Harry Truman’s 1947 Doctrine of Containment attempted to stop Communist expansion, to serve as sop in a period of widespread angst with regard to Soviet aggression. American angst lasted in various permutations until the collapse of the USSR in 1991 when Russia became Russia again. But John Kennedy’s bold handling of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and then his assassination the following year created a sea change in public perceptions of the U.S. relationship to Communism. This course examines significant texts by women writers of that period: 1947 – 1963. It was a time when desire dived underground, when public and communal safety overarched private and individual longing. In the Cold War, heated passions needed contained—at both the national and the household level. We will explore the paths that subversion and sublimation took as women succumbed to compulsory homemaking and heteronormativity. Texts by American women writers that delineate this internalized Cold Warring begin with Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” published in The New Yorker in June 1948. Her shocking tale lets us trace the morphing of Rosie the Riveter, that WWII poster girl who bespeaks the fierce strength and independence of mid-20th century American womanhood, to her domesticated and victimized counterpart, Tessie Hutchinson, who must be sacrificed to the cause of containment.

The course will also include, but not necessarily be limited to, Flannery O’Connor’s 1952 Wise Blood, with its androgynous protagonist Hazel and triptych of “wise women”: Leora, Sabbath Lily, and Mrs. Flood. Drawing on selections from The Lottery and Other Stories (1949) and from A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories (1955) will let us investigate the dramatic burgeoning of consumer culture and its impact on women’s lives as suburbia spawns a housing sprawl and a shopping-mall way of life whose afflictions we still suffer. Women’s desires plumbed as deeply underground as the fallout shelters that promised protection from Communist bombing and invasion. Women who waxed floors in ruffled aprons with gleeful panache simultaneously seemed to vouchsafe both our psychic and national security equally well. But Patricia Highsmith’s 1952 The Price of Salt and Grace Metallious’ 1953 Peyton Place suggest ways in which female sexuality flourished while culturally forbidden and hidden. Jean Kerr’s Please Don’t Eat the Daisies (1957) and its Doris Day film version reveal an era using fluff and frolic to camouflage the grim and gritty, one that juxtaposes sharply with Sylvia Plath’s 1963 The Bell Jar. That year, 1963, also saw ironically President Kennedy’s Commission Report on the Status of Women shortly before his November assassination, as well as the publication of Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique.

Our work will include intense reading and discussion, presentations and handouts, primary research into the popular culture—particularly the women’s magazines, and reliance on such works as Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham’s Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1947), Kenneth T. Jackson’s Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (1987), Elaine Tyler May’s Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (1988), David Halberstam’s The Fifties (1993), and Leigh Gallagher’s The End of the Suburbs (2013). A seminar paper on a major work and a paper on a popular-culture/sociological topic will highlight the end of our course.