# EN3M4-15 Sick Imagination: Disability, Illness and the Critical Medical Humanities

## 26/27

**Department**
English and Comparative Literary Studies
**Level**
Undergraduate Level 3
**Module leader**
Liz Barry
**Credit value**
15
**Module duration**
10 weeks
**Assessment**
100% coursework
**Study location**
University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

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## Description

## Introductory description

This module will introduce you to the rich creative and critical work in medical humanities and disability arts, thinking about what literature, lifewriting, film and graphic fiction might offer to the understanding and critique of the practice of medicine and conceptions of illness and disability. The module spans the twentieth and twenty-first century, investigating medical humanities writing from as early as 1926 and as late as 2022, but it concentrates its attention on the last twenty years, introducing recent work and theory in relation to physical disability, chronic illness and severe mental health conditions. It also encourages you to think not only about the psychological, phenomenological and social dimensions of illness and disability, but also the new forms of creativity, art and narrative that such experiences have produced. In the wake of Covid-19, issues such as chronic illness and mental health have gained new complexity and greater prominence in the social and cultural landscapes. You will explore new writing and answer questions about how language and form can hope to represent such subjective and non-normative experiences as pain and psychosis, as well as thinking about how to create narrative about experiences that frustrate traditional linear story-telling, such as chronic illness, or terminal illness. You will learn new

theoretical and critical skills useful on other modules, as well as participating in research-led teaching at the forefront of a rapidly developing field.

## Module aims

This module will introduce students to key works of modern and contemporary literature (the majority 1990-2022) on illness, disability and medicine, exploring the principles and conceptual framework of medical humanities, covering key foundational works in the field, and looking at cutting edge recent theory and ‘autotheory’ by those living with limitations. It will emphasize form, strengthening their close-reading and narratological skills, and building on and expanding their critical and theoretical training in Year 1. It will introduce concepts and theories that straddle the medical, psychological and sociocultural spheres, introducing the students to new interdisciplinary methods. It will consider debates about disability and illness in terms of social vs material models, clinical vs phenomenological approaches. Exploring theorizations of stigma and shame, it also offers answering and affirmative theoretical responses such as body positivity and ‘disability gain’. Finally, it will touch on philosophies of language and the body in thinking about how to express and narrativize subjective experiences such as pain, embodiment and disordered consciousness. Students will develop skills in writing a critical bibliography for an anthology of illness and disability writing, and undertake an independent research essay. They will be formulate their own research question, and be encouraged to respond to current and cutting-edge debates in the critical medical humanities. The differentiation in learning outcomes for Level 6 will be reflected in these research questions via input with the module tutor. They will subsequently -- where appropriate – be encouraged to make this work available in a public-facing forum as a resource for those working in this area.

## Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Unit 1: Illness as Metaphor/Illness as Narrative
In this introductory unit, we will look at some of the key foundational texts of medical humanities and the cultural history of illness, and apply the ideas and conceptual frameworks they provide in close reading some relevant poetry in Week 1, and the first primary works, Hilary Mantel’s Giving Up the Ghost, and a section of Anne Boyer’s The Undying in Week 2. Participants will be introduced to issues in narrative medicine, and debates (formal and cultural) about illness, the body and metaphor.

Week 1: Backstories
Virginia Woolf, ‘On Being Ill' (1926) [short essay]

From:
Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor (1978)
Arthur Frank, The Wounded Storyteller (1995)
Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography (1998)

Close ‘sight reading’ of poems in the light of the ideas in these excerpted works.

Week 2: The Big C

From:
Audre Lorde, The Cancer Journals (1980) [memoir]
Anne Boyer, The Undying: A Meditation on Modern Illness (2019) [memoir]

Unit 2: Chronic Narratives
In this unit, we will look at the lifewriting of chronic illness, a growing segment of the 'medical memoir' genre, and consider the challenges chronic conditions pose to narrativisation and literary form (building on and extending the theoretical base of Unit 1). We will think about the formal features of autobiography and memoir, namely Hilary Mantel's Giving Up the Ghost and Sarah Manguso's The Two Kinds of Decay, and the possibilities for representing new experiences of time, space, the body and subjectivity offered by science fiction (Etter) and graphic fiction (Brunton). We will—incidentally but relevantly—also consider the cultural concepts of 'crisis' and 'chronic time', and current theorizations of and debates about 'care', in relation to illness, healthcare provision, pandemic culture and late capitalist society in general.

Week 3
From: Hilary Mantel, Giving Up the Ghost (2003) [autofiction/ memoir]
Sarah Manguso, The Two Kinds of Decay (2008) [memoir]

G. Thomas Couser, 'Autopathography: Women, Illness, and Lifewriting', a/b: Auto/biography Studies, vol. 6 (1991): 65-75
Kathlyn Conway, Beyond Words: Illness and the Limits of Expression (2007)

Week 4
Sarah Rose Etter, The Book of X [sci fi/ YA novel] (2019)
Tessa Brunton, Notes from a Sickbed [graphic novel] (2022)

Meghan O'Rourke, The Invisible Kingdom: Reimagining Chronic Illness (2022)

Unit 3: Disability, Performance, Identity
This unit will introduce key disability concepts and theories, looking at some foundational work by Tobin Siebers (social model, passing, masquerade, disability and democracy) and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (feminist disability studies, embodiment, the 'stare'), as well as some recent intersectional disability theory (Clare) and writing. It re-reads Beckett's canonical play Endgame through a disability lens and in relation to a recent production by actors with Parkinson's disease, as well as Siebers and Thomson's theoretical ideas, drawing out ideas of performativity and spectatorship in relation to disability, before turning to some contemporary essays, lifewriting and poetry exploring interesectional experiences of disability and their social and personal construction.

Week 5
Samuel Beckett, Endgame (1954) [play] / The Endgame Project, Me to Play [documentary] (2021)

From: Ato Quayson, Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation (Columbia UP, 2007)
Matt Hargrave, Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad or Plain Ugly? (Springer, 2016)

Selected Disability Theory reading: Tobin Siebers, 'Disability in Theory', American Literary History, 2001; Rosemary Garland Thomson, 'Staring at the Other', Disability Studies Quarterly, 2005

Week 7

Raymond Antrobus, The Perseverance (2018) [poetry]
From: Terry Galloway, Mean Little Deaf Queer (2009) [memoir]
Keah Brown, The Pretty One: On Life, Pop Culture, Disability and Other Reasons to Fall in Love with Me (2019) [essays]

Eli Clare, Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999)

Unit 4: The Land of Enlightenment: Psychosis and Delusion
The final unit will think about the experience of severe mental illness and disordered thinking, examining the challenges to representation these conditions offer, but also the possibilities of literary and creative writing in this regard. It will revisit conceptions of narrative and metaphor from Unit 1 in relation to this new context. It will consider theoretical and phlosophical cruxes (Woods' sublimity, Jaspers' explaining vs understanding, Deleuze's schizoanalysis, Fuchs' phenomenology of time) in relation to schizophrenia and delusion. It will also look at the representation of psychotic experience in literature and film and consider the formal, aesthetic and cultural significance of key works in this respect, touching finally on their uses in medical education.

Week 8
Marguerite Sechehaye, Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl [clinical memoir] (1951)
Esmé Weijun Wang, The Collected Schizophrenias (2019) [essays]

Angela Woods, The Sublime Object of Psychiatry: Schizophrenia in Clinical and Cultural Theory (OUP, 2011)
Matthew Broome, 'The Neuroscience, Psychopathology, and Philosophy of Time', Philosophy, Psychiatry, Psychology, vol. 12, no. 3 (2005): 187-194

Week 9
From Janet Frame, An Angel at My Table (1984) [memoir]
Jane Campion (dir.), An Angel at My Table (1990) [film]
Lodge H. Kerrigan (dir.), Clean, Shaven (1993) [short film]

Sue Gillett, Angel from the Mirror City: Jane Campion's Janet Frame, Senses of Cinema, vol. 10 (2000) [online]
Stephen Harper, 'The Suffering Screen: Cinematic Portrayals of Mental Distress', Madness, Power and the Media (Springer, 2009): 59-102

Conclusions
Week 10
Roundup: student-curated case studies and reflections

## Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- To gain knowledge of *and to critically evaluate* a range of fictions, lifewriting and critical writing representing disability and illness.
- To understand *and critically compare* the form of different genres and modes of writing and visual culture (novel, lifewriting, graphic novel, essay, film) in representing the experience and social meanings of disability.

- To understand, *evaluate* and apply literary theoretical concepts and methods (narratology, stylistics, cultural theory)
- To understand, explain and apply concepts from psychiatry, psychology and critical medical humanities.
- To understand, *evaluate* and apply different theoretical models of disability, including functionalist theory, the social model of disability (including social oppression theory), disability ‘gain’.
- Gain an overview of critical disability studies and its intersection with literary studies.
- To learn literary research skills (anthologizing, critical bibliography, summary).
- To formulate an independent research question and original arguments to do with an aspect of the module based on independent research (to be demonstrated through an essay).
- To demonstrate the ability to critically reflect on the aims, process, and outcomes of one’s own research.

## Indicative reading list

Reading lists can be found in Talis

Specific reading list for the module

## Research element

The assessment is a 4000 word research essay which will require students to formulate an research question and undertake independent, original research and 4 x 200 word entries in a critical bibliography as part of a proposal for a disability and illness literary ‘reader’ (Sick Imagination). For the essay they will formulate an original research question based on any aspect of the material they have studied. They must draw on primary texts and theoretical literature from one of the fields covered, to demonstrate their understanding of the key concepts and contexts covered by the module.

## Interdisciplinary

This module is situated within an interdisciplinary area of research. It employs the methods of literary and critical medical humanities, principally drawing on the concerns of literary criticism and literary theory, but in conjunction with critical and sociological theory (including disability theory, social constructionism, medical anthropology), philosophy (phenomenology, philosophy of psychiatry), and medical and psychological science. It will also investigate and interrogate the meanings and methods of ‘narrative medicine’ in its clinical and cultural guises. The module will introduce students to scholarship produced in all of these contexts, and ask them to think carefully about the ideas and assumptions underpinning different disciplinary approaches.

## International

This module principally draws on Anglophone literature from Britain, Europe and North America, but includes in its key primary and set secondary texts writing from Black British, African-American and Asian-American writers who reflect and draw creatively on their heritage and identity beyond

the Global North, and consider its intersection with their lived experience of disability or illness.

## Subject specific skills

Close reading; analysis of genre, form, and style; narratology for literary studies and narrative medicine; capacity to understand, *judge*, compare, and employ different theoretical and critical approaches; interdisciplinary knowledge and methods.

## Transferable skills

Comparative and close analysis, application and evaluation of interdisciplinary methodologies and theories, research, and the formulation of original and informed arguments.

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# Study

## Study time

| Type | Required |
| --- | --- |
| Seminars | 9 sessions of 1 hour 30 minutes (9%) |
| Private study | 136 hours 30 minutes (91%) |
| Total | 150 hours |

## Private study description

Students will spend this time completing preparatory reading for seminars, undertaking research for the assessment, as well as writing their assessment.

## Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

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# Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

### Assessment group A1

| | Weighting | Study time | Eligible for self-certification |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Assessment component** | | | |
| Research essay | 70% | | Yes (extension) |
| Students will produce a research question and resulting essay based on original research, discussing any aspect of the module. Their essay titles will be formulated independently, in consultation with the tutor. | | | |
| **Reassessment component is the same** | | | |
| **Assessment component** | | | |
| Critical bibliography | 30% | | Yes (extension) |
| In producing a critical bibliography, they will learn and reflect on the form, function and register of this element. The writing will be individually produced, but they will work collaboratively with their peers (as their 'readers') to workshop this element, and, in so doing, understand the requirements and concerns in selecting texts for an anthology and summarizing their content, form and value. | | | |
| **Reassessment component is the same** | | | |

### Feedback on assessment

Written feedback, as well as opportunities for further oral feedback in office hours.

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## Availability

## Courses

This module is Core for:

- Year 4 of UENA-QQ00 Undergraduate English & Cultural Studies

This module is Optional for:

- Year 3 of UENA-Q300 Undergraduate English Literature
- Year 3 of UENA-QP36 Undergraduate English Literature and Creative Writing
- Year 4 of UENA-QP37 Undergraduate English Literature and Creative Writing with Intercalated Year
- Year 4 of UENA-Q301 Undergraduate English Literature with Intercalated Year

- Year 3 of UENA-VQ32 Undergraduate English and History
- Year 4 of UENA-VQ33 Undergraduate English and History (with Intercalated year)
- Year 3 of UENA-VQ34 Undergraduate English and History (with a term in Venice)
- Year 4 of UENA-QW35 Undergraduate English and Theatre Studies with Intercalated Year

This module is Core option list A for:

- Year 3 of UPHA-VQ52 Undergraduate Philosophy, Literature and Classics

This module is Option list A for:

- Year 3 of UCXA-QQ37 Undergraduate Classics and English
- Year 3 of UFIA-QW25 Undergraduate Film and Literature

This module is Option list B for:

- Year 3 of UTHA-QW34 Undergraduate English and Theatre Studies

This module is Option list C for:

- Year 3 of UPHA-VQ72 Undergraduate Philosophy and Literature