

TEACHING MEDICAL HUMANITIES: LITERATURE, MEDICINE & ETHICS

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CLARK UNIVERSITY

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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



Photo Credit:

<https://strangerforall.wordpress.com/2014/11/23/poetry-street-the-blue-moon-poem-by-rish-b/>

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

Medical Ethics in Science Fiction

English 125



Photo Credit: "Sleep Dealer," Alex Raven.

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.

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

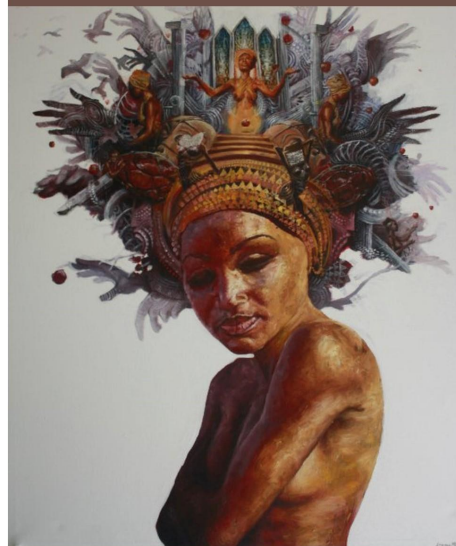


Photo Credit:

Logiso Mhise, "Reflections of Inner Truth" Series

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

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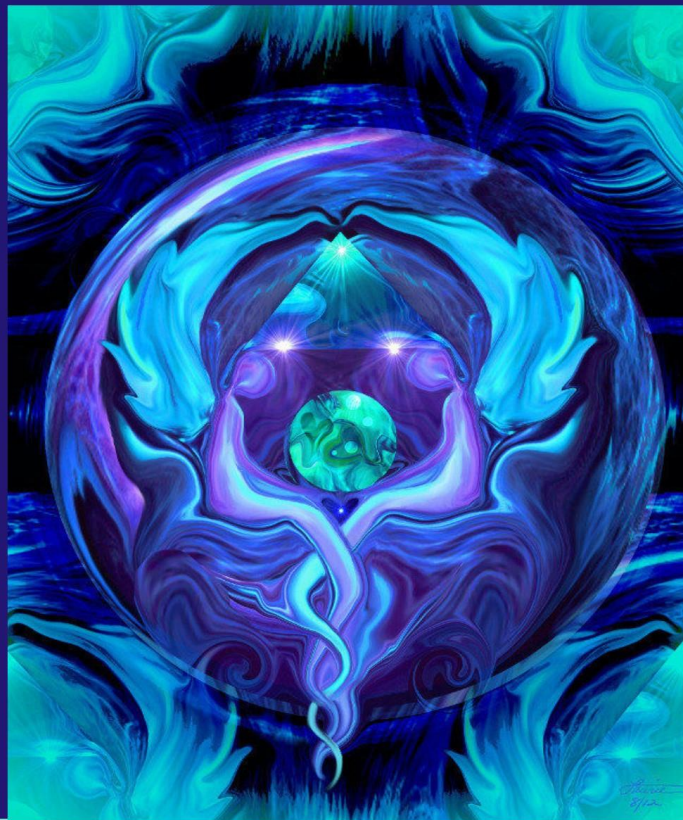


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Curriculum Overview

- 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)

**“In Sickness and In Health:”
Narrative and the Art of Healing**
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Texts

- Theoretical and Practical Texts

- Charon, *Narrative Medicine*
- Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*
- Mehl-Medrona, *Healing the Mind through the Power of Story*
- Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*

- Literary Texts

- Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*
- Edson, *Wit: A Play*
- Vergheese, *Cutting for Stone*
- Trethewey, poems from *Thrall*

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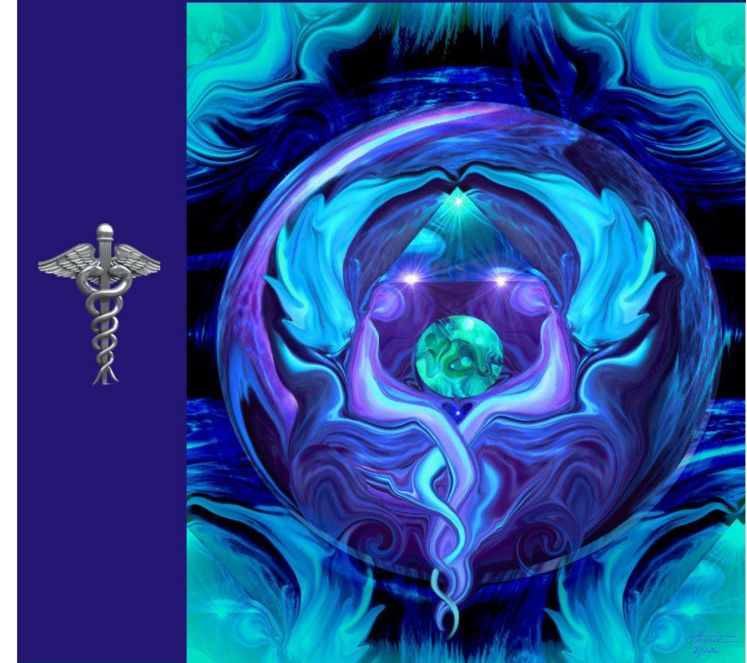


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Assignments

- **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

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English 125

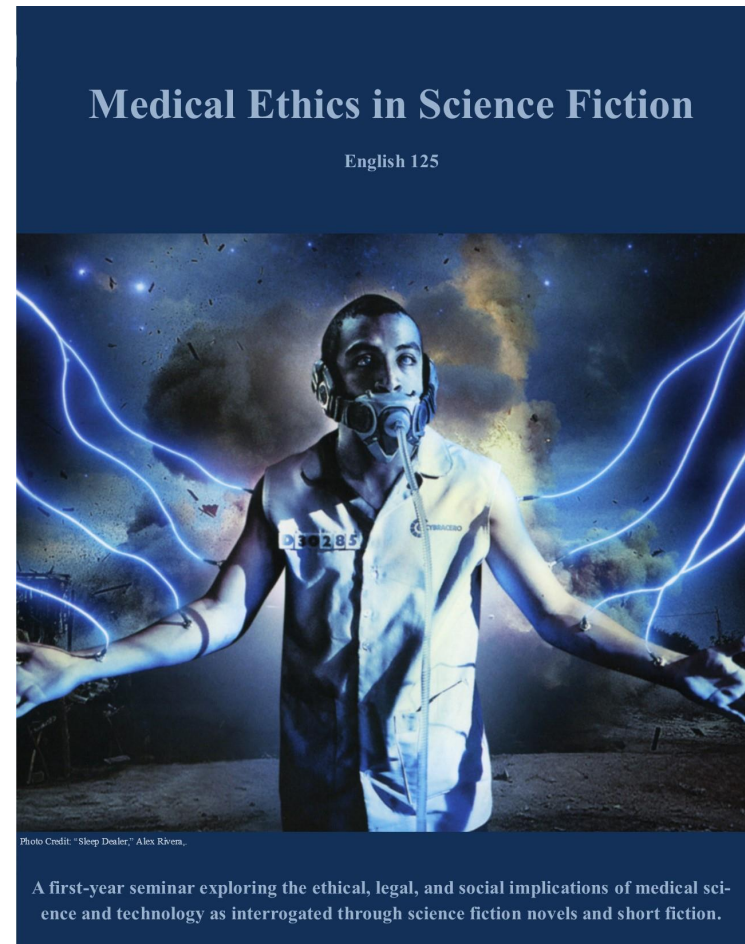


Photo Credit: "Sleep Dealer," Alex Rivera.

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"*

Medical Ethics in Science Fiction

English 125


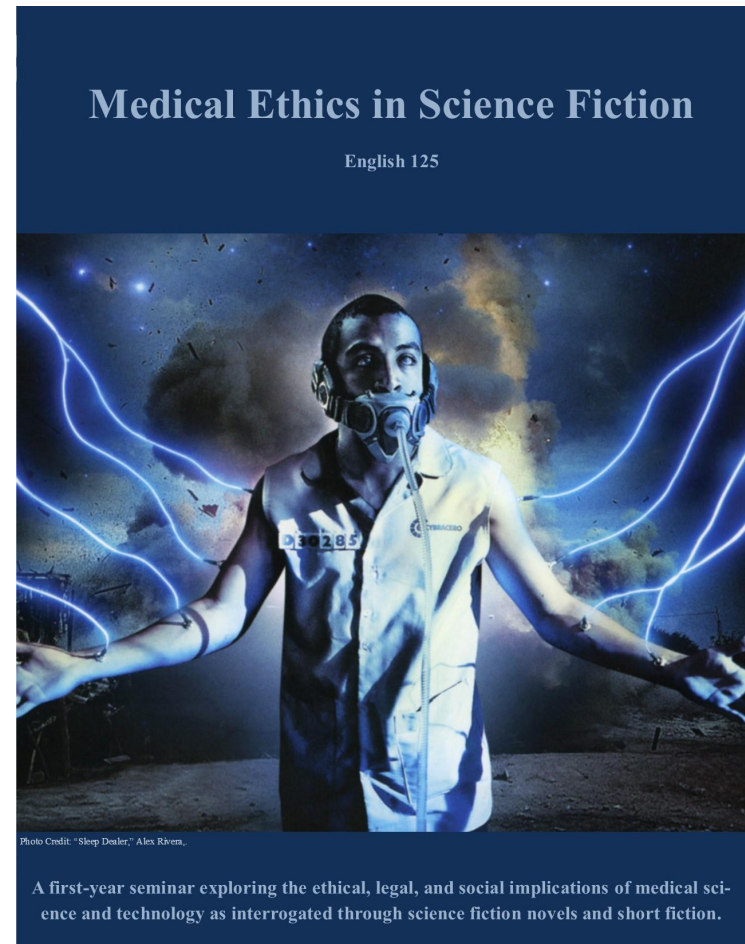


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Assignments

- **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**

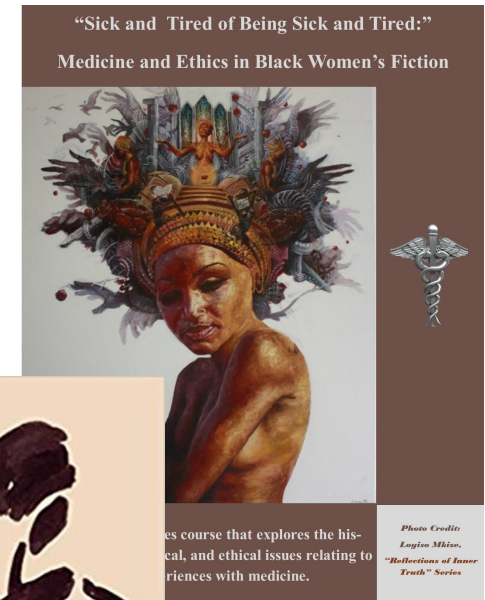
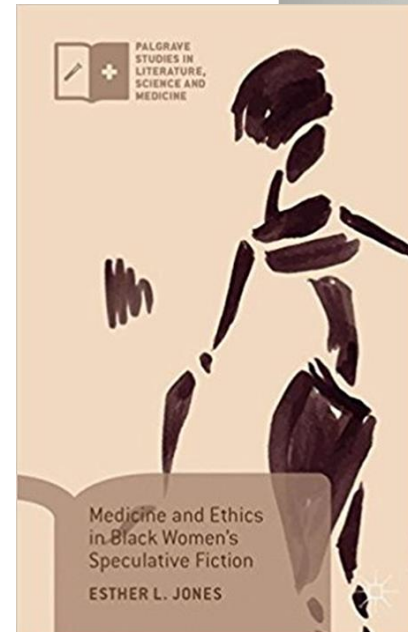


A medical humanities course that explores the historical, social, political, and ethical issues relating to black women’s experiences with medicine.

*Photo Credit:
Loyiso Mhize,
“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



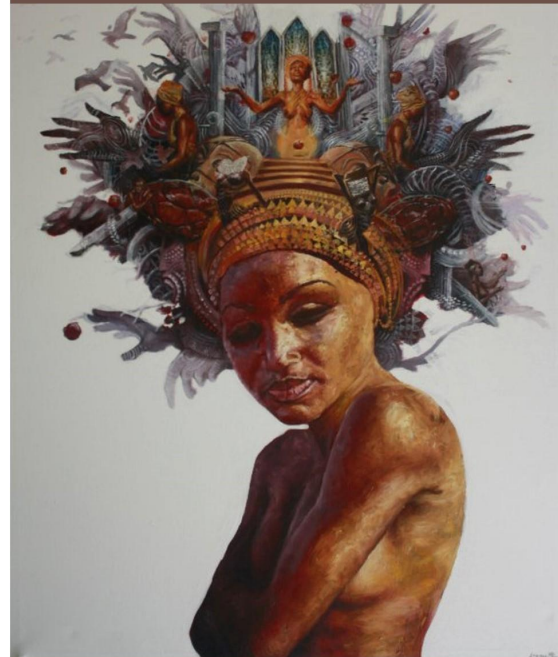
Texts

- **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*

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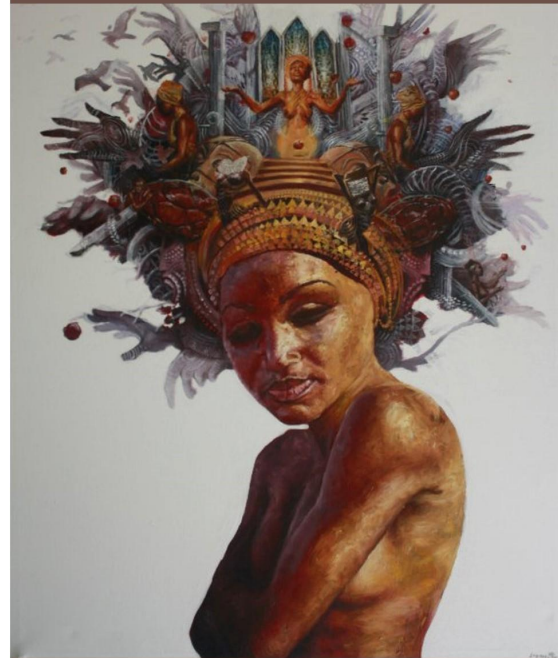
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Assignments

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

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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

Boker, John R., Johanna Shapiro, and Elizabeth H. Morrison. "Teaching empathy to first year medical students: evaluation of an elective literature and medicine course." *Education for health* 17.1 (2004): 73-84.

Charon, Rita. "Narrative medicine: a model for empathy, reflection, profession, and trust." *JAMA* 286.15 (2001): 1897-1902.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

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