

Dying and Death in American Literature  
Fall 2007  
W 4-7 pm  
Rm. 3109 Weiskotten Hall  
SUNY Upstate Medical University

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Texts: On Death and Dying, E. Kubler-Ross; The Gifts of the Body, R. Browne; Wit, M. Edson; Refuge, T. Williams; Thirst, M. Oliver; The Year of Magical Thinking, J. Didion; Tuesdays with Morrie, M. Albom; Without, D. Hall; A Death in the Family, J. Agee; Handouts.

Aug 29 Introduction, Requirements, Expectations  
Film TBA

Sept 5 On Death and Dying, Chapters 1-6, pp.11-123; from Handout, L. Pastan  
“Five Stages of Grief,” BA St. Andrews “Galahad’s Gone.”  
Journal Due

Sept 12 On Death and Dying, Chapters 7-9, pp.123-186; from Handout, Bloom,  
“Silver Water;” Selzer, “Mercy;” Olds, “The Last Evening.”  
Journal Due

Sept 19 Tuesdays with Morrie  
Journal Due

Sept 26 Thirst; from Handout, Carver, “A Small Good Thing.”  
Journal Due

Oct 3 Without  
Journal Due

Oct 10 Healing Muse launch party—Medical Alumni Auditorium  
**Paper Due**

Oct 17 Donald Hall Reading TBA  
Journal Due

Oct 24 Refuge  
Journal Due

- Oct 31 Wit  
Journal Due
- Nov 7 A Death in the Family  
Journal Due
- Nov 14 The Gifts of the Body  
Journal Due
- Nov 21 Thanksgiving
- Nov 30 The Year of Magical Thinking  
Journal Due
- Dec 5 **Paper Due**  
Evaluations

OBJECTIVES: Contemporary culture in the United States appears to worship youth and deny or at least delay aging for as long as possible. Consequently, many of us have difficulty both facing our own mortality and handling the serious illnesses of those we love. Many authors have addressed this paradox and created intriguing and provocative responses to it. Through careful analysis of fiction, poetry, memoir, drama, and film we will identify and examine our own beliefs about and attitudes towards dying and death. We will compare and contrast a variety of cultural responses to the dying process and discuss how they have evolved and what significance they may hold for us today.

As faculty members at Upstate Medical University, we have a particular interest in fostering ethical and healing attitudes towards those patients who are dying and toward their families and caregivers who suffer with them. Members of the health professions (physicians, nurses, and other members of the health care team) face death all the time, yet too often they have not had any formal training in how to approach the subject with their patients or how to evaluate and handle their own reactions when they leave the hospital or clinic. “Detached concern” becomes valued over empathy. What is the qualitative difference between these terms?

Literature provides us a place where we can more objectively analyze our individual philosophies about these life and death issues. Please come to class prepared to discuss the week’s assignment. If you have to miss a class, please be

sure you have checked with a classmate to determine if the next week's assignment has changed in any way from the syllabus.

**GRADING:** Each week there will be a quiz on the day's readings. The quizzes will simply ask factual questions about that week's assignment. Quizzes cannot be made up; if you miss the quiz, you receive an F for that week. We will drop the lowest two quiz marks at the end of the semester.

Each week we will collect journal excerpts from you; we will expect at least three entries per week. The journal records your thoughts and reactions to the week's readings and the class discussion. You may submit journals to us electronically; our e-mail addresses are above on page one of the syllabus. If you do submit your weekly journal by e-mail, please send the attachment to both of us.

There will be two writing assignments. We will discuss topics several weeks in advance. Yes, grammar, spelling, proper citations, style, and usage do matter. Papers should reflect your academic status: we are looking for more than a book review. Plagiarism will result in failure on the paper and referral to SUNY Upstate's Judicial Board.

<b>PERCENTAGES:</b> Quizzes	20%
Journals	20%
Paper #1	25%
Paper #2	25%
Participation	10%

We look forward to a semester of passionate inquiry and thoughtful debate.