

Professor Jessica Sheets Maxwell
Office: Palmer 400
Office Phone: 843.3416
E-mail: maxwellj@rhodes.edu
Office Hours: T/Th 10:30 – 11:30am

**English 190.01 Perilous Lives; Precarious Stories: Trauma and Mourning in
Contemporary World Literature**
T/Th 12:30 – 1:45pm; Palmer 211

A Brief Course Description

This class will explore texts haunted by literal and figurative ghosts. These ghosts, these fragmentary and disruptive remnants of a traumatic history, will offer us a way to investigate concepts of mourning, memory, trauma, and narrative. We will also examine how these texts attempt to communicate the seemingly incommunicable experiences of extreme pain and suffering. For example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores how the traumatizing institution of slavery haunts its victims; while Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* examines how a family and a community remain haunted by unearthed tales of wartime atrocities. This class will also provide an introduction to trauma theory. We will read from a selection of trauma theories, namely those posed by Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, Kali Tal, and Jeffrey Alexander. Writing assignments will include a series of interpretive essays that address these concepts in the context of literary analysis.

This course satisfies both the F2 (Writing Intensive) and F4 (Literary Texts) requirements.

Required Texts

Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*
Randall Keenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*
Eugene O'Neill, *Strange Interlude* (included in *Three Plays*)
Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*
Jonathan Tropper, *This is Where I Leave You*
Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*
Selected Trauma Readings (will be made available to you either as printed copies or as digital files)

Grading

15% - Participation
10% - Discussion Questions
15% - Scholarly Article Presentation with Handout
10% - Paper 1 (3 pages)
15% - Paper 2 (5 pages)
15% - Paper 3 (5 pages)
20% - Final Paper (7 pages)

Course Requirements

Attendance

Attendance is required. **You are allowed four absences.** Each absence beyond those four will result in a one-tier grade reduction of your final grade. Hence, a B- becomes a C+. **If you miss eight classes, you will automatically fail the course.** Sorry. In addition, as tardiness is an ever-growing problem, you will be penalized for coming to class late. Habitual and excessive tardiness will affect your attendance record (**3 late arrivals equals one absence**).

Note: There is no difference between an excused and an unexcused absence so please plan accordingly.

Participation

Each student's participation is vital to the overall disposition and accomplishment of the group. Your participation grade is based on the regularity and quality of your contributions to discussion. Comments that help advance the discussion and that enable all class members to contribute are highly valued. These kinds of comments are only possible when you have come to class fully prepared, and have completed all of the required reading. Thus, over the course of the semester I will randomly give quizzes to ensure that you are keeping up with the reading requirements. **Quizzes are Pass/Fail, with failure resulting in you being excused from class and counted as absent for that day.**

Discussion Questions

You will be required to submit five separate (i.e. you cannot submit multiple questions on the same day) discussion questions over the course of the semester. These questions, typed and turn-in-ready, should be focused, should reference specific textual evidence and thematic concerns, and should spark lively discussion. Be prepared to explain the relevance of your question and guide your peers as they respond to it.

You will sign up for specific dates on which to prepare discussion questions.

Scholarly Article Presentation and Handout

You are to find and familiarize yourself with a scholarly article that takes as its subject one of the texts we are reading in class. In fact, you will need to be familiar enough with the article to type up a 1-2 page handout summarizing and highlighting its main points. Of course, you will also want to focus on how the article relates to the text and our ongoing class discussions. During class, you will spend roughly 10 minutes discussing the article with the class and going over the points included in your handout. Remember to bring enough handouts for the entire class (approximately 22).

Choosing an Article: On the first day of class, you will be asked to submit a ranked list of texts that you would be interested in researching. I will try to accommodate everyone's first choice, but some of you may have to work with your second or even third choice. At the beginning of the second week of class, I will let you know which text you need to research and on what day you will be presenting

Writing Assignments

All writing assignments are due at the beginning of class, whether you are there in person or not. If I do not receive papers by such time they will be considered late. Brief extensions for good reasons (i.e. illness, family emergency) are permissible with my approval; otherwise, late assignments will be penalized, resulting in a one-tier grade reduction for each day the assignment is late. Hence, a B- becomes a C+.

All essays written for this course should follow the MLA rules of style and citation. In addition, all written assignments should be typewritten in **12-point Times New Roman** font and **double-spaced** with **1 inch margins**. Each paper you turn in should also be stapled and numbered. **Failure to follow any of these formatting requirements will result in a grade reduction.**

Papers

I encourage everyone to visit me during my office hours to discuss his or her papers (or any aspect of the class for that matter). I am always happy to look at and comment on any early drafts. I also recommend visiting the Writing Center. For each of these assignments you will be given a handout detailing specific expectations and requirements. *Unless otherwise stated, final drafts will not be accepted electronically.*

You are required to complete four literary analysis papers for this course, each analyzing one of the texts we are reading as a class. You will be required to choose from specific texts for papers 1- 3; however, you may choose to write on any text in your fourth and final paper (with one small caveat, you cannot write on a text that you have already tackled in a previous paper).

As pieces of literary analysis, the bulk of any of these essays should function as a “close reading” of the text and should demonstrate how certain literary elements – such as characterization, plot, setting, and so on – function to make a particular statement/s. In each case you will be asked to consider how the text deals specifically with certain thematic issues, namely trauma, memory, and mourning. You will be given a handout indicating the specific requirement for each essay and including a selection of writing prompts.

Please be advised that “sloppy work,” meaning writing that is riddled with grammar, spelling, and proofreading errors, will be heavily penalized.

Paper 1 (3 pages) – Due 2/12

Paper 2 (5 pages) – Due 3/5

Paper 3 (5 pages) – Due 4/9

Final Paper (7 pages) – Due 4/30

Department of English Expectations and Policies

A college course is more than simply a set of assignments; it is an intellectual process, one which requires active engagement from beginning to end in order to achieve its intended results. With this in mind, the Department of English has formulated a number of expectations and the policies that support them. If you have questions about how these policies relate to the syllabus for a particular course, you should address them to the instructor.

Attendance: The success of a course depends to a significant extent upon the presence of students alert and prepared to address the subject under discussion. Unavoidable absences should be discussed with the instructor, ideally before they occur. Excessive absences will result in a lowering of grade, in some cases to an F.

Deadlines: Writing assignments, tests, etc., are carefully scheduled as stages toward the fulfillment of the course's goals and cannot be indefinitely deferred without frustrating those goals. Brief extensions for good reasons may be permissible with the instructor's prior approval; otherwise, late assignments will be penalized and may result in their not being accepted for credit.

Submission of all work: All major assignments are integral to the goals of the course. Failure to complete any major assignment will result in a grade of F for the course.

Intellectual honesty: All work is assumed to be the student's own and produced exclusively for the course in which it is submitted. Papers written for one course, even if revised, are not to be submitted in another without the instructor's prior approval. Borrowing of ideas or language from other sources (including published material, other student papers, the internet or other electronic resources, etc.) must be carefully documented. Students are advised against posting their work on the internet since doing so may lead to suspicion of plagiarism. Students are advised to maintain drafts of their work to verify its originality. Cases of suspected plagiarism will be referred to the Honor Council, and the student if convicted will receive a grade of F in the course in addition to sanctions assigned by the Council. Clear evidence of plagiarism (failure to use quotation marks around verbatim or copied language, failure to adequately paraphrase, and failure to cite the source of quoted, paraphrased, or borrowed text and ideas), regardless of the Council hearing outcome, may likewise result in failure of the course. Carelessness in documenting sources, even if not technically plagiarism, will be penalized as the instructor deems appropriate. If you are uncertain about how or whether to document sources, consult your teacher.

Schedule of Assignments

The following schedule is subject to change; however, sufficient notice will be given before any changes are made. Always bring the appropriate books and/or handouts to class.

Week 1

1/15: Introduction

Week 2

1/20: Trauma Theory (selected readings)

1/22: *Strange Interlude* (from *Three Plays* by Eugene O'Neill); reading from Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*

Week 3

1/27: *Strange Interlude*; reading from Walter Benjamin's *The Storyteller*

1/29: *Slaughterhouse Five*; reading from Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt*

Week 4

2/3: *Slaughterhouse Five*, reading from James Dawes's *The Language of War*

2/5: *Slaughterhouse Five*

Week 5

2/10: *Beloved*, reading from Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's *Testimony*

2/12: *Beloved*; **Paper 1 Due**

Week 6

2/17: *Beloved*

2/19: *Beloved*

Week 7

2/24: *A Visitation of Spirits*, TBA

2/26: *A Visitation of Spirits*

Week 8

3/3: *A Visitation of Spirits*

3/5: *The Virgin Suicides*; **Paper 2 Due**

Week 9

3/10: **SPRING BREAK**

3/12: **SPRING BREAK**

Week 10

3/17: *The Virgin Suicides*, reading from Jeffrey C. Alexander's *Trauma: A Social Theory*

3/19: *The Virgin Suicides*

Week 11

3/24: *In the Lake of the Woods*, reading from Vamik Volkan's *Blind Trust*

3/26: *In the Lake of the Woods*

Week 12

3/31: *In the Lake of the Woods*

4/2: EASTER BREAK

Week 13

4/7: *In the Lake of the Woods*

4/9: *The God of Small Things*; **Paper 3 Due**

Week 14

4/14: *The God of Small Things*, TBA

4/16: *The God of Small Things*

Week 15

4/21: *The God of Small Things*

4/23: *This is Where I Leave You*

Week 16

4/28: *This is Where I Leave You*

4/30: *This is Where I Leave You*, **Final Paper Due**

A Few Notes:

1. Assignments should be completed by the date listed.
2. Not all reading assignments and handouts are included in this schedule. Periodically, you will be required to read selections that accompany these assignments.
3. Handouts and reading assignments not included in the texts you purchased for this course will either be passed out in class or posted online. Reading assignments posted online should be printed out and brought to class for discussion.