Death and Literature

Death is the sanction of everything the story-teller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. (Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller")

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires. (Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning")

Death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it. (Haruki Murakami)

In this seminar, we will explore the relation between the phenomenon of death and literary form. Reading a select group of texts drawn from diverse literary traditions and time periods, we will examine how writers understand and represent the experience of death and how this in turn determines the structure of literary texts and our mode of reading them. While we think of death often in terms of sorrow and loss, pain and suffering, writers have always recognized the
connection between the experience of dying and the emergence of literary genres such as tragedy and elegy. Death represents one of the most important paradigms for understanding social change and of energizing the creative imagination, poetic language, and aesthetic meaning. The experience of death is simultaneously connected to our desire to find a language for dealing with, and managing, difficult events in life but also generating the capacity for love and freedom.

More importantly, death is intimately connected to the process of storytelling. The distinctive character of the major genres in literary studies—drama, poetry, and narrative—is bound up with writers’ understanding of death across time and space. The grave, for example, is considered to be “the birthplace of tragic drama and ghosts as its procreators” (Catherine Cole); elegy is shaped by the absence of the lost one; and narratives bear powerful testimony to loss, longing, and the desire for life. The representation of death also provides an ideal place to examine the origins of major literary movements and styles: realism, modernism, and postmodernism. In built into each seminar will be mini-writing workshops in which students will work on strengthening their critical writing skills and a Library Day to introduce students to archival work.
Rhythm and Community

What do we mean when we say something has "rhythm"? How does our understanding of rhythm create ideas of community? And how is the concept of "rhythm" understood or re-purposed outside and beyond music and poetry? In this seminar we will look at literary texts that employ rhythm as both literary form and mode of definition. From poetry to narrative prose, language acquisition to communal rituals of mourning, from chants of protest to military marches, rhythm is a concept that touches nearly aspects of literary production and reception. We will think about rhythm as an ordering principle and as a means of escaping certain kinds of forms and orders, as both discipline and as ecstasy. We will consider rhythm in a variety of forms and formats, but because the concept is so pervasive we will limit most of our inquiry to literary texts.

Course material will draw on non-fiction prose, novels, poetry, and hip hop lyrics. We will look at work by writers from several centuries and in several genres, such as John Donne, Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Thomas Hardy, Claude McKay, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Langston Hughes, Simone Weil, Derek Walcott, Dr. Seuss, Gift of Gab, Black Thought, and Kanye West.

Additionally, we will read a range of critical essays in order to examine arguments, close reading, and rhetoric. We will practice and master analog and digital research methodologies, but most important: we will work together to help you develop and maintain a rhythm to your own writing and revising practice.
"This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine"

So admits magician Prospero at the end of Shakespeare's reputed last play, *The Tempest*, about Caliban, a creature he has just named "misshapen knave," "demidevil," "bastard." Notice the potent line-break at "I"—a pause in the poetry that, figurally, makes it seem as if "I" were modified by the phrase just prior!

Literary and cultural imaginations have always been obsessed with "the other"—the seemingly savage, subhuman, monstrous—and no more so when the aura of self-identification is strongest: are they other, or are they ourselves? These questions have wide vibrations, magnetizing not just the intimacy of self and other, but also worked across differences of culture, sex, gender, race, class, and the sciences of sociology and anthropology. Our seminar will study a sample—selected but resonant—as a resource for your first adventure in writing a sustained critical essay for your work, and fun, in the English major. Welcome!

What do you think of these images?

The one in the oval is "The Wild Boy of Aveyron," who appeared out of the woods in France in 1798, with some mysterious scars on his body, apparently having survived in the wild for several years. He is adopted by a young idealistic French doctor, Jean Marc Gaspart Itard, who tries to civilize him, and tells his story in a brief narrative that was translated into English. The second picture is a native of Tierra del Fuego, a population, and civilization, that young scientist Charles Darwin encountered on his expedition with *The Beagle* in the 1830s (40 years before he outlined his theory of
natural selection and evolution in *The Descent of Man*. Below is a young Tierra del Fuegan, Jemmy Button, whom the crew of *The Beagle* took back to England, to educate and civilize, and then return to Patagonia as an anchor for modernizing this remote realm.

Below left is nineteenth-century imagination of Caliban—and so part of the gallery of Darwin's and Itard’s reports of "primitive man".
The nineteenth century was also the century in which the struggle for the abolition of the slave trade, and then of slavery itself, was waged, first in England at the end of the eighteenth century with particular intensity. An important document was the narrative of a former slave, Olaudah Equiano (above right) whose account of his life, from African freedom to slavery to freedom as an English subject was publish in 1789: what statement does his frontispiece portrait make?

We’ll be reading all these works and viewing François Truffaut’s film, L’Enfant Sauvage (1970) and a film of The Tempest as well. We’ll begin, perhaps counter-intuitively, with Robert Louis Stevenson’s A Child’s Garden of Verses, poems for and about children that appeared in 1885, one year before Stevenson’s most famous work, Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. We’ll also read Mary Shelley’s short tale, Transformation, another strange case, which she published in 1830, just the year before she published the revised version of her most famous work, Frankenstein.

We’ll read a sample of critical essays, examining the different ways a discussion gets structured and developed: how other reader/critics are engaged; the force of close-reading selected passages; how contexts can be investigated for illuminating angles.
Coming of Age in Literature and Popular Culture

Adolescence and coming-of-age narratives figure prominently in many literary and cultural traditions and time periods. In this seminar we will look at the relationship between representations of coming of age and literary form. The indeterminate suspense between child and adult is often given over to identity problems and formations of “self” (self-discovery, self-questioning, the desire for self-definition). This introspection—and narcissism—is equally filled with dark nights and comic relief. In this course we will examine this narrative closely: what are its defining features? How has it changed and developed? What are some of the ways in which nationality, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender have influenced the shape of the narrative? In America, for example, perhaps because it is a perennially "young" country, there may be something attractively representative in this tumultuous phase of life for the collective myths of America’s own formation.

Course material will draw on novels, short stories, plays, poems, graphic novels, and film. We will look at work by authors including Mark Twain, Alison Bechdel, Shakespeare, Junot Díaz, Danzy Senna, David Mitchell, Carson McCullers, Paul Beatty, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Erdrich. Additionally, we will read a range of critical essays in order to examine ways to organize and develop arguments, how close reading works, and what makes writing rhetorically persuasive. We will also look at your writing in every class in order to strengthen your critical writing and research skills.
Americans in Europe

In this seminar, we will survey literary and cinematic works that represent American experiences of traveling abroad to Europe. From Henry James’s novel of manners *The American* (1877) to Eli Roth’s horror movie *Hostel* (2005), continental Europe has proven to be fertile ground for American fish-out-of-water narratives. Why is that so? What assumptions about the Continent (even as opposed to the United Kingdom) frame these stories? How does New World vs. Old World civilizational discourse inflect their meaning, and in what ways has that discourse changed over the years? The seminar will consider these and other questions in view of U.S. identity formation along the axes of class, gender, sexuality, and race.