

English 265.2, Spring 1999
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Course Description

Titled “Words and Healing: Literature and Medicine,” English 265.2 seeks to explore the relationships between literature and medicine, which are at least as old as the Greeks. Inscribed over the door of the library at Thebes were the words “Medicine for the Soul.” Both Greek empiricism and Epicurean rhetoric found their methodology in the writings of Hippocrates.

Designed primarily for pre-med majors, this course will focus on literary works, some by or about physicians, that treat subjects from medicine or medical ethics. We will examine a variety of texts that reveal the emergence of “medical science” from the “medical arts.” We will look at medical issues as portrayed in a variety of literary forms, noting at times the cultural biases that underlie the seemingly neutral discourse of medicine.

The course will examine five major themes that emerge in the study of literature and medicine: (1) defining disease/pain and writing, (2) the doctor/patient relationship, (2) healing and conversion experiences, (4) plague literature, and (5) women and medicine. In approaching these themes we will read selections from a wide cross-section of literary figures: Chaucer, Donne, Defoe, Keats, Hawthorne, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Hemingway, William Carlos Williams, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, James Dickey, and Alice Walker. In addition we will read from the fiction of contemporary physician/writer Ferrol Sams, the emerging body of fiction and fictionalized accounts known as “plague discourse,” essays/tales by physicians Oliver Sacks and Richard Selzer, and poems by contemporary writers who have published in JAMA and in Literature and Medicine. Although we will read several selections from the medieval and early modern periods of literature, most of the readings will come from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Class Procedures

Classes will emphasize discussion and interpretation. Students will keep reading journals (three entries per week). They will write three papers, with some class time devoted to editing and revising the papers. One of the three papers will be a documented essay on a particular text. In preparing their papers, students will be introduced to the rich and growing body of critical studies of literature and medicine. Each student will also give an oral presentation based on one of the selections for further reading.

Texts

Course pack, including readings from Chaucer, Donne, Locke, Browne, Goldsmith, Keats, Arnold, Auden, Hawthorne, Lawrence, Hemingway, O’Connor

Selected poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, James Dickey, Alice Walker (handouts)

Selected poems by Dannie Abse and others published in JAMA and in Literature and Medicine (handouts)

Ibsen, An Enemy of the People

Chekhov, Uncle Vanya

Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyitch

William Carlos Williams, The Doctor Stories

Camus, The Plague

Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tine Roof

Percy, Love in the Ruins

Sams, When All the World Was Young

Selzer, Letters to a Young Doctor

Sacks, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales
Lynch, Carriers

Selections for Further Reading

Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic
Sontag, Illness as Metaphor
Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women
Hawkins, Reconstructing Illness
Radner, It's Always Something
Hunter, Doctors' Stories
Freud, Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria
Kleinman, The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition
Coles, Medical Ethics and Living a Life
Mitchell, The Autobiography of a Quack
Nuland, How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter
Garrett, The Coming Plague
Frank, The Wounded Storyteller

Goals and Objectives

- To develop further the ability to read and think critically
- To hone students' abilities to analyze literary texts
- To examine perceived and real relationships between writing and healing arts
- To examine writing as a vehicle for exploring and refining ideas
- To examine the growing body of work on the interrelationships of literature and medicine
- To help students discover how discourse links disciplines
- To examine the literature-medicine link in its cultural context

Assignments

Readings. Each week, students will read selected assigned material. Classes are designed to be interactive, with discussion of the texts, the cultural contexts, literary and rhetorical conventions in the texts, and the interrelationship of thinking and discourse in medicine itself.

Journals. Students will write critiques of and/or reactions to the assigned readings. Journals will be collected every two weeks.

Essays. Students will write three papers on selected texts. Two will be 500 to 750 words each, and the third will be a five- to seven-page documented essay drawing in part on one of the selections for further reading; this paper will be the basis of a report presented to the class.

Oral Reports. Each student will be responsible for presenting one of the assigned essays for class analysis. Near the end of the course, each student will present a brief oral report based on the research project.

Quizzes. We will have twelve reading quizzes (covering simple, factual material). No make-ups will be given, but I will drop the two lowest grades. The final exam will be an essay exam requiring critical reading, analysis, and synthesis of some of the texts.

Syllabus

Week

- 1 Introduction to the course and to one another; overview of the course; introductory analysis and writing.
- 2 Selections from early writers, including Chaucer, Browne, Defoe (handout).
- 3 Selections from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers, including Donne, Harvey (handout), Locke, Descartes, Goldsmith.
- 4 Selections from nineteenth-century writers, including Keats and Arnold; Eliot, Middlemarch (text to be ordered)
- 5 Middlemarch
- 6 Hawthorne, “The Birthmark”; Ibsen, An Enemy of the People
- 7 Chekhov, Uncle Vanya
- 8 Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyitch
- 9 SPRING BREAK
- 10 Hemingway, “Indian Camp” (handout); W. C. Williams, The Doctor Stories
- 11 Camus, The Plague; O’Connor, “Good Country People”
- 12 Percy, Love in the Ruins
- 13 Sams, When All the World Was Young
- 14 Poems from course pack, plus handouts; Lynch, Carriers
- 15 Selzer, Letters to a Young Doctor
- 16 Sacks, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales
- 17 Final exam

Grading Summary

Essays: 60% (The documented paper counts as two essays.)

Journals and class participation: 10%

Quizzes: 10%

Oral presentations: 5%

Final Exam: 15%

Honor Code

The Honor Code will apply to all work except for peer editing of essays; in any case, the work and the insights are assumed to be the writer's own.

Attendance

A copy of the English Department's policy statement on attendance is attached. Anyone with excessive absences will be urged to drop the course.

Completion of Work

Students must complete all work if they are to complete the course. If you have a reasonable excuse, I will work with you. However, students who fail to keep up with the process of writing the research paper, or any other paper, may fall so far behind that they will be unable to complete the course. The course is not based on product alone, but on process as well, and everyone's participation is essential to creating a rich atmosphere of learning.

Level of Sophistication

As a student at a highly respected liberal arts college, you are expected to act appropriately at all times and to show respect for others. Wandering in and out of the classroom or behaving inappropriately in class will not be tolerated.

Office Hours

I will be in my office during the hours listed below. You are welcome (actually, you are encouraged) to come by for help in planning and writing papers. If you make an appointment but cannot come, please send me an e-mail message so that I will not expect you. If you need to see me at a time not listed, please ask for an appointment.

Mondays and Wednesdays: 12:00-1:30

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 2:40-4:15