

# ENGLISH 386: LITERARY RESPONSES TO DEATH AND DYING

Winter 2017

Th 6-8:50

Eberhard Center 512

Section 02

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Office Hours: W 3-5 and by appointment

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How can I keep silent? How can I stay quiet?

My friend, whom I loved, has turned to clay.

Shall I not be like him, and also lie down,

Never to rise again, through all eternity?

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tab. X

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

John Donne, 1633

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## Course Description:

In this course, we will read and analyze the ways in which authors explore the meanings and experiences of death for individuals and cultures. Our texts are pulled from various historical and cultural moments, representing the literatures of ancient, medieval, and early modern European cultures, as well as contemporary American culture. We will read literature from a variety of genres, including the poetic forms of ancient epic, sonnet, and the medieval “dialogue,” as well as historical and nonfiction writing, memoirs, and literary and graphic novels. Across our texts, we will read clinical and figurative representations of death and im/mortality, spiritual conceptions of bodily death and afterlife, experience of mass death and its psychological effects on survivors, and accounts of individual experiences of the death of a family member and coping mechanisms. At the same time, we will read critically and think carefully about how literary responses to death and dying show patterns in the ways that humans attempt to assuage our anxieties about mortality, “give voice” to the dead, remain in contact with those whom we have lost, and use death to create meaning in our own lives.

## Course Objectives:

By the end of this course, students will:

1. Show an improvement in reading and literary analysis skills through daily discussions and writing assignments.
2. Gain confidence in textual interpretation, critical thinking, and crafting persuasive arguments.
3. Demonstrate a broader understanding of the ways that authors use genre, figurative language, voice, and form to represent death and dying.
4. Demonstrate improvement and revision of writing skills, research, and fluency with MLA documentation by writing two short papers and one “capstone” paper.

## Warning:

The texts we will read this semester include explicit descriptions / depictions of sexuality, violent acts such as rape and murder, and descriptions of the human body, its frailties, and its breakdown. They also include gorgeous moments of transcendence, personal growth, and spiritual discovery.

## **Required Texts:**

Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, ISBN: 9780316168816

Andrew George (trans.), *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ISBN: 9780140449198

Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, ISBN: 9781400052189

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, ISBN: 9780618871711

Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*, ISBN: 9780802124739

Various readings and handouts, available on Blackboard.

**\*\*Web access:** You will need to have access to Blackboard to retrieve some readings, engage in discussion, and to turn in some assignments.\*\*

## **Coursework:**

**Reading, participation, and class activities:** Our class will be discussion-based and fairly light on lecture. You will be expected to complete the reading assignments prior to each class meeting, to attend class regularly, and to contribute to class discussion often. Your comments and questions to some extent determine the shape and direction of the course -- your active engagement will help me to make this class a productive, positive experience for all of us! I will keep track of the quantity and quality of your contributions to discussion, so be sure to *think* and *speak up* often. In-class writing assignments and your contributions to group-work assignments will also count toward the “participation” portion of your grade.

**Daily classwork points:** For each class meeting, you can earn a possible 10 points for participation. I will award points thus:

0 points -- absence OR student is disengaged with class, unprepared (no textbook), or using phone or laptop for activities unrelated to class.

6 points -- student is present, brings book or reading, at times attentive in class.

8 points -- student is present, with text book, attentive, taking notes, perhaps volunteers once in discussion; if working in groups, student contributes to group efforts.

10 points -- student is fully prepared, actively engaged in the class, taking notes and actively participating in discussion; if working in groups, student is actively engaged in group.

## **Discussion Board Questions:**

Each week, I will post directed reading questions to our Blackboard discussion board, and you will be required to post responses to these questions by each **Tuesday evening at 9pm**. Try to respond in about a paragraph to each question posted, and do read previous posts and feel free to respond to each other. I will give you a comprehensive grade for your discussion board responses at the end of each month.

## **Reading Quizzes:**

Over the course of the semester, you will complete five reading quizzes. These will measure whether you are keeping up with the assigned reading and how well you are comprehending the material. Quizzes will be given at the start of class. Quiz questions will be in short-answer format; expect 5 questions per quiz with an expectation of 1-2 sentences needed to answer each question. You must make up a missed quiz within one week, for a reduced grade.

## **Response Papers:**

You will write two short (3-4 pages) response papers, each focused on one of our texts. No outside research required, and I will provide topics. Due via Blackboard as indicated in course schedule.

### **Final “Capstone” Paper:**

In place of a final exam, your final project for this class will be a comprehensive paper (8-10 pages). In this paper, you will analyze and compare how three literary texts treat a topic relating to death or dying. Two of these texts should come from our reading list; one may come from your own outside reading. You must also do a bit of outside research and incorporate two peer-reviewed scholarly sources to support or contextualize your own analysis. I will provide a list of topics and questions, and can provide suggestions about scholarly sources, if you wish. Paper is due on **Thursday, April 27 at 6pm via Blackboard.**

### **Grading Breakdown by Assignment:**

Participation / daily writing assignments / group work: 30%

Analysis papers: 20% (10% each)

Reading quizzes: 15%

Discussion Board postings: 15%

Final paper: 20%

A = 94-100	A- = 90-93	B+ = 87-89	B = 84-86	B- = 80-83	C+ = 77-79
C = 74-76	C- = 70-73	D+ = 67-69	D = 64-66	F = 0-63	

### **Communication and Blackboard:**

Any updates and notices (change of venue, change in assignment, instructor absence, etc.) will go out over email and will be posted on the Blackboard site. **PLEASE CHECK EMAIL AND BLACKBOARD REGULARLY!** I promise to make my best attempt to get this information to you as soon as possible.

### **Other Policies...**

*Respect: The classroom (this includes our online class space!) is a place of respect, civilized discussion, and open-mindedness. We will likely disagree with each other from time to time about literary interpretations (among other things), but we will learn to do so respectfully and sensitively. Please be aware your tone online and in person.*

Attendance: is expected. I will take attendance at the start of each class. Arriving more than 10 minutes late (or leaving more than 10 minutes early) will result in a penalty of your classwork points for the day. Arriving more than 20 minutes late will be counted as an absence. **\*\*EVERY** component of your grade draws upon the material we explore in class discussion and in lecture, so be here!\*\* If you miss class, it is YOUR responsibility to find out what content you missed, preferably by first asking your classmates. Any absences beyond two will result in a deduction of 5% from your final grade, *per day*. I do not distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences... if you run into a situation where you must miss multiple classes, talk to me.

Computers and cell phones: **You may use a laptop to take notes**, read the handouts posted on Blackboard, and find information relevant to our discussion. You may NOT use your laptop for Facebooking, watching cat videos, or otherwise wasting time or distracting yourself during class. **No cell phones out during class.** Lectures and class discussions **may not be** recorded in any fashion by students.

Late work: Assignments are due at the start of class on the due date OR when indicated on Blackboard. One letter grade will be lost for every calendar day that an assignment is late. Class activities and quizzes cannot be made up at a later date.

FERPA: Because of FERPA regulations, I cannot discuss your grade via phone or email. If you would like to discuss your academic standing and progress in this class, I am happy to meet with you during my office hours.

Plagiarism: I am happy to discuss what constitutes plagiarism and how to ensure that your work is your own creation. If you have any questions or uncertainty about the issue, PLEASE ASK ME. If you plagiarize in this class, you will face academic sanctions including possible failure of this course and a letter sent to the appropriate campus offices.

Students with Disabilities:

If you need academic accommodations because of a learning, physical, or other disability, please contact Disability Support Resources at 331-2490. Furthermore, if you have a physical disability and think you will need assistance evacuating this classroom and/or building in an emergency situation, please make me aware so I can develop a plan to assist you.

## Course Schedule

**\*\*PLEASE REGARD THIS SCHEDULE AS SOMEWHAT FLUID. I may move some readings and assignments around if we fall behind, or due to weather\*\***

### Body and Soul

Th, Jan 12 – GVSU CLOSED DUE TO WEATHER

Th, Jan 19 – Introductions, course expectations; READINGS: Depicting Death (poems); Body and Soul poetry: sonnets of Shakespeare and Donne; Anglo-Saxon “Soul and Body” poems; Andrew Marvell’s “Dialogue between the Body and Soul” (on Blackboard)

Th, Jan 26 – Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, chaps 1-12     **QUIZ**

Th, Feb 2 – Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (to the end) and film

### Chasing Immortality

Th, Feb 9 – *The Epic of Gilgamesh*     **QUIZ**

Th, Feb 16 – Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Th, Feb 23 – Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Mon, Feb 27 -- **Paper #1 DUE** to me via Blackboard by 5pm

Th, Mar 2 – ONLINE LESSON: watch Margaret Edson’s *Wit* and complete activity on Blackboard

SPRING BREAK

*Fri, Mar 10 – Last day to drop with a “W”*

### Mass Death – War and Plague

Th, Mar 16 – selections on plague from *The Grim Reader* (on Blackboard)     **QUIZ**

Th, Mar 23 – poetry of World War I (on Blackboard)

Mon, Mar 27 -- **Paper #2 DUE** to me via Blackboard by 5pm

### Mourning and Moving On

Th, Mar 30 – Bechdel, *Fun Home*     **QUIZ**

Th, April 6 – Macdonald, *H is for Hawk*     **QUIZ**

Th, April 13 – ONLINE LESSON: Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (complete activity on Blackboard)

Th, April 20 – catch up; review and summation... review final papers(?)

**Final PAPER DUE – Thursday, April 27, at 6pm on Blackboard.**