

**THE SCREENPLAY WORKSHOP – Fall 2009 THR 382**

**Wednesday 1:30 – 4:10 pm**

**Heather McDonald**

**SYLLABUS**

Heather McDonald [hmcdonal@gmu.edu](mailto:hmcdonal@gmu.edu) or [dulcinae@earthlink.net](mailto:dulcinae@earthlink.net)

**GRADING**

70% written work (creative writing, critical writing, and reading work aloud)  
25% class participation (contributing to discussions)  
5% attendance

**COURSE OUTLINE**

**Week One**

An introduction of the course. Reading List. Course Description & Requirements.

Introduction of each other and background in writing, film, drama.

In-class writing exercise: Finding the stories you want to tell.

Lecture: Mythic Structure & The Hero's Journey in Joseph Campbell.

Clustering: a writing prompt

Writing Assignment: Event

Reading Assignments in Robert McKee's *STORY* and *THE WRITER'S JOURNEY* by Christopher Vogler.

End with reading opening of screenplay by Horton Foote of *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*.

**Week Two**

Watch film. Take notes and be prepared to discuss.

What aspects of the hero's journey and fairy tale/mythic structure relate?

What is the story the writer found to tell?

Who goes on a journey? What is the nature of that journey?

How is the main character finding his/her way home?

Discuss journey, loss and transformation.

Tell us the movie in a paragraph. Compression.

Reading Assignment: Read screenplay

Film: OUT OF AFRICA, THE PIANO, OR AMERICAN BEAUTY

### **Week Three**

Read in class and discuss their Event pieces.

In-class writing: Using clustering as a springboard to event.

Discuss film we watched. Read their paragraphs.

Look at particular scenes in the screenplay.

Assigned reading in McKee and Vogler.

### **Week Four**

In-class writing using a visual as a prompt. A photograph. An object. A visual image.

Lecture on character.

Assign screenplay for THE FISHER KING or AMERICAN BEAUTY

Writing assignment: Character pieces. A list of ideas handout.

Assigned reading in McKee and Vogler

## **Week Five**

Watch THE FISHER KING or AMERICAN BEAUTY

Handout questions to prepare for discussion.

Review and add to Character Lecture.

Character work using the film as a springboard. Using characters in the film as a springboard. Writing about secret lives. Sadness. Who the character was as a child. A dream.

An image from the film that haunts you and why.

Assigned reading in McKee and Vogler

## **Week Six**

Review of character

Notes on The Writer's Journey.

Discussion of character archetypes in Joseph Campbell, THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES.

Review Twelve Parts of the Hero's journey and character.

Aspects of Heroine's Journey in Maureen Murdock's THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY.

Continued character work outside the script.

## **Week Seven**

Discussion of film watched. THE FISHER KING or AMERICAN BEAUTY.

Read and discuss their character pieces.

In-class writing in character voice.

Assigned reading in McKee and Vogler.

Introduce Fairy Tales as a storytelling model. Poems and stories to spring from.

### **Week Eight**

Finish reading aloud character pieces.

Writing Assignment: The Fairy Tale using elements from mythic structure.

Or Subtext Scene: Activity vs. Action Scene

Assigned reading: THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION screenplay.

### **Week Nine**

Watch THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

Questions for discussion.

Review Subtext Scenes

HANDOUT: preparing to write your own fairy tale

### **Week Ten**

Discuss THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

Work through screenplay beat-by-beat.

Introduce Screenplay FORMAT

Handouts of other examples

Read: Subtext Scenes

Writing Assignment: The Fairy Tale

Preparing for adaptation exercise: Read screenplay for SENSE & SENSIBILITY

### **Week Eleven**

Discussion of McKee and Vogler books

Read The Fairy Tales aloud.

A working-session class. How to transform these tales into a two-minute screenplay. Thinking visually. Writing in format. Thinking in the form.

### **Week Twelve**

Read their short screenplays using their own fairytales as the springboard. Adaptation.

Discuss aspects of adaptation. Study either screenplay for SENSE & SENSIBILITY or ADAPTATION

Discuss ideas for Final Projects due last class of semester. Creative or critical pieces.

### **Week Thirteen**

Assign: read screenplay to SHINE. Another kind of adaptation.

Finish reading their short fairy tale screenplays.

Writing assignment: choosing a piece of music and writing a “music video,” a short film, visual, using a piece of music as a springboard.

Discuss Final Projects

### **Week Fourteen**

Discuss SHINE screenplay. How writer handles a big story and compressed time.

Read their “music videos.”

Discuss Final Projects

Breaking down and examining scenes.

Handout for ideas for Final Project

### **Week Fifteen**

Final Class

Read from FINAL PROJECTS

Closing ritual.

Some bits of inspiration to carry with you.

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**READING LIST:**

STORY by Robert McKee

The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers by Christopher Vogler

Save The Cat by Blake Snyder

Stranger Than Fiction: The Shooting Script by Zach Helm

Big Fish: The Shooting Script by John August

Crash: The Shooting Script by Paul Haggis

Slumdog Millionaire: The Shooting Script by Simon Beaufoy

American Beauty: The Shooting Script by Alan Ball

***FILMS/SCREENPLAYS***

Casablanca

American Beauty

Out of Africa

The Crying Game

The Fisher King

The Shawshank Redemption

The Wizard of Oz

Sense & Sensibility

Jerry Maguire

Tender Mercies

Into The Wild

To Kill A Mockingbird

Betrayal

Adaptation

Shakespeare in Love

Finding Neverland

Amelie

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Rushmore

The Power of Myth – Joseph Campbell & Bill Moyers

Chinatown

Dead Poets Society

The Piano

The English Patient

Witness

Shine

Star Wars

Lord of the Rings

Field of Dreams

Good Will Hunting

Do The Right Thing

Chariots of Fire

Truly, Madly, Deeply

You Can Count On Me

About A Boy

The Royal Tenenbaums

Crash

Wings of Desire

Stranger Than Fiction

# THE SCREENPLAY WORKSHOP

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***Heather McDonald***

**Office Hours – Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays by appointment**

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or leave me a note

PAB A109D

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION: Story & Structure**

***“All language is a longing for home.” Rumi***

Screenwriting is the dramatic form of the twentieth and twenty-first century and our own current variant on playwriting. We are drawn to these forms because we all undergo a journey, and the great dramas take us on great journeys.

We will look at the elements of those journeys as we study the screenplay form. The soul of screenwriting remains a part of an old tradition written about by Aristotle in his POETICS 2400 years ago, playwriting. The film medium is new but the elements of drama are old ones.

We will look at the old and the new as we study the form using examples from screenplays and films. We will also study those who have written about

and/or influenced the form ie/ Joseph Campbell, Robert McKee. Our focus will be on the essential elements of story.

The action of drama is the engine of transformation. In studying the screenplay form, we will explore journey and transformation, event and change, story, plot structure, three-act structures, mythic structure, fundamental story patterns, character, thinking and writing visually, longing/want/ache and conflict/obstacles.

Requirements include the weekly reading and writing assignments, participating vigorously in class discussions, keeping a notebook/journal of notes you take on the reading and ideas for work of your own, and a final project. Grading 70% written work (creative writing, critical writing, and reading work aloud), 25% class participation (contributing to discussions), 5% attendance.

While this is not primarily a writing class, there will be opportunity for both critical and creative writing. The final project will be a student-proposed idea and can be a critical thinking paper, a screenplay, or something else magical.

“Our real life is in our dreams.” Federico Fellini