

Elizabeth Robins in the Women's Literature Classroom

Suggestions for in-class writing evaluations

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<http://www.jsu.edu/depart/english/robins/robclasw.htm>

EH 420/G Women's Literature. (Class Text: Gilbert and Gubar, editors. *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, using the second edition in one volume or the third edition in two volumes)

Students had been exposed to didactic literature through Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Life in the Iron Mills*, in the textbook. Students read Robins' *Votes for Women* and either *My Little Sister* or *The Mills of the Gods*, available at the Elizabeth Robins Web: <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb>. This document was originally published at the prior address, <http://www.jsu.edu/depart/english/robins/robclasw.htm>.

These are Writing Prompts, options for responding to assigned reading by Elizabeth Robins

Select ONE of the lettered options, and on the sheet provided, brainstorm your ideas for a more expanded and thoughtful written response. Sketch this out for your contribution to the class. We may share in groups first. You may have the opportunity to revise and expand for a prepared section of your final exam, perhaps 20 points toward total final.

Then, briefly indicate which other work and question about that work you would select to work on if the question you selected were not available. (Which one would be your second choicer and some briefer possibilities for answering it.

A. Kenneth Burke revolutionized dramatic criticism in his essay "Mark Antony in Behalf of the Play." (Anthologized 1941 in *Philosophy of Literary Form*, Louisiana State University Press 329-343.) He took a creative approach to analyzing the strategies of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* by having a character step outside his role at a precise moment of the action (in this case during Antony's funeral oration) to explain why the playwright wrote the play the way he did, why the moment is a crucial turning point, and how his character functions for the playwright to carry out his larger dramatic scheme. Your task is to do the same for *Votes for Women*. Select one of the main characters (probably this works best with Vita, Stonor, or Jean/Bea, but others are possible) and a crucial moment for that character in the play. Use the first-person address of the character to imagine what else is in the character's mindset that helps to explain to the audience the strategies Robins undertook for writing the play the way she did. Burke explained his analysis in a preface to the imagined speech by Antony by saying that in addition to "being a dramatic character *within* the play, he is here made to speak as a critical commentator *upon* the play, explaining its mechanism and its virtues. [The] tale from Shakespeare [becomes] retold not as a plot but from the standpoint of the rhetorician, who is concerned with a work's process of appeal" (Burke 329-330).

[Students further interested in this approach may be interested in Scott L. Newstock's *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*. His website for the book: <https://www.scottnewstok.com/kenneth-burke-on-shakespeare>. I was first introduced to the essay by Professor of Dramaturgy, Virginia P. Scott at U Mass Amherst and developed for her my imitation of the Antony essay using "Masha on behalf of *The Seagull*."]]

B. *Votes for Women* conveys its message effectively because it weaves together the personal conflicts of Vida, Stonor, Jean/Bea with the public debate on suffrage for women as a political issue. Outline or sketch the scenario of a play which imitates Robins' construction and makes attempts to reach across class lines and follow some of the principles of Ibsen's strategies of dramatic composition: symbolic realism and exposition that gradually reveals the past. The most successful of these approaches will show careful influences from the details of Robins' script. What matches Mrs. Heriot's role? What is equivalent to the Labor man (Pilcher/Walker's scene in Act II?) Unless you have a good reason not to, consider a three-act structure, with action taking place in three locations over the course of a single day. Select one of these issues:

Humane treatment of animals

Issues of open education and Social Justice campaigns

Contaminates in our air, water, and/ or soil

Deforestation

Keep in mind these as stated are very vague and you will need a more focused campaign around a particular issue. As I argue in my introduction to the prompt-book edition of *Votes for Women*, Robins was likely influenced by the town meeting scene in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, where contaminated water is an issue.

C. If you read *Mills of the Gods*:

Write the Journal of Alicia in the style of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The entries should contain a good blend of her scientific discoveries, her plans for how she can measure the depth of the glacial mill, and her suspicions that Bellucci may harm her. Presumably, the evidence she leaves behind in the journal could be used to indict him if her body were discovered. You might opt to include correspondence from Alicia's mother which reveals more about Bellucci's past. Unlike Gilman's agenda, you are proving Alicia's sanity, not celebrating her mental breakdown. Still, you might consider a style of writing which shows how Bellucci has misunderstood her, or work out a strategy which, like Gilman, displays intensified emotion as it builds to a climax. Key your entries to passages in text with page references. You can be liberal and make up your own dates or invent a calendar which intersects with the narrative.

D. If you read *My Little Sister*, speculate on what it would take to update this narrative so it would be relevant to today's society.

Connect as many details of the plot and the development of characters (with page references, if you work on this as a final exam option) to equivalent details in a modernization. Make sure to EXPLAIN your choices. Don't assume all your readers "get the connections" to contemporary references. (I.e., if you refer to "Car Pool Karaoke" or "Oprah TV" or "Rocky Horror Picture Show," include annotations for someone who has never heard of these contemporary cultural artifacts.) Do NOT attempt to suggest known actors for the roles.

E. You have been appointed to a committee to plan the Monarch Notes (or Cliff Notes or Barron's Notes) study guide to Elizabeth Robins and her major works. Select *Votes for Women* and either *My Little Sister* or *Mills of the Gods* (other works and chronology if you are familiar with them). Make a brief outline of the study guide (major sections to be covered) and select a couple of focus areas to expand. You may want to explicate the three-act structure of the play. You may want to enumerate a list of questions to be answered on the background of the historical suffrage movement. You may want to do an annotated character list of the play or the novel. Suggest ways for students to combined study of play and novel. Make suggestions for linking Robins and her work to other writers. Show knowledge of your reading by brief notations in specific categories. Suggest areas of backgrounding that assist future readers.

Reminders about electronic texts:

Votes for Women can be accessed at Open Library,
<https://archive.org/details/votesforwomenpla00robiuoft/>

Or at The Indiana Victorian Women Writers Project,
<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/view?docId=VAB7192>

It has been numerous times anthologized. All modern texts except the version I edited for the Routledge anthology, *Modern Drama by Women*, derive from the printed edition of 1909.

Mills of the Gods <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/docshort/millsgod.html> and

My Little Sister <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/mls/index.html>

are at the JSU Robins Web, and may also be found at other repositories, including *HathiTrust*.

For graded work in class, citations are expected to be from a paginated edition.