Literature & Medicine: Common Perspectives and Strategies

• EMPATHY
  • The study of literature can help enhance empathy in medical students and practitioners

• SELF-REFLEXIVITY
  • Writing creatively or narratively engages students and practitioners in a process of reflection that makes them better able to empathize with patients and act more ethically.

• COMPLEXITY & NUANCE
  • Literatures fleshes out the “bare bones” of statistical data and numbers to provide context and add complexity to issues
University Profile and Programs

Clark University, Worcester, MA
A small research-based liberal arts college in central MA

Enrollment:
• 2300 Undergraduate Population
• 1000 Graduate Population

Curricular Programs:
• Pre-Health program in Biology
• Certificate in Global and Community Health
• Master of Health Science in Community and Global Health
Learning Objectives

Undergraduate Objectives

• Introduce students early on to principles of bioethics
• Interrogate the role of medicine and medical discourses in shaping definitions of normalcy/difference and humanity/personhood
• Understand the social and cultural construction of illness
• Engage how narrative might engender compassion, develop increased empathy, and promote physical and psychological health
• Explore how these concerns may inform the formation of personal/professional ethics
Current Courses

“In Sickness and In Health:” Narrative and the Art of Healing
HS 206/306

Medical Ethics in Science Fiction
English 125

“Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired:” Medicine and Ethics in Black Women’s Fiction

A Higgins School for Humanities team-taught medical humanities course in Psychology and English.

A first-year seminar exploring the ethical, legal, and social implications of medical science and technology as interrogated through science fiction novels and short fiction.

A medical humanities course that explores the historical, social, political, and ethical issues relating to black women’s experiences with medicine.
“In Sickness and In Health:”
Narrative and the Art of Healing
HS 206/306

A Higgins School for Humanities team-taught medical humanities course in Psychology and English.

Photo Credit:
Curriculum Overview

• Narrative and the Art of Healing
• Advanced Team-Taught Seminar
  • 11 psychology seniors, 1 Int’l Development JR, 1 English M.A. student
  • Several theoretical pieces on narrative medicine and psychology
  • Fewer literary texts (1 play, some poetry, and 1 novel excerpted)
Texts

• Theoretical and Practical Texts
  • Charon, *Narrative Medicine*
  • Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*
  • Mehl-Medrorna, *Healing the Mind through the Power of Story*
  • Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*

• Literary Texts
  • Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*
  • Edson, *Wit: A Play*
  • Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*
  • Trethewey, poems from *Thrall*
Assignments

• Writing the Self: An Illness Narrative
  • Reflect on how narrative has impacted how students make meaning of illness in their own lives.

• Gathering a Life History
  • Interview a family member utilizing *the Life Story Interview Guide* (McAdams, 2008) to familiarize students with the process of eliciting narratives.

• Annotated Bibliography
  • Research focused on a particular mental or physical health issue and the auto/biographical, literary, and scientific explorations of it

• Final Paper or Project
  • Synthesizing one of the previous narrative projects with the empirical research
Medical Ethics in Science Fiction

English 125

A first-year seminar exploring the ethical, legal, and social implications of medical science and technology as interrogated through science fiction novels and short fiction.
Curriculum Overview

- Medical Ethics in Science Fiction
- First year seminar
  - 16 first-year students, most of whom planned to major in bio or psych
  - Mostly literature: 5 novels, 1 play, 2 short stories, 2 poems
  - Theoretical and historical background on bioethical issues given during lectures
  - Introduction to foundational principles of bioethics and related issues
Texts

• Literary Texts and Topics
  • Ethics of Science and Creation
    • Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (personhood/humanity)
    • Octavia Butler, *Fledgling* (*Eugenics, Genomics*)
  • Organ Donation and Social Hierarchy
    • Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (*organ donation, personhood, cloning*)
    • Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (*organ donation, alternative medicine*)
    • Manjula Padmanbhan, *Harvest* (*Organ donation and global north-south relations*)
  • Medical Ethics and Labor
    • Films: *Sleep Dealer, Gattaca*
    • Novel: Nancy Kress, *Beggars in Spain*
    • Ken Liu, *“The Algorithms of Love”*
    • Natasha Trethewey, *“Knowledge”*
Assignments

• **Short analytical essays** based on each thematic module

• **Discussion leaders** reporting on related Higgins School of the Humanities symposium events (human being/being human)

• **Mid-term exam** to assess comprehension of principles of bioethics as well as SF genre

• **Final research paper** exploring one bioethical issue raised in class in greater depth, analyzed via a SF text of their choice
“Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired:”
Medicine and Ethics in Black Women’s Fiction

A medical humanities course that explores the historical, social, political, and ethical issues relating to black women’s experiences with medicine.

Photo Credit:
Logiza Nhove,
“Reflections of Inner Truth” Series
Curriculum Overview

• Medical Ethics in Black Women’s Fiction
• Advanced Seminar (cap. 20)
  • Sophomores to Grad Students
  • Mostly literature & theory
  • Some historical, theoretical and legal readings
• Topics engage themes such as race and gender within cancer research, female circumcision, organ donation, mental health, cultural bioethics and indigenous healing practices
Texts

- Literary Texts
  - Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*
  - Natasha Trethewey, poems from *Thrall*
  - Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*
  - Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*
  - Sapphire, *PUSH*
  - Nnedi Okorafor, *Who Fears Death*
  - Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*
  - Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*
  - Esther Jones, *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*
Assignments

- Discussion Leader for one class session
- Annotated Bibliography
- Paper Proposal
- Final Research Paper
General Challenges

• Classroom Level
  • Uneven student preparedness
  • Measuring comprehension of bioethical principles in concrete contexts
  • Tracking student application of skills or concepts beyond the course
  • Elective status

• University Curriculum Level
  • Few faculty teach medical humanities
  • Institutional ignorance of the medical humanities and its benefits to students
  • Slow to adopt such courses into the curriculum for older and new programs
  • Frequency of offering
Sources


THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

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