English 540 (70): Ethics & Illness in Contemporary American Literature

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Class Meets: T, 4:30-7:10  
Hours: MW 12-1:30; TR 9:25-10:50;  
& by appointment

Edvard Munch, *The Sick Child* (1907)

This course will consider the implications of trauma theory and narrative medicine for the representation of illness in contemporary American novels, plays, poems, and memoirs. We will read such authors as Philip Roth, Joan Didion, Paul Monette, Margaret Edson, Sylvia Plath, Michael Cunningham, and Tony Kushner. We will see Edson’s *Wit* performed at the Playhouse on Park in West Hartford. Ultimately, we will theorize the difficulty of representing illness, the effects of a terminal diagnosis, and the literary narrativization of illness itself.

Required Texts:
Cathy Caruth, Ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*
Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine*
Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*
Joan Didion, *Blue Nights*
Margaret Edson, *Wit*
Ann Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative*
Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*
Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*
Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*
Philip Roth, *Patrimony*
Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*

Course Goals:
- *To hone* your skills in literary analysis, which include reading and talking about literature.
- *To theorize* the style and content of writing published in America after 1960, particularly in terms of its representation of illness.
- *To ask* what modern American literature can teach us about contemporary American life and the problems that haunt us today.
• To become more versed in literary theoretical discourse, exemplified by narrative medicine and trauma theory.
• To develop skills in writing a traditional research paper of publishable quality.

Particulars:
1. Keep up with both the primary and secondary reading and attend every class.

2. The written requirements for this class comprise two 4-5 page close reading papers, one 12-page research paper with annotated bibliography, a class presentation, a final exam, and six abstracts of secondary sources assigned to help elucidate main issues in the primary texts. In all cases, you will be graded not only on your knowledge of the material, but also on the way you present your ideas. All of your writing will take the form of a thesis-based argument; it will be carefully written, and proofread. See pp. 8-12 of this syllabus for more details regarding the format and content expectations for the written assignments.

3. You must complete every assignment to pass this class. All papers must be submitted on time. All abstracts must be submitted. I will not accept any work submitted electronically. Any late work will result in a lowered grade at my discretion and will likely not be returned with the papers submitted on time.

4. I fully support open and candid discussions in class. In many cases, a good class depends upon animated conversation among as many students as possible. However, we must draw and defend limits: Please, when you talk in class, focus on the TEXT itself. Our conversations will focus on the way in which the author portrays his characters and his events in addition to what is significant about each representation.

5. The CCSU honor code for Academic Integrity is in effect in this class. You may find it online at: <http://www.ccsu.edu/AcademicIntegrity/>. Please read it carefully. You might especially be interested in the Undergraduate Academic Misconduct Policy, found here: <http://www.ccsu.edu/AcademicIntegrity/UndergradAcadMisconductPolicy.htm>.

6. As discussed in the University Academic Misconduct Policy, plagiarism is forbidden. While I value highly cooperation and collaborative work, all writing you submit must be your own. Because a writer’s ideas and the words he or she uses to express these ideas are regarded as property, you will be punished justly if you use any author’s phrasings or ideas without citation.

7. Just as I will consistently treat you with courtesy, I expect you to treat this classroom with the respect it deserves as a place of higher learning. This means that cell phones must be put away for the duration of the class and tardiness should be avoided. If you come in late, take a seat by the door so as not to interrupt the class and have your notebook, book, and pen out before entering the classroom.

8. The best way to reach me is via e-mail. Please copyedit your email. Include a salutation and sign it. I give full attention to e-mail conventions and the detail of typewritten text. Please extend to me the same courtesy.
9. CCSU, the Department of English, and I are all committed to supporting equal access to the content of this course. Students with disabilities (physical, learning, psychological, or other) that may affect their performance in this class are encouraged to contact the Office of Special Student Services. Students who wish to discuss the possibility of accommodations are also encouraged to meet me in my office hours. An OSSS staff member will be able to coordinate accommodations for this class. Information on OSSS can be found here: <http://www.ccsu.edu/specialstudentservices/>. The phone number is (860)832-1955.

10. You will be expected to sign an attendance sheet at the beginning of every class period, so make sure you are not late. The success of this course depends upon active class participation of all class members. Noticeable absenteeism (greater than two absences) will result in a lowered grade at my discretion. Should you miss class for any reason, you are responsible for obtaining the relevant notes and information from your classmates.

11. Caveat: All assignments and due dates are subject to change with notice.

Grading Policy:
Each paper and exam will be graded on a scale from A to F. These grades will be determined by the coherence, depth, consistency, and clarity of your argument, its relevance to the course, and the amount of effort your work displays. I will calculate your final grade using the following percentages and criteria:

Two close reading papers: 2(15) = 30%
One 12-page research paper with annotated bibliography: 40%
One close reading presentation: 10%
Final Exam: 20%
Six Abstracts of Secondary Sources: Pass/Fail

Criteria:
A An “A” paper moves your instructor and the best members of your class to admiration. It implies not only that the theme is virtually free of errors but that it makes its point clearly, logically, and gracefully. An “A” final grade is the product of work of consistently high quality and occasional brilliance.

B A “B” paper reveals effective performance of the assignments. The theme is clear and logical but with perhaps some small problems of coherence or development and without the stylistic grace of an “A” paper. It has no more than an occasional error in spelling, sentence structure, diction, usage, or punctuation.

C A “C” paper indicates that you have performed the assignment adequately but usually with some problems of clarity, logic, support, or documentation, grammar, mechanics, and spelling. Improvement is desirable, but you should remember that a “C” grade does indicate average college work.

D A “D” paper reveals a failure to perform the assignment adequately or to overcome some problems pointed out in previous themes. The “D” paper only partially fulfills the requirements
of the topic, and it usually has a significant number of errors in spelling, sentence structure, usage, diction, and punctuation. When you receive a “D” you are being given warning that you must improve.

F An “F” paper indicates gross failure at carrying out the assigned topic. An “F” grade may also be given to students who make frequent errors or those who consistently fail to seek out help and correct their indiscretions. It is, of course, a failing grade.

Schedule:

Week 1

**January**

**Tue 19** Introductions

Read: (In class, Backgrounds): Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: An Introduction”; Rita Charon, “The Sources of Narrative Medicine”; “How Should One Read a Book?”; and “Bearing Witness”

Week 2

**Tue 26** Read: Ann Jurecic, chapter 1: “Illness Narratives and Challenges to Criticism”; Read: Monette, Borrowed Time (pp. 1-183)

Week 3

**February**

**Tue 2** Read: Monette, Borrowed Time (183-end)


Write: Research abstract #1

Week 4

**Tue 9** Read: Sontag, AIDS and Its Metaphors

Read: Jurecic, chapter 4: “Sontag, Suffering, the Work of Writing”

Week 5

**Tue 16** Read: Kushner, Angels in America – Book I: Millennium Approaches


Write: Research Abstract # 2

Week 6

**Tue 23** Read: Kushner, Angels in America – Book II: Perestroika


Write: Close reading paper #1

Week 7

**March**
Tue 1  Read: Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*
Write: Research Abstract #3

Week 8
Tue 8  Read: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*
Write: Research Abstract #4

Week 9
Tue 15 Read: Philip Roth, *Patrimony*
Read: Jurecic, “Theory’s Aging Body”
Read: Secondary source – Aimee Pozorski, “American Jewish Life Writing, Illness, and the Ethics of Innovation” in The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction (PDF)
Write: Research Abstract #5

**Spring break: March 21-25 … No class!**

Week 10
Tue 29  Read: Margaret Edson, *Wit*
Write: Research Abstract #6

Week 11
April
Tue 5  Read: Joan Didion, *Blue Nights*
Write: Close reading paper #2

Week 12
Tue 12  Read: Charon, chapter 3: “Narrative Features of Medicine”
Read: In Caruth, ed. “Trauma and Aging: A Thirty-Year Follow Up” by Henry Krystal

Week 13
Tue 19  Write: Paper topic proposal and annotated bibliography; bring to class the close reading paper you intend to develop for the final.

Week 14
Tue 26  Write: Paper draft for Workshop—Bring two copies to class.
Fri 29  Attend: *Wit* performed at Playhouse on Park Theatre in West Hartford, CT at 8:00 p.m. Meet in the lobby at 7:40.

Week 15
*Last week of classes*

Tue 3  *Write: Final Exam (in class)*

Week 16
*Final exam week*

Tue 10  *Write: Final Research Paper*. Submit in class at 4:30 p.m. SHARP! See below for a list of documents submitted with your paper portfolio.

**Graded, Written Assignments**

**Abstracts of Secondary Sources**

The easiest way to find the nine critical articles available online, is through the MLA or LION bibliographic databases. In order to access the MLA database, for example, go to the library’s home page. From there, click on “Digital Library Resources.” Next, click on “A to Z List of Databases.” Then, click on the M and scroll down to find the “MLA Bibliography.” Next, type in the name of the author or title of the article. At the bottom of the bibliographic entry, you will likely have to click on “find at CCSU.” Once you do that, you’ll be given the option of accessing the article through JSTOR. Click on that option, and read/print the article as a PDF file you can bring to class.

The abstract will be about one or two paragraphs only – give an overview of the article (including thesis and reasons), discuss the author’s values and critical methodology, and comment, briefly, on the article’s merits or shortcomings.

**Close Reading Papers**

Your close reading papers should be 4-5 pages long, double spaced, and address thematic and literary concerns of a particular text. That is, you will begin with a *thesis* (a statement that is arguable) and will proceed to flesh out this claim with a further explanation of your reasoning and a careful reading of the quotations you choose to support your claim. Be sure to write a thesis that thinks together the relationship between a primary literary text and a theoretical text. The focus here is on your thorough interpretation of the quotes from both kinds of sources (theory and literature). Do not simply cite some lines and paraphrase them. Give an explanation for nearly every word, every sound, and every punctuation mark. If you quote three lines of material, you should type at least six lines of interpretation.

If a reasonable person would not argue with your thesis, then it is not a strong thesis. Please take chances with your readings! Be creative. Your audience for these papers is your instructor and the rest of the class, so you can assume that we have all read the work, know the characters and themes, and eventual outcomes of the texts. It is your job to look so closely at the material that you locate in it something (again) that those of us, on a first reading, may have overlooked or would have interpreted in another way.
Finally, please pay attention to formatting issues. The paper should be typed in a 12 point font, Times New Roman if you have it. You should have 1” margins on all sides. You should have page numbers in the top, right hand corner. Your name, my name, the course number, and the date of the assignment should appear in the upper right hand corner of the first page. Your paper should have a title and a Works Cited page.

Your work should be carefully edited. I will give your paper back to you if I find five typos or grammatical mistakes on the first page.

**Final Exam**
The examination will cover both the assigned reading and the material covered in class sessions. Again, even in the exams, you will be graded not only on your knowledge of the material, but also on the way you present your ideas. Ideally, all of your writing will take the form of a thesis-based argument; it will be carefully written and proofread. The final will feature three essay questions asking you to think together the theory and the American literary tradition (you choose 2) and eight passages for identification and close reading (you choose four).

**Presentation**
You will sign up for your presentation during the third class meeting, so start looking through the books ahead of time to choose your presentation date. The presentation will be about 20 minutes long, including Q & A, and will take as its focus one compelling detail or passage from the text assigned for that day. Your presentation will include a handout – so bring 15 copies to class. The handout will have these parts: a title, an overview, a thesis, a list of passages for close reading, three open ended discussion questions that ask the class to consider the implications of your thesis, and a list of Works Cited. Try to keep the handout to one or two sides of a sheet of paper. You may use the ideas in your presentation for your close reading paper and your research paper.

**Research Essay Project**
For this project, you will research, and write, a 12-page research essay that enriches our understanding of the relationship between illness, ethics, and contemporary American literature. To do this, you will need to 1) narrow down the subject to a topic you can address fully in your page range; 2) have your own understanding of significant secondary sources that take up your topic; and 3) propose your own arguable claim about this sufficiently-narrowed topic.

In addition to the essay, components of the project include a close reading paper that considers the literary attributes of your topic, a research paper proposal, an annotated bibliography, and a peer-review workshop you conduct with classmates during class time.

These are the recommended steps you should take in beginning this work:

**A. Develop a Topic.**

The subject, as you already know, is “ethics and illness in contemporary American literature.” Beginning with a literary text that speaks to you, narrow this broad subject to a topic you can thoroughly address in approximately 12 pages – considering your close readings and responses to secondary sources.
You may think about your close reading papers as an initial exploration of this topic. You have two close reading papers due this semester; one of them can be used in your research paper as well. Your topic proposal is due in class Tuesday, April 19.

**B. Research: Locating Secondary Sources**

You can locate secondary sources through

1. The PDF files I send you addressing a particular work. Although the secondary sources may take on a different topic, you are free to go back to one or two of these essays for your research paper.

2. Books in the stacks of Burritt Library. Search CONSULS to see what the CSU system has. Burritt has many interesting books—and there are still others at the three other CSU schools. This is why it is important to have a topic early. You may need to “Request” a book from a sister school, and will need to give the couriers about a week to process this request.

3. MLA Bibliography, available online through the Burritt Library website. Go the university home-page ccsu.edu. Click on “Library” on the top right hand side of the page. Click on “database finder” under Search (on the left.) Click on “M” for MLA Bibliography. Click on the MLA Bibliography link. From there, you will get to MLA through an EBSCO host Research Database.

To do an initial search, I would type in *the title of the work you are researching* and see what you find. The article titles in the list of hundreds of possibilities will let you know if you’ve hit upon your topic.

Choose *peer-reviewed* journal articles. The articles we discuss in class exemplify the quality of journal you should seek out in your research.

**C. Preparing the Annotated Bibliography**

Your annotated bibliography should include six entries. You should submit it with your final research paper.

1. The six works should come from respected sources as obtained through the three methods above.

2. You may not count google.com searches (although sometimes Google scholar is useful) or wikipedia, dictionary entries, personal websites, magazine or newspaper articles toward your research.

3. Each entry should include three parts: citation, summary, and evaluation of the source as it relates to your topic.

**D. Draft the Essay**
Write a 12 pp. essay that articulates your argument emerging out of a close reading of *an aspect of one novel from the syllabus* and how that argument relates to what others have proposed regarding your topic.

At the end of the essay’s introduction, you should state a thesis making an argument, and going one step further to emphasize how your argument is in conversation with other, previously-published scholars.

The essay should include a close reading of passages significant to your topic. Close reading draws on prosody, allusions, point of view, tone, symbols, metaphors, as it relates to the content, or message, of the passage itself.

Assume the reader has read the novel and do not summarize the plot or go into detail about basic character traits.

Your essay will also include a fairly close reading of the secondary sources. Convey for the reader, early on, what the other scholars say and how they say it; discuss also the merits of these points of view, and the shortcomings, which you hope to correct via your particular reading of a particular novel.

You must indicate the source of any information you take from someone else – even if you summarize or paraphrase the information. Cite, when in doubt.

E. Peer-review Meeting During Class

Come prepared with a draft of your essay on Tuesday, April 26. During this class time, you will meet with a partner or partners who will give you feedback on your *nearly completed* papers. When you read each other’s papers, look for an introduction that leads up to a clear statement of the thesis, main body paragraphs – logically organized – that reflect promises made in the thesis, use close reading to support a claim, and engage secondary sources, and a proper conclusion that further solidifies the significance of this paper.

F. Submit your Research Paper

But, before you do, integrate suggestions from your peer-review meeting. Read your paper. Re-think your argument. Restructure paragraphs. Locate more persuasive evident. Revise sentences. Choose more precise words. Proof read and edit. Proof read again.

The essay should be bundled together with a black binder clip with the following documents *in this order*:

1. A clean copy of the revised essay
2. Works cited page – using MLA style
3. *Revised* Annotated bibliography, incorporating even the sources you do not cite
4. *Process statement*: a short memo in which you evaluate your own writing process. Discuss what you were trying to do with the paper, what seemed to work and what did not
work. Discuss how the paper developed from pre-writing, through drafts, and to the final revision. Include major decisions you made while composing and what difficulties you encountered as you wrote. Tell me what you learned about your topic and what you learned about your writing process along the way.

5. Topic proposal
6. Draft of your close reading paper
7. Peer-responses
8. All other drafts of the essay

Due: Tuesday, May 10 at 4:30.

Additional Formatting Advice

Please follow this advice carefully when writing assignments for this class.

1. All papers should be typed, double-spaced, stapled or paper-clipped, and given both page numbers and 1” margins. Longer papers (i.e., the three main papers) should be given a title, too. Handwritten papers will not be accepted.

2. When you first mention a work and author, give the author’s full name and the text’s full title (including its subtitle, if it has one), as well as its original date of publication.

3. When should you underline or italicize a work’s title, and when should you reference it with quotation marks? The distinction is relatively simple: Novels, novellas, and epic poems are set off by italics or underlining (the difference being a matter of style; the choice is yours). Short stories, essays, and most poems, by contrast, are set off by quotation marks.

4. Cultivate a formal and concise writing style, and aim to express yourself with clarity, style, and grace. Whenever possible, avoid word contractions (“doesn’t,” “don’t,” “couldn’t,” et cetera), slang, and overuse of the passive voice.

5. Pay attention to your prose style as you revise. Consider, for instance, the remarks of Florence King, one of the South’s most gifted and irreverent writers, on her early publications:
   You may ask: why didn’t the editors of these books catch these faults and call them to my attention? I imagine they did catch most of them, but there was nothing they could do. Editors really are overworked, though not as much as some of them like to claim. But even if they had had time for heavy blue-penciling, it would not have taught me anything. Self-editing is the only kind that really works, and it takes years to develop. Besides, I love it. Some women primp; I rewrite. Polishing and tightening my prose is my idea of good clean narcissistic fun.
   ---Author’s Note, The Florence King Reader (1995), xxvi

6. List the works you mention in a Works Cited, at the end of your essay. If you consult several works but do not cite them, you may wish to include them as well, listing these works in a bibliography. Adopt the MLA format and consult a handbook if necessary. Additionally, in-
clude the original date of publication of primary sources, and pay particular attention to the specific punctuation conventions.

7. Before submitting your assignment, check your spelling, grammar, and quotations for accuracy. This simple exercise will help you catch many errors, and will almost certainly improve your grade.