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LIT 494.01: Capstone - Literature of Death & Dying

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LIT 494: Capstone: Literature of Death, Dying, and Grief

Ashby Kinch

Class: Monday, 3:30-6:20; LA 336; Cooper Room, 4th Fl Missoula Public Library (see syllabus)

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Office Hours: W 10-11:30; Th 3-5; by appointment

Course Description:

In the wake of COVID-19 and our collective confrontation with mass mortality, we are trenchantly aware of the importance of the questions at the root of this seminar, and indeed of all human social life: how does imaginative art allow us to “practice” death, and thus develop the empathy and understanding to prepare for the inevitable deaths of others, as well as our own? How can a richer understanding of past death practices help us re-imagine death in the present? What does it mean to think about death in an increasingly virtual world, where constructions of immortality rooted in a definition of humanity as “information” are possible?

We will pursue these questions through reading 21st century novels, essays, and poetry that engage with death, but we will also explore older literature as a means to expand the imaginative possibilities for thinking about what our deaths might mean for a well-lived life. The primary aim will be to better situate ourselves to understand this fundamental human experience, which modern culture conspires to place further and further from direct view. To the extent possible under the strictures of COVID, we will engage in community conversations with our fellow citizens of the meaning and experience of death in our personal and collective lives. Students will be encouraged to reflect on the way the course content might shape their future lives as ethical, informed citizens of a complex pluralistic world, in which the future impingement on our lives of decreasing resources might bring our individual and collective deaths into much sharper relief.

Through engaging with these imaginative and critical perspectives on death, students will develop their own independent interpretive projects, which can focus on any time period, genre, or author. While the course is open to all English majors, students will meet basic expectations for independent research of a graduating major in the Literature track: a research prospectus, an annotated bibliography of at least 10 sources of peer-reviewed scholarship, and a final paper of 15 pages.

Required Texts

Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death and Dying: from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) (MOODLE)

Joy Williams, *The Quick and the Dead* (Vintage, 2000)

Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* (Vintage, 2015)

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Scriber, 2017)

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Vintage, 2005)

Course Requirements:

Weekly Moodle Position Papers: 30% (on weekly readings)

Two Class Presentations: 20% (on student-selected readings, final projects)

Final Project: 50% (15 pp. research paper/project, annotated bibliography)

Policy Statements

Attendance

As advanced undergraduate students, your attendance and participation in class is a basic expectation for completing the class. If you have commitments that require you to be absent, or a serious health situation, the burden is on you to make up the regular work and to contact other students for perspective and notes on what you missed. Repeated absences and/or poor preparation for class may result in your final grade being lowered; I will warn you of that fact if your attendance and participation are jeopardizing your work

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is an affront to the fundamental values of an academic institution, indicating a lack of respect for intellectual labor and a lack of responsibility for each student's part in sustaining academic community. Acknowledge, by citation of name, title, and page number, all work that has influenced your thinking. The University's official warning can be found in the [Student Conduct Code](#).

For information on academic policies and procedures, please consult the [Catalog](#). For importance dates and deadlines, please see: <http://www.umt.edu/registrar/calendar.php>

Disability Accommodation

All effort will be made for any student who needs accommodation, for information on which, contact the [Office for Disability Equity](#).

Conduct of Class / Trigger Warning / Values of Inclusion

My aim in every class is to make space for each of us to think deeply about the topic of death, which creates discomfort and difficulty for many people in our society.

Talking about death is very difficult. We need one another, and we need a collective strength that is greater than any one of us as individuals. Some of us may struggle to participate on any given day. Others may have a lot to say in the face of working through some deep-seated question about death. Great literature should trigger such discussions—and I intend that word in a neutral sense. But if you are “triggered” in the sense we have come to recognize as traumatic, please let me know, and feel free not to attend a particular class. You can make up the work by writing more that week, and we can circle back, as a group, to the topics raised at a later date. There are ample resources on campus for treating acute distress, including [SARC](#) (243-4429) and [Curry Health Center](#) (243-4712). Please use these resources if you are in distress, and do not hesitate to contact me.

Also, feel free to share with me and your peers any of your identities that you think might be important for us to have a relationship of trust and communication. Though I identify as a cis-gendered male from a mixed European background (Scottish, German, Welsh and unknown others), I also have other identity attributes that do not “present” as obviously. We all do, and we need to be prepared to encounter one another in a spirit of openness, tolerance, and mutual understanding to engage in this difficult work together.

Having access to a diversity of viewpoints, backgrounds, and perspectives is essential equipment for living in a pluralistic society. We must be able to talk from, between, and to these diverse experiences, including ones that we encounter in fictional, poetic, or essayistic work written by authors from a range of backgrounds. This course will offer many opportunities to talk about questions of diversity, including race and gender, and all students should feel comfortable speaking their minds in an atmosphere of inclusion, tolerance, and respect. I come from a long intellectual tradition that values dispute and debate, including the ability to take on perspectives not your own as a means of growing, changing, and exploring new ideas. I take this to be essential to the work of reading imaginative literature, so it is something we should be prepared to practice in our discussions.

Reading / Work Schedule

Nota Bene: due to the MLK holiday falling on the first day the class otherwise would have met, we will need to accomplish a lot on Day 1.

Moodle Response # 1 due by Monday, Jan 23rd at **9 a.m.**

Week 1-2 (Jan 24th): Missoula Public Library: 4-7 (Cooper Room, Level 4)

Matters of Life and Death: Terror Management Theory, COVID, Our Moment Introductions; discussion of death values/experiences; writing strengths; historical death cultures (Medieval death-art genres)

Read: Joy Williams, *The Quick and the Dead*, Bks 1&2 (1-193)

Select short lyric poems (MOODLE: PDF)

Ernst Becker, "The Terror of Death" (MOODLE: PDF)

Discuss: project possibilities, research methods, historical periodization, the "Other" (of history, of culture, of subjectivity, of ontology)

Moodle Response # 2 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 3 (Jan. 31st): Death in/Through Time: Historical Frameworks

Read: Phillipe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death and Dying* (1-107)

Joy Williams, *The Quick and the Dead*, Bk 3 (194-308)

Drew Gilpin Faust, "Believing and Doubting," *This Republic of Suffering*, 185-200 (MOODLE)

Moodle Response # 3 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 4 (Feb 7th): Missoula Public Library: 4-7 pm

Dr. Ruth Vanita, "Death, Rebirth and Endless Cycles in Hinduism"

Read: Selections from Georges Bataille, *Erotism* (MOODLE)

Herbert Marcuse, "The Ideology of Death" (64-76) (MOODLE)

Robert Pogue Harrison, "Hic Jacet" (17-36) and "The Names of the Dead" (124-141) from *Dominion of the Dead* (MOODLE)

Moodle Response # 4 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 5 (Feb. 14th): Voices of Grief

Read: Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (1-106)

Robert Pogue Harrison, "The Voice of Grief" (55-71) (MOODLE)

Walt Whitman, "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd" (HANDOUT)

Moodle Response # 5 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Include your critical reading for your presentation Wks 7-9

Week 6 (Feb 21st): PRESIDENT'S DAY: NO CLASSES

Choose one of the following excerpts to write about for Moodle:

Kevin Young, *Book of Hours* (excerpts), Victoria Chang, *Obit* (excerpts)

Moodle Response # 6 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 7 (Feb. 28th): Writing Grief

Missoula Public Library: 4-7 pm (Cooper Room, Level 4)

A Conversation About Grief and Writing with Qlispe Poet Heather Cahoon, author of "Horsefly Dress"

Read: Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (106-227)

Heather Cahoon, *Horsefly Dress* (excerpts)

Moodle Response # 7 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 8 (March 7): Missoula Public Library: 4-7 pm (Cooper Room, Level 4)

Irish Traditions of Lament with Drs. Katie Kane (English) and Bernadette Sweeney (Theater)

Read: John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea* (PDF)

James Joyce, *The Dead* (PDF)

Prospectus Due by Monday at 9 a.m.

Week 9 (March 14): Premonitions of Mortality

Read: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* (1-181)

Selections from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (101-132) (MOODLE)

SPRING BREAK: March 21-25

Moodle Response # 8 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 10 (March 28): Death, Trauma, Memory

Read: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* (182-317)

Moodle Response # 9 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 11 (April 4): Death, Trauma, Resilience

Read: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (1-141)

Moodle Response #10 due by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 12 (April 11): Death, Trauma, Resilience

Missoula Public Library: 4-7 pm (Cooper Room, Level 4)

Clary Loisel, on Horacio Quiroga, "The Son"; David Quammen, "Walking Out"

Read: Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (143-285)

Annotated Bibliography Due (no online response this week)

Week 13 (April 18): Transhumanism, Biocentrism, and the Attack on Death

Read: David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives* (Vintage, 2009) (MOODLE)

Excerpts from popular press, debates on transhumanism, the "Fable of the Dragon"

Week 14 (April 25): Missoula Public Library: 4-7 (Cooper Room, Level 4)

Death in the Anthropocene

Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (MOODLE)

Select readings on species death

Kate Shanley (Native American Studies), "Death in Native American Oral Traditions"

Draft Due online by Monday at **9 a.m.**

Week 15 (May 2nd): In-class writing workshop

Post a draft online by Monday at 9 a.m.; come to class having read your peer paper

Final paper due May 13th: Meet for presentations / public event