LIT 522.02: Death and Literature
LA 204; 6:30-9:20
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Office Hours: M 2-4; W 3-4; Th 9-10

Course Description:
In this seminar, we will discuss death. We will read literature, social history, and a range of philosophical and critical work, but 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. Literature will be the central tool through which we explore this experience. We will pose a set of interlocking questions: What role does literature play in helping us understand death? Is literature well-situated to provide witness to the experience of death in a culture where death is less often directly accessible to us? What value does a richer understanding of past death practices have in the way we might re-imagine death in the present? What value might encounters with the literature and art of death from other cultures play in re-imagining death? 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 now possible?
The reading has been selected to reflect a “polychronical” approach, through which we will regularly compare and discuss texts from far-flung historical periods, particularly the medieval (my area of expertise), and in a number of genres (poetry, short fiction, novels, and drama). We will also read select philosophical texts on death, including excerpts from Bakthin, Bataille, Baudrillard, Becker, and Blanchot. Students will present two pieces of independent reading: 1) a substantial critical, cultural, historical, philosophical, theoretical text; 2) a substantial literary work not on the syllabus. You will also complete weekly writing assignments, and a final project; see “Work Requirements” document for detail.

Required Texts
Everyman (anonymous 15th century drama): FREE COPY available in LA 129 above the mailboxes
Don DeLillo, Falling Man (Scribner, 2007)
Everyman, Phillip Roth (Vintage, 2006)
Dominion of the Dead, Robert Pogue Harrison (Chicago University Press, 2003)
Learning to Die in the Anthropocene, Roy Scranton (City Lights Books, 2016)
Western Attitudes Toward Death and Dying: from the Middle Ages to the Present, Philippe Aries (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974)
Pearl, anonymous Middle English poem, translated by Simon Armitage, 2016)
Please buy this particular translation, which is a facing page edition.
The Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion (Vintage, 2005)
Sing, Unburied, Sing, Jesmyn Ward (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2017)
Lincoln in the Bardo, George Saunders (Random House, 2017)
Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives, David Eagleman (Vintage, 2009)

Reserve Readings: on Moodle (electronic) or at the Mansfield (hard copy)

Work Requirements (described fully in a separate document)
Weekly Online Position Papers: 30% (due each Monday at midnight)
Two Class Presentations: 25% (mid-March; late April)
Final Research Paper: 50% (Prosp: Nov. 6th; Ann Bib: Nov. 20th; Draft: Dec. 6th; Final: Dec. 13th)
Policy Statements
Attendance
As graduate 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. (http://www.umt.edu/student-affairs/dean-of-students/)

Add-Drop Deadlines, Incompletes, Disability Accommodation
For information on these topics, please see the Registrar’s Office dates and deadlines page (http://www.umt.edu/registrar/calendar.php), UM’s academic policy and procedures (http://catalog.umt.edu/academics/policies-procedures/), and visit the Disability Services for Students website (http://www.umt.edu/dss/).

Conduct of Class / Trigger Warning
If you enrolled for this class, you passed the first threshold for what is likely to be an emotional and challenging, but I think fulfilling body of reading and discussion. 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.

But as we all know, our society apportions “discomfort and difficulty” very unevenly. I am a heterosexual “white” male (scare-quotes around this vexed term, which codes a lot, without having a root in any reality other than a cultural fantasy), with a “conventional” set of male gender identifications, performed through my personal identities: son in a stable, middle class home with two parents; brother to an brother and sister; husband to a woman; father to a daughter and son. My difficulties have been easy to surmount in comparison to others. I am probably alone in that set of identities in this class, and I may share very few of any parts of that set of identities with any of you. I am well aware that my identity position in this class—-as professor—-places me in alignment with many of the power differentials that constitute our vexed socio-cultural climate. I do not embrace that alignment, but I cannot erase my identity, only “perform” it in relationship to others in as full and complete a way as I can, open to the possibility of change and transformation that takes place when we practice that relationship authentically.

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 work 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): please use these resources if you are in distress, and do not hesitate to reach out to me.
Reading Schedule

Week 1: August 28th
Introductions, discussion of class values-aims-interests-motivations
Everyman (36-59); John Lydgate, Danse Macabre

Week 2: September 4th
Carol Ann Duffy, Everyman (PDF)
Roy Scranton, Learning to Die in the Anthropocene
Phillipe Ariès, Western Attitudes Toward Death and Death

Week 3: September 11th
Chaucer, Pardoner’s Tale
Don DeLillo, Falling Man, 1-109
Ernst Becker, Denial of Death (excerpt)

Week 4: September 18th
Don DeLillo, Falling Man, 110-246
Phillip Roth, Everyman
Tom Laqueur, The Work of the Dead (excerpt)

Week 5: September 25th
Pearl
Robert Pogue Harrison, Dominion of the Dead, Chapters 1-4
Herbert Marcuse, “The Political Ideology of Death”

Week 6: October 2nd
Joan Didion, The Year of Magical Thinking (medical memoirs: Gawande, Kalanithi, Warraich)
Harrison, Dominion of the Dead, Chapters 5-6

Week 7: October 9th
Drew Gilpin Faust, This Republic of Suffering (selection)
Ambrose Bierce (select short stories)
Emily Dickinson (select poems)
Mikhail Bakhtin (excerpt from Art and Answerability)

Week 8: October 16th: Civil War Death
Walt Whitman (select poems)
Lincoln in the Bardo, 1-164

Week 9: October 23rd
Lincoln in the Bardo, 165-end

Week 10: October 30th
Dancing With the Dead: Rehearsal, Recitation
Performance on November 3rd, 7 pm

Week 11: November 6 [ELECTION DAY: NO CLASSES]

Week 12: November 13th
Jesmeyn Ward, Sing, Unburied, Sing
Week 13: November 20
David Eagleman, *Sum*
Ted Chiang, “Exhalation”

Week 14: November 27th
Transhumanism, Biocentrism, and the Attack on Death

Week 15 / Finals Week: December 4th / 11th
Class Presentations

December 14th: Final Projects Due