek essayist, saw his purpose in writing was to portray character and reveal its moral implications. In the Greek tradition, a good woman functions solely within the private sphere. Women are to remain at home, their fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers performing in the public sphere of action and justice. Numerous times I heard my grandmother tell with pride how Bah had studied Greek and Latin for eight years. The patriarchal Greek and Roman ideas infused the way my family thinks and conducts itself both privately and publicly. In ancient Greece, a woman's power lay in her ability to control her children through her teachings. Cornelia, the mother of Gracchi, impressed the mighty Cicero himself through her letters of instruction to her son. One letter illustrates how important a mother's influence was to raising a "good" son:

No enemy has given me so much trouble and toil as you have done, Gracchi. I should have the least possible anxiety in old age, and you should have thought it sinful to do anything of major importance against my views, especially since so little of my life remains. . . . (qtd. in Glenn 66)

This letter is the embodiment of Damma's interpretation of the fifth commandment, Honor thy Father and thy Mother: It does not matter what you believe or what you want, what matters is what I believe and what I want.

Miller finds the position taken by the Southern aristocracy in the 1800's not so different than that of the ancient Greek and Roman orators or British aristocracy. The upper class was well aware that education was as important to women as to men in order to maintain class status. A good education enhanced a woman's desirability on the marriage market—perhaps even more so than wealth. After all, a woman was responsible for instilling the family values and cultural morality in the children (56). Education was a process designed to transmit family power.

Let me return to the idea of Damma's memoir as instruction, a place to write down for her grandchildren how she led her life and how her parents and grandparents led their lives, so that we, too, might follow their example. Education is foremost of the patterns we are to follow. She takes pains to write:

Need I remind you that Bah was a fifth generation student [at Hamilton College] through his mother's line? Bah's trusteeship at Hamilton began in 1937 and ended with his election to the New York State Board of Regents in 1951. It was resumed in 1968 when he retired from the Regents after seventeen years of dedicated service, the last seven as Chancellor. (6)

Education may well have the same underlying message as church-going—mentioned no less than thirty-five times in this memoir—that it is not really about becoming educated, it is about following the ancestral example in order to honor their glory. I think about how my older brother felt compelled to attend Hamilton College, how he tried to kill himself on three different occasions. However, he managed to graduate Phi Beta Kappa—a "good" grandson. My cousin attended Hamilton and had a nervous breakdown, unable to complete his education at Hamilton—a "bad" grandson. No one ever speaks of his graduation from Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland.

At the heart of Miller's book is the chapter "The Class on Gender." Writing organizes gender "to fund the exchange of its ready sexual currency for yet another cultural property, discursive assurances of class superiority" (149). However, textual substance still has to rank males above females even within this tentative class unity (149). The importance here for Damma's memoir is Miller's point that this class identity is taught in commonplace practices. What emerged was conduct literature preserved and circulated to prescribe local family traditions that "males and females use to fit themselves quite literally—in language—into self-conscious ways to

maintain their relative class positions” (150). A dominant feature of conduct literature was that its goal was to keep a woman modest and in her place as –A Proper Lady—in the home. In addition, A Proper Lady does her best to further her husband's career.

When Damma wrote *Annals and Anecdotes*, not a single divorce marred the family heritage. I had married while in undergraduate school and produced a great-grandson within two years. My gendered-position was to repeat my female ancestral roles, and I had internalized this message. I perceived no alternatives to marriage or babies. None at all. I knew that my mother wanted to please her mother and the way for her to do that was for me to marry. So I did. “A Proper Woman” marries and reproduces. I am now aware of numerous references to marriage in Damma's memoir. Despite the fact that her father died when she was four years old, she writes that Mun, her mother, was “a widow at twenty-nine, after five years of wonderfully happy married life” (4). I wonder how Damma could possibly know that? She didn't even remember her father. Yet she took pains to emphasize her parents' wonderfully happy marriage.

Damma writes of her long marriage to Bah:

Bear with me while I say a few words about your Channing grandparents. The fact that the Bah's family and my family were near neighbors when the latter first moved to Clinton led to a close friendship, not only between the two wives, but their daughters, Bah's mother, Gram, and my mother, Mun. In later years when Bah visited his Clinton grandparents he was instructed to call on the Hayes family and being a good boy he did so! You may call ours an arranged marriage if you like but as we approach our fifty-third wedding anniversary you have to admit it has worked! (6)

To me this sounds defensive, and I cannot help but wonder whose voice she is trying to silence. Her own? Her mother's? Her children's? Damma's rhetoric both constructed and defended her marriage to Bah, and this same gender rhetoric trapped my mother in a marriage that she knew the family—Damma—would not allow her to leave. My mother told us children many times what a “good” marriage she and my father had despite the fact that we were living witnesses to a different truth. Rhetoric made it so? Beginning with the ancient Greeks, movement was the aim of rhetoric. Miller describes memoir as well as detailed narratives of transformation.

I am now remembering what my brother Charlie said about Damma's memoir. He said that he thought it was a mistake that he was born into this lineage. There was no space for a gay male.

I remember something else, too.

I remember my mother telling me that it would be better if Charlie committed suicide than Damma and Bah find out he was gay.

My divorce threatened Damma's codified infrastructure that my mother and probably Damma herself had sacrificed so much to hang onto. No way was I going to get away with such insubordination to my husband, to my parents, to the Honor and Glory of Damma and Bah and all who came before me.

Do I think after this exploration of Damma's *Annals and Anecdotes* that had I understood the infrastructure that I might have retained a position in the family? Do I think Damma intended to create a new space to move from the pre-technological world she grew up in to the technological age she died in?

Absolutely not.

Damma never learned to drive. She had a chauffeur to the end of her days. I used to wonder why she never learned to operate an automobile. I no longer wonder. Damma could not go anywhere.

Lack of flexibility and movement is at the heart of Damma's memoir.

If you asked my mother, she would tell you she would rather I had committed suicide than become a divorced

woman. If my mother could write the epitaph on my tombstone it would say: Better Off Dead.

I've had some time now to think about Damma and her rhetoric. Part of me thinks she's a liar, but I have also come to understand that Damma didn't lie on purpose—she wrote what she perceived as her necessary truths. The problem is that she demanded that they be my truths, too.

As I was coming to terms with my family's dissolution, I discovered a book called *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* by Lauren Slater. The premise of the book is that emotional truth is the truth—that if Slater writes she has epilepsy in order to describe trauma in her life and she doesn't have epilepsy, it doesn't matter—all that matters is that emotional truths are on the page. I loved this concept and have begun to use this book as a text in my Women and Writing class. They love Slater's ambiguity in unfolding her truths. When asked to write their own Lying Autobiographies, they are enthusiastic: they are free to be as truthful or not as they wish. Nothing fetters their creativity—or their exploration of their own truths. Later in the term, students have the opportunity to bring their papers to life through performance—engaging classmates in the process of performing themselves and not themselves. The Lying Autobiographies are the highlight of the class. One class paid to have theirs bound into a book with copies for each of us.

## Works Cited

Glenn, Cheryl. *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1997.

Miller, Susan. *Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1998.

Slater, Lauren. *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. New York: Random House, 2000.

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Part Two:

Assignment:

Lying Autobiographical Essay

## Guidelines

What I envision here is an essay that is creative, innovative in both structure and content, and that makes connections among your life, the essays we've read, and either historical political issues or current political issues or both—which is just about anything, you realize. I'm hoping to see personal narrative interwoven with quotations and narrative from outside your lives—in the manner of Susan Griffin or Judy Ruiz. This isn't to say you must write your essay this way, it just means it would be fun to see you push yourselves in that direction.

More than anything, my goal is to guide you away from the traditional essay: intro with thesis statement, body with supporting facts, conclusion. What I'm hoping for are exploratory essays—essays that explore who you are and how you are a part of our world—which is what Lauren Slater is doing in her *Metaphorical Memoir*—she's asking you to think beyond the literal. I'd rather you don't have a thesis per se, but rather that you explore possibilities—again, in the fashion of Griffin. I think the anonymous author of the paper exploring her possible

lesbian sexuality and Judy Ruiz are exploring possibilities and meanings, also. In addition, I think you'll see that the student papers I've given you to read are likewise exploration papers. Monica is questioning Christianity's ideas of forgiveness in relationship to her life experiences, I think; Steven Dizzle is questioning his own role in his abuse of others; Molly Stewart is exploring personal responsibility in her life—and thus in all of our lives.

Here is a quote from Lauren Slater's book that I just love—it makes me think about the way we hold onto our beliefs even if they may be hurting us and how we hold fast to our defenses even when they, too, are hurting us. At least that's how I interpret this quote on this particular day:

I think you can hold out for only so long. I think secretly each and every one of us longs to fall, and knows in a deep wise place in our brains that surrender is the means by which we gain, not lose, our lives. We know this, and that is why we have bad backs and pulled necks and throbbing pain between our shoulder blades. We want to go down, and it hurts to fight the force of gravity.

I put this quote here because this is what I'd love for you to do—try to find that deep wise place in your brain and go exploring. Don't be afraid. And lying—storytelling—is part of the exploration. Why? Because narratives need only hold emotional truth—not literal truth. Sometimes by telling a story we can tell what is in our hearts in a way that we can't by telling the facts of what happened to us. Does this make sense?

### Specifics

- Eight to ten pages numbered in the upper right corner.
- No cover page required. Simply put your name on the paper.
- Paper needs a title.
- If you use quotes from the essays, be sure to credit the author and page number. For instance, up above where I quote Slater, I should put the page number in parenthesis at the end—I didn't because I don't know what page it is—but I should have taken care to note it. So maybe I'd put (Slater 118). You'll also want to put a Works Cited list—MLA format—I'll do a sample for you before your final paper is due.
- Paper must have a central metaphor. Griffin's is the cell/missile; Slater's is epilepsy; Ruiz's is the orange. If it doesn't come naturally and feels forced, don't worry about it—either classmates or I will have an idea, I'm sure.
- I would love to see some political or world issue or philosophical or historical issue interwoven in the way Griffin does.
- But keep in mind that the specific stories and specific details are what bring an essay alive.
- I would love to see dialogue included/ fleshed out with scene—we'll be discussing this in our next classes.

I thought the following were some possible guidelines for A papers regarding content:

- Complexity of thought—the layers you create—the originality of the connections you make
- Use any or all of the essays we've read—including the two student papers—and respond to them either implicitly or explicitly
- Relate essays to personal life—specific details are vital—remember Jess's paper that told the story of her torture in the basement?
- Political content required—in other words, make some connections to issues broader than yourself
- Create a new thought—something aside from the obvious—something new for the reader to think about—maybe just in the uniqueness of the connections you make
- Specifics are always vital to a good essay—specific details—not generalities
- Honesty—that reverberation of truth that touches the heart no matter how awful the revelation

Thoughts about structure of both essay and sentences:

- Get away from the traditional format—use Griffin or Ruiz as examples—use quotations, space breaks,

various fonts—bring in different voices

- Innovation—fragments for emphasis are fine—dialogue is great

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS: Now that I've laid out all these “requirements”—please don't take them literally in the sense that they constrain you—this is *your* paper—not mine and its purpose is for you to maybe discover something new about yourself and the world as you write it—ergo, use your own instincts as to how to go about writing it!!!! Creativity is always honored in this class. Maybe part of your paper will be a poem—a bit of dialogue—italics—let yourself fall!

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Part Three:

Syllabus:

Women and Writing

Practice in developing essays on women and their interests, on women and writing, and on gender issues. Focus on skills in writing expository prose, with regular practice and evaluation supplemented by attention to published prose and concepts of rhetoric and style.

In addition to using essays, novels, memoir, short stories, and poetry, I envision the use of plays and films. I see us working on various creative nonfiction, as well as fiction prose styles such as memoir in the style of Susan Griffin, Lauren Slater, Judy Ruiz, and Gloria Steinem. I hope to encourage experimentation in comparison/contrast, descriptive, and narrative exposition through our study of current memoirs, Paula Vogel's Pulitzer-Prize-winning autobiographical play, *How I Learned to Drive*, Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-Prize-winning magical realist play, *Angels in America*, Margaret Edon's Pulitzer-Prize winning play, *Wit*, and various gender-related films. CREATIVITY IN OUR WRITING AND READING IS ABSOLUTELY KEY—AND A SENSE OF HUMOR!

Texts

*Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* by Lauren Slater

*How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel

*The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler

*The Father* by Sharon Olds

*Angels in America* by Tony Kushner

*The Beans of Egypt Maine* by Carolyn Chute

*Wit* by Margaret Edson

*Jackpot* by Tsipi Keller (litworks@yahoo.com)

Possible films: *Osama*, *The Magdalene Sisters*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Ma Vie En Rose*, *Dark Days*, *The Vagina Monologues*, *Night Mother*, *Breasts*, *American Pimp*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Me Without You*, *An Angel at My Table*, *The Mother*, *Heavenly Creatures*

Possible short story/essay authors: Dorothy Parker, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Rick

Moody, Gloria Steinem, Richard Russo, Toni Morrison, Russell Banks—and student writings from previous classes as well as your own work.

## Course Goals

- To help students learn and understand the elements and techniques of creative nonfiction with the emphasis on what autobiography and the use of metaphor means.
- To help students learn to read like writers and learn to peer critique in a useful manner.
- To help students produce one complete and revised lying autobiographical essay.
- To help students write and perform a collaborative play utilizing innovative techniques.
- To help students write and perform and interactive monologues about gender issues.
- To help students consider and re-consider gender issues as related to both men and women—in particular constricted gender roles, the concept of eugenics, the idea of what it means to transgender—within the context of writing.
- To guide students in understanding what it means to present and discuss a book in such a way that the entire class participates.

## Course Requirements

**Attendance :** This is a college course that involves collaborative effort; you need to be here every class period. If you miss more than two classes (excused or not excused, illness or otherwise), I will deduct one full grade for each class you miss beyond two. My justification for doing this is that in order for a writing class to function well, there must be trust, frankness and openness (which come with getting to know each other) and reciprocity (which means being in class to discuss each other's work and ideas). If you must miss a class, you must let me know in advance via e-mail or a phone call.

There are no exceptions to this attendance policy. It is not negotiable. Obviously, major problems (illness, etc.) can arise during a term; if they do occur, let me know as soon as you can. Then we will be able to resolve grades, etc. Please don't miss several classes and hope to solve the problem at the end of the term. I think it's important for you to accept the fact that at a certain point, no matter how justified your reasons for missing class are, you are not fully a member of the class. More than fifteen minutes late to class will count as a class absence.

You must meet with me at some point during the quarter for a one-on-one conference regarding your work. Scheduling this appointment is your responsibility. Should you fail to do so, this will count as a class absence.

## **Response Papers/Peer Critique Workshops/Plays/Monologues/Lying Autobiographies/Class Presentations of one of our books:**

- All class work and homework. You'll be expected to write response papers to our readings. These papers must be typed. Don't write anything that you are unwilling to share. As a class we'll determine if one or two of these papers need to be deleted so that you're not overloaded.
- Six-to-ten-page lying autobiographical essay to be workshopped/peer critiqued. Provide enough copies to be distributed to everyone in your group. **YOU MAY PROVIDE UP TO THREE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AT THE END OF YOUR ESSAY THAT YOU WOULD LIKE US TO ANSWER. I'VE FOUND, IN THE PAST, THAT THESE QUESTIONS CAN BE EXTREMELY HELPFUL TO BOTH THE WRITER AND THE READER.**
- Minimum one-page typed-written critique of your classmates' essay—one copy for me, one copy for your classmate—I will provide you with the forms.
- Six-to-ten page collaborative plays written and performed the last day of class.
- Interactive monologues will serve as your midterm: requirements will be provided in plenty of time.
- The class will form groups and present each book—specific requirements will be handed out.
- **NO EXAM**

Submit all of your work in a professional manner, as if you were sending it to an editor: double-spaced, clear type (times/12-pt. type), pages numbered in upper right-hand corner, punctuation correct, etc. I WILL NOT READ PAPERS THAT ARE FULL OF GRAMMATICAL And/Or SPELLING And/Or PUNCTUATION ERRORS. Please use the Writing Center in the library if you need help with copyediting.

Critiques : You have four responsibilities as far as **written** critiques of your classmates' lying autobiographical essays are concerned. First is the obvious—read the essay at least two times. Second, you are to write comments on the manuscript and write a one-page set of comments (or more)—I'll provide suggestions and an example. Sign your critique and the manuscript you marked up. Give to the author at the end of discussion. Third, make an extra copy of your critiques to hand in to me. Fourth, be prepared to write a brief report to me at the end of class as to whose comments you found the most useful to your work and why. One thing I keep learning is how subjective tastes in writing are, how subjective an aesthetic can be.

I will try to write comments that invite revision that will invite you to discuss your work with me. That is the perfect time to meet with me one on one. My stance is that you're a writer, and I'm a writer, and I'm trying to be helpful. I will be detailed, frank and honest. I may be intrusive at times, assuming you can and will ignore any comment that is not helpful to you. Your job is to use what helps and ignore what doesn't.

Plagiarism : Failure in course. No negotiation. End of discussion.

### Final Grades

- Come to class and participate in discussions and class assignments. Be prepared for numerous writing quizzes. You can't do this unless you've read the homework articles and stories.
- Write helpful critiques and give them to the other writers at the end of our peer critique discussions.
- Be detailed and specific in all your writing.
- Critique the work of others in the way you would like your own work critiqued.
- Submit your work ON TIME and in a professional manner/MLA format.
- Performance plays must demonstrate your understanding of how words and scenes interrelate as well as how layers can be achieved both through writing and visuals.
- Interactive monologues must be practiced and demonstrate your understanding of the many layers of writing and meaning in a writers' work.
- Collaborative presentations of the books must fulfill requirements that I'll pass out to you.

### Grade Distribution

Response Papers: 10%

Classwork—quizzes, writing, participation: 5%

Lying Autobiographical essay: 30%

Collaborative Performance Play: 20%

Interactive Monologue: 20%

Peer Critiques: 5%

Collaborative presentation of books: 10%

\*As a class we'll figure out due dates for readings, autobiographical essays, plays, and performance papers. I have a tentative schedule I'll share the first day of class, but we can adjust as necessary.

\*FLEXIBILITY IS KEY!! Keep me posted on what is reasonable and what is not. I try my best to be accommodating to your needs as students—this is your class!

Requirements for leading class discussion on assigned texts:

1. Come prepared to really lead the discussion.
2. Must have a hand out of some sort for everyone in the class—and that will be turned in to me.
3. Do not use the computer—if you want to supplement, use the library.
4. The class must be involved—you must prepare an activity that requires us to respond to your ideas—you could even act out your ideas—put on a skit and have us respond—what do we think you're up to? I see this class involvement as the most important part—get us talking and thinking—maybe hand out cards to each one of us that we then have to respond to that have ideas of yours—be as creative as you like. One class took a ball of yarn and we had to throw it around to each other and relate something in our own lives to something in the book. You might begin by reading a review of the book that your group wrote and ask us to write down our response to the review. Then have us share our responses. Writing exercises are a great way to engage the class. Another great way to engage the class is to put us into groups and then give us a question or idea to then perform a skit on that relates to your book—again—BE CREATIVE!
5. Plan on taking at least thirty minutes.

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