The Melancholy Hero in Western Literature

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Office Hours: Mondays 12-3PM or by appointment

Course Description

In this course, we will explore the theme of melancholy in a range of texts across genres and time periods. Our analyses and discussions will investigate the relation of melancholy in literature to the concept of the journey, societal exclusion and exile, madness, heroism, and artistic genius. Some of the questions we will tackle are: Why is melancholy sometimes romanticized? How does melancholy differ from depression? Why do so many of these melancholy heroes undertake a voyage, and what is the outcome of their journeys? Do melancholy heroes more readily connect with animals than with humans? Why might this be?

Rather than reading the texts on the syllabus in chronological order, we will read them comparatively according to specific sub-themes. We will start out by thinking of the connection between melancholy and illness, which will also allow us to explore some key definitions of melancholy. The next section will focus on the image of the tortured literary hero, which served as the inspiration for this course. We will then spend several weeks discussing some of the consequences of melancholy. Does it lead to action or inaction in these heroes? What type of action do they seem to favor? How do these melancholy heroes interact with their environment? How do they connect or disconnect with humans or animals in their surroundings? During the last week, we will look specifically at the female melancholy experience and the stereotypes associated with it. We will end the semester with an introductory analysis of representations of melancholy in visual art through the example of Mexican surrealist painter Frida Kahlo.

This course aims to familiarize students with important works from a variety of Western traditions through the thematic study of melancholy heroes. In my lectures, I will incorporate clips from cinematic representations such as Lars von Trier’s Melancholia and James Mangold’s Girl, Interrupted in addition to further theoretical and critical references to enrich students’ own interpretations. The primary emphasis of this class, however, will be on developing our own readings and finding evidence for them in the text. This is a writing-intensive class.

Required texts:
Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy
Sophocles, Philoctetes
William Styron, Darkness Visible
William Shakespeare, Hamlet
Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther
Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being
Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights
Antonio Tabucchi, *Indian Nocturne*  
Luigi Pirandello, *Henry IV*  
Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*  
Arto Paasilinna, *The Year of the Hare*  
Charles Baudelaire, Selected prose poems from *Le spleen de Paris*  
Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*  
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*  
Emily Dickinson, Selected Poems  
Selected painting by Frida Kahlo

All books are available at the Brown Bookstore.

**Course Proceedings and Requirements**

**Class schedule and attendance:**
Class will be held Monday/Wednesday/Friday between 10.00AM and 10.50PM. Attendance is mandatory. If circumstances do require you to miss class, you must inform me ahead of time by email or in class the week prior to your absence. Please be proactive in approaching me about absences.

**Discussion Questions:**
Every week before noon on Wednesday, students will post at least one thoughtful discussion question on the week’s reading to the class wiki [insert link]. The question should deal with something you found interesting, surprising, or confusing about the texts to be discussed in section. Everyone should read and consider the weekly questions and come prepared to discuss them in section. You may find it helpful to include specific passages that are relevant to your question.

**Individual consultations:**
Students are invited to meet with me as often as they wish during office hours [insert time]. Everyone is required to meet with me at least twice during the semester for an individual consultation on your progress for the final paper project.

**Papers:**
Students are required to write 4 *response papers* (2 pages double-spaced) on a selection of prompts handed out a week before the deadline. Additionally, they will write one longer *final paper* (10-12 pages double-spaced), in which they will engage in depth with a topic of their choice. Final papers will focus on comparative close readings of materials from at least two genres. Students are required to hand in a one-page *final paper project proposal* including three bibliographical references by week 10. This proposal will be discussed in an individual meeting the following week. (Guidelines for paper assignments will be handed out separately.)

1st assignment – week 3: first response paper (with prompt)  
2nd assignment – week 6: second response paper (with prompt)  
3rd assignment – week 9: third response paper (design your own topic)  
Final paper project proposal – week 10
4th assignment – week 12: fourth response paper (design your own topic)
Final paper – one week after the last class

All papers should be in my mailbox in Marston Hall by 5pm of the due date. You can also hand them in during class.

Grade Breakdown:
Four short papers: 40%
Attendance and participation: 20% (this includes submitting weekly discussion questions to the class wiki)
Final paper project (proposal and final version; 10-12 pages): 40%

Detailed Class Schedule

Week 1: Introductions and syllabus; exploring definitions of melancholia

MELANCHOLY AND/AS ILLNESS

Selections from The Anatomy of Melancholy

Week 2: Philoctetes
Week 3: Darkness Visible

THE TORTURED HERO

Week 4: Hamlet
Week 5: The Sorrows of Young Werther

MELANCHOLY AND (IM)MOBILITY

Week 6: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Week 7: Waiting for Godot + selections from Le spleen de Paris
Week 8: The Unbearable Lightness of Being

RELATING TO HUMAN OTHERS

Week 9: Wuthering Heights
Week 10: Henry IV
Week 11: Indian Nocturne

RELATING TO ANIMAL OTHERS

Week 12: The Year of the Hare
Week 13: The Seagull

THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE
**Week 14:** *The Yellow Wallpaper* + selected poems by Emily Dickinson
Selected paintings by Frida Kahlo