

Grand Rounds: Exploring the Literary Symptoms of Illness through Narrative

Doctors have been swearing by the Hippocratic Oath for centuries, recognizing that “there is art to medicine as well as science.” But what exactly does this entail? In this mini-course, we will immerse ourselves within the art of medicine by entering into the realm of illness narratives. How do the worlds of Literature and Medicine intertwine? This literary perspective will illuminate the experience of illness from outside the scope of science. While paying particular attention to literary genres that express the illness experience from outside the scope of science, we will also explore multiple modalities of expressing illness in music, art, and dance.

In medical education, health practitioners embark on medical rounds by discussing individual patient cases at their bedsides. This course will be structured in parallel to this approach; each week, we will explore a different aspect of medicine through the lens of a different literary genre. Through literary theory, novels, short stories, poetry, memoir, and children’s literature, we will explore abstract illness, mental illnesses like depression, physical illnesses like the locked-in syndrome, disabilities like autism, cancer, and terminal illness.

Questions to be explored include:

- How do different genres of literature illuminate illness differently? What aspects of illness are made visible by some genres, overshadowed in others?
- What insight do literature and other artistic mediums provide into the illness experience? What are their limitations?
- Ultimately, why should we study literature from the perspective of illness narratives? How does this perspective add dimension to literary analysis, and how can it be applied to patient interactions in the medical field?

Course Requirements.

Class Participation (10%): I expect everyone to contribute thoughtfully to class discussions by listening and participating. I hope that this will be an open space where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and asking questions. Please be respectful of sensitive topics and of diverse perspectives that others may have.

Blog Entries (60%): Weekly assignments due Wednesdays at midnight will be to engage with readings on personal student blogs (as such, please treat these posts as formal writing exercises). Generally, posts must be at least two paragraphs, including something that you find interesting and a question that may have arisen. I will provide optional questions to guide your reading or prompts to address, but these entries are for you to personalize based on what intrigues you.

Final Project (30%): Students will choose between analyzing a preexisting illness narrative or to create their own representation of illness. Those who choose to analyze a preexisting illness narrative must do so in 3-4 pages and ground their analysis in course readings with comparative analysis if relevant. Those who create their own illness narrative may do so through any medium, with the caveat that any non-written work must be accompanied by writing that explains the artistic liberties taken. Final projects will be evaluated on thoughtfulness and effort.



Reading List. All course readings will be provided on Ctools. Please print whenever possible.

Attendance. Up to one excused absence is acceptable, but please notify me in advance.

Accessibility. Please let me know what I can do to best accommodate your learning needs.

Academic misconduct. Plagiarism is the unauthorized use of another person's words or ideas. If you are found to have plagiarized, you will fail the assignment and potentially the course. Please read the English Department's web page on plagiarism carefully as well as LSA's policies on academic misconduct. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism or how to practice scholarly etiquette, I would be happy to discuss this with you.

Tentative Course Schedule.

Week 1 (1/16): Introductions, Syllabus, Welcome to Blogging.

Week 2 (1/23): Diagnosing Illness Narratives.

Literary theory. General Illness.

*Read Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller*.

Week 3 (1/30): Living Beneath *The Bell Jar* of Depression

Semi-autobiographical novel, Poetry. Depression.

*Read Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, poems *Lady Lazarus* and *Tulips*.

Week 4 (2/6): A Literal Lock-in- The Body's Entrapment of the Mind.

Autobiography/Memoir, Film. Locked-in syndrome.

*Read Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. Watch clips in class.

Week 5 (2/13): Embracing Illness- (Dis)Ability in the Blogosphere

Blogging. Autism.

*Read DSMV entry for autism, Chew and Raymaker's *10 Autism Controversies*, autism blogs.

Week 6 (2/20): Meeting Cancer, The "Emperor of All Maladies"

Memoir. Breast Cancer.

*Read Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*. Watch clips from *W;t* in class.

Week 7 (2/27): Guest Speaker- Dr. Janet R. Gilsdorf, M.D.

UMMS Director of Pediatric Infectious Disease, Professor of Epidemiology, Writer.

* Final project proposal due (1 page). Read *A Simple Song of Gratitude* and Dr. Gilsdorf's bio.

~Spring Break~

Week 8 (3/13): Facing the Ultimate Illness: Death and Children's Literature

Children's Literature. Terminal Illness and Death.

*Read Leo Buscaglia's *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* and Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown's *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*.

Week 9 (3/20): Show and Tell

*Final project due. Showcase of illness narratives analyzed and created by students.



Unless otherwise noted, this material is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 License.