



Hugh Steers, *Two Men and a Woman* (1992) (Visual AIDS)

Term II 2010
McMaster University
Health Studies Program

Health Studies 4J03: Narratives of Illness

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Class time: Tuesday 8:30 am-11:20 am

Office Hours: Tuesday 4-5 pm

Course Description:

This is a seminar about the many different ways in which major illness is experienced and described, whether by those who are ill or by others (including family members and caregivers). Rather than viewing illness through a biomedical lens—as important as that lens is—we are going to consider the kinds of “stories” that individuals create around illness and out of illness. (In this course, the term “stories” does not mean *pretense* but refers instead to the structures that shape and quicken accounts of illness, and that are a chief source of their significance both to the person who is ill and to those to whom the narratives are told.) Why is illness experienced and described in the particular ways that it is? What social and psychological forces are at work shaping how it is that an individual or a group feels and thinks about being “sick”? What sorts of stories do patients and care-givers tell about illness? Why those stories and not others? How do these narratives give meaning or significance to the experience of illness? For the purposes of this course, a “narrative of illness” names the particular *form* by which illness is experienced and described. Special emphasis will therefore be placed on the patterns or structures shaping narratives of illness, and on the kinds of “languages” (visual or verbal, autobiographical or documentary, to name a few) that are used in those narratives.

Narratives of illness come in many different forms: from autobiographical accounts to journalistic essays, and from fictionalized accounts to filmed documentaries. We will look at a broad range of materials, the basic assumption being that much can be learned about the nature and experience of illness by listening rigorously and capaciously to how that illness is being narrated. In what ways is an ill person a new kind of person? In what ways is a person more than their illness? Each of the narratives that we consider is challenging in its own way, and may well unsettle you, testing some of your basic assumptions about life, death, illness, and identity. More: I am a Humanities researcher and teacher offering a course primarily to social science and science students, and one of my goals is to

explore and to affirm what happens when these different academic worlds make contact around the specific question of health, illness, embodiment, and the politics of health care. What can I learn from you, given your own education in social science, science, and health studies? What can you learn from me and from the distinct humanities perspective that I bring to this course? What humanistic forms of inquiry can be brought to bear on social science knowledges?

After considering the work of one prominent thinker about the narratives of illness (Frank), who, to be sure, cannot be said to have the last word on the subject, we will turn to the narratives themselves. These include: narratives of HIV/AIDS (Brown, Joslin), cancer (Broyard, Rogers, Woodman), and bipolar disorder (Perry). The course will include a class devoted to a frank discussion with a person living with HIV who regularly gives seminars at McMaster University.

Required Texts:

- 1) Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*
- 2) Woodman, Marion. *Bone: Dying into Life*
- 3) Broyard, Anatole. *Intoxicated By My Illness*.
- 4) Brown, Rebecca. *Gifts of the Body*.
- 5) Clark, David L. and Anna G. Joong. "Speaking of HIV/AIDS: Reflections on the Local Faces of the Epidemic" (in 5 pdf files, i.e., all files in the section entitled *Literature, Arts, and Medicine*, found in the *McMaster Medical School Journal* 5.1 (Spring 2008). See: www.mumj.org and click "Past Issues," then "Volume 5, Issue 1, Spring 2008".
- 6) Schnell, Lisa. "Learning How To Tell." *Literature and Medicine* 23.2 (Fall 2004): 265-279. See: http://muse.jhu.edu.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/journals/literature_and_medicine/v023/23.2schnell.pdf
- 7) Raeburn, Daniel. "Vessels (Stillbirth)." *New Yorker* 82.11 (May 1, 2006), 48.
See: http://find.galegroup.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/gtx/infomark.do?contentSet=IAC-Documents&docType=IAC&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=ITOF&docId=A145183766&userGroupName=ocul_mcmaster&version=1.0&source=gale&infoPage=infoMarkPage
- 8) *Narratives of Illness Toolkit* (posted on coursepage on Dr. Clark's website)

Films:

- 1) *My Left Breast*, dir. Gerry Rogers
- 2) *Silverlake Life: The View From Here*, dir. Tom Joplin, Mark Massi, Peter Friedman
- 3) *Boy Interrupted*, dir. Hart and Dana Perry.

(Additional readings may be provided and suggested along the way. Students are encouraged to recommend supplemental readings for class discussion.)

Work and Mark Distribution

Seminar Participation:	20%
Response Papers:	30% (2 X 15%)
Research Essay:	50%

Assignment Descriptions and Weighting

Seminar Participation (20%)

Note the weighting given to participation. What is being asked of you here? Members of the class will be encouraged and expected to *create*, on an ongoing basis, a *lively undergraduate seminar*—i.e. an inquisitive and informed space of critical discussion and debate. All students will therefore be expected to contribute consistently and meaningfully to the intellectual life of the seminar, developing and volunteering questions and arguments as well as responding mindfully to queries and challenges that are put to them by their classmates and by their instructor. Do you characterize yourself as a “shy” student, or a student who is reluctant to join and create class discussion, or a student who has no experience contributing to class discussion? If so, you will need to make changes to thrive in this course, and to make those changes quickly. No student is doomed to hang back in class! You have *nothing* to lose and a great deal to gain: confidence, grades, and knowledge. Everyone can teach themselves how to become an active participant in their education, but this transformation is especially important in the last term of your last year as an undergraduate student. To that end, students in this course must be willing and able to:

- read and engage all assigned materials.
- attend all classes and participate in all classes. (Attendance in this course is mandatory.)
- explore and absorb as much related critical material as possible, both seeking this material out independently and in consultation with their classmates and instructor.
- develop questions and arguments that are directly relevant to the materials at hand, and actively to introduce these points into the class discussion on a consistent basis.
- listen and respond thoughtfully to the issues raised in class, engaging the issues in ways that complicate and advance the intellectual life of the seminar.
- be willing and able to point the class in new directions, by making arguments and raising questions that are of particular interest to you, and that you believe can be of interest to the class.
- foster a developing scene of pedagogy, bearing in mind that a central part of our task is to *teach* others and to be *taught*.

Response Papers (2 x 15%=30%)

Each student will be responsible for **two** 1000-word (4 pages) responses to the readings, each of which is worth 15% of your final grade, for a total of 30%. The response papers must be submitted at the start of the class in which the relevant reading is taken up (see seminar schedule below). Response papers should move briskly from a brief outline of the reading’s main argument to a succinct engagement with some of the reading’s most pressing themes, arguments, worries, and questions. Remember throughout your paper to keep the focus on the specific matter of *narratives of illness*. Organize your paper around several distinct points, linking these points to specific materials drawn from the text at hand. Point to difficulties or unresolved questions you have about the materials under consideration.

Response papers are assigned by lottery, according to which Group you fall into:

- Group A: Frank, *Wounded Storyteller* (Response Paper 1) + Broyard, *Intoxicated by My Illness* (Response Paper 2)
- Group B: Brown, *Gifts of the Body* (Response Paper 1) + Woodman, *Bone: Dying into Life* (Response Paper 2)

Final Essay (50%)

Students will write a research essay of about 12-15 pages on a topic of their own choosing. You may write an essay based upon one of your Response Papers, but you are not bound to do this. If you write an essay based upon a response paper that you have submitted, your essay must move in significantly new directions and make new arguments. With your permission, finally essays will be eventually be made available on my website. I am happy to

discuss your research essay with you at every stage, but all students are expected to consult with me about their work at least once prior to submitting the essay. Essays are due in class **Tuesday 30 March 2010**. Essays will be accepted up until **Tuesday 6 April 2010**. Essays submitted after 13 March, though, will not receive a marking commentary.

If you are a smoker, please ensure that you print and submit a copy of your paper that is smoke-free.

E-mail protocol:

The Faculty of Humanities has issued the following set of instructions to students: “It is the policy of the Faculty of Humanities that all email communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University email account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. Instructors will delete emails that do not originate from a McMaster email account.”

All e-mails must be written in full sentences (i.e. no point form, no text-messaging short form), and must contain a subject line that includes the course designation, i.e., "HS 4J03." Receipt of all e-mails from me must be acknowledged.

Class cancellations:

In the unlikely event of class cancellations, students will be notified on the Department of English and Cultural Studies website and on my website. It is your responsibility to check these sites regularly for any such announcements.

Link: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/> (Department of English and Cultural Studies)

Link: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/> (Dr. David L. Clark)

University Statement Regarding Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresentation by deception or by other fraudulent means and can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various kinds of academic dishonesty see:

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/univsec/policy/AcademicIntegrity.pdf>.

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- i) Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- ii) Improper collaboration in group work (Insert specific course information)
- iii) Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld. See:

http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/ac_ethics.htm

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity>.

Statement from the Office of the Associate Dean of Humanities

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check their McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

**Health Studies 4J03: Narratives of Illness
Seminar Schedule
(Term II 2010)**

January	5	Preface to the seminar and seminar assignments
	12	Introduction (<i>Narratives of Illness Toolkit</i>) + Schnell, "Learning How To Tell," + Raeburn, "Vessels (Stillbirth)"
	19	Frank, <i>The Wounded Storyteller</i> [Group A: Response Paper 1]
	26	Brown, <i>Gifts of the Body</i> [Group B: Response Paper 1]
February	2	<i>Silverlake Life: The View From Here</i> (film screening)
	9	<i>Silverlake Life: The View From Here</i> (discussion)
	16	Reading Week
	23	<i>My Left Breast</i> (film screening)
March	2	<i>My Left Breast</i> (discussion)
	9	Broyard, <i>Intoxicated By My Illness</i> [Group A: Response Paper 2]
	16	Woodman, <i>Bone: Dying into Life</i> [Group B: Response Paper 2]
	23	Discussion with Dr. S.M. Barber + Clark and Joong, "Speaking of HIV/AIDS: On the Local Faces of the Epidemic." [This class will be held jointly with the members of Term I's English and Cultural Studies 4J03, "Rhetoric, Culture, Catastrophe: HIV/AIDS and its Representations."]
	30	<i>Boy Interrupted</i> (film screening) [Research essay due.]
April	6	<i>Boy Interrupted</i> (discussion) [Last day research essay may be submitted.]