

Queers, Freaks, and Invalids: An Examination of Marginalized Bodies in Literature

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course is designed to cultivate critical reading and writing skills, particularly as they apply to the social construction of normal/abnormal bodies through literature. Students will engage the material of this course through creative and critical writing projects. As we read a range of texts from the nineteenth-century to today, from short and long fiction, to poetry, personal essays, the graphic novel, and critical pieces, we will ask complex questions of society's portrayal of "normal" and "abnormal." How do we define "health" and "illness"? What is the proper use of the body? What determines beautiful and ugly? What makes a body valuable? And how are these questions addressed in literature? In addition, we will examine the development of a queer or disabled subjecthood and look at issues of representation and performance. As we trace the depictions of "abnormal" bodies as "other" and marginalized, we will seek to avoid oversimplification (e.g. pity, pedestals, or quick dismissal of difference with conclusions like "*They are just like Us.*") Instead, we will critically examine our own rhetoric, grapple with questions that do not allow for easy answers, and look for new ways of understanding and describing bodies and our experiences in them.

The course is divided into two major units. In the first unit, we will take a broad look at the representation of marginalized bodies in literature across the last one-hundred-and-fifty years. Our content in this unit will include a range of material from nineteenth-century children's stories and sensation fiction to mid-century film, early twenty-first century novels, and contemporary critical texts. Most of the authors/directors in this unit do not belong to the marginalized identities they represent through their fictional characters, which prompts larger questions of authority, power, and purpose. In the second unit of the course, we will shift our attention to authors writing about their own, personal experiences inside of their "freakish," "queer," "gimpy" bodies. We will interrogate what this shift brings to the subjects at hand, identifying the many ways these narratives support, subvert, complicate, and contradict the works read and discussed in the first half of the semester. By the end of the semester, students

will be able to speak to and find connections between the critical theory, personal experience, and cultural construction of marginalized bodies.

COURSE GOALS

What we will strive for in this class (and hopefully the rest of college) (and life in general):

1. Cultivation of curiosity and sustained inquiry
2. Ability to listen with an open-mind to opinions that differ from our own
3. Willingness to interrogate widely held assumptions
4. Willingness to suspend closure, bottom lines, or easy resolutions
5. Willingness to take intellectual risks
6. Acceptance of messing up, making mistakes, and fumbling
7. Tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty
8. Metacognitive awareness (or learning to think about our own thinking processes)
(list adapted from Sheridan D. Blau)

READINGS AND MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS:

Unit 1: Fictional Representation

Primary Texts:

Charles Darwin, excerpts from *Descent of Man* (1871)

Wilkie Collins, excerpts from *Poor Miss Finch* (1872)

Dinah Craik, *The Lambe Little Prince* (1875)

Tod Browning, *Freaks* (1932)

Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (1989)

Jeffrey Eugenides, excerpts from *Middlesex* (2002)

Anne Finger, selections from *Call Me Ahab: A Short Story Collection* (2009)

PDF Critical Texts:

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Construction" (1988)

Lennard Davis, excerpts from *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995)

Rosemarie Garland Thomson, excerpts from *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996)

Allison Kafer, excerpts from *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013)

Douglas Baynton. "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History" (2013)

Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence" (2013)

Critical Analysis Assignment

In the first unit, students consider the creative ways writers shape and frame embodied difference in fiction. In their first assignment, students are given the opportunity to examine the depiction of these bodies and the roles they play in story. This assignment requires that students apply critical theory, forging a bridge between story and academic knowledge. Using ideas discussed in class and at least one secondary source, students will analyze the construction or subversion of the concept of “normalcy” in at least one of the primary texts read in the first unit. This assignment requires students to write a 1,200 – 1,500 word argument with a clear thesis that engages at least one critical argument and applies close reading from the original text.

Unit 2 – Personal Narrative

Primary Texts:

Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, *The Story of My Life* (1902)

Christy Brown, *My Left Foot* (1954)

Jean-Dominique Bauby, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (1997)

Georgina Kleege, *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (2006)

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006)

Terry Galloway, *Mean Little deaf Queer: A Memoir* (2009)

PDF Critical Texts:

Eli Clare, excerpts from *Exile & Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation* (1999)

James Charlton, excerpts from *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (2000)

Andrew Solomon, “Son” (2012)

Sara Newman, excerpts from *Writing Disability: A Critical History* (2013)

G. Thomas Couser, “Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation” (2013)

Tobin Siebers, “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment – For Identity Politics in a New Register” (2013)

Personal Narrative Assignment:

In this assignment students will write a creative, personal essay, considering the influence of an ableist, heteronormative society and/or defining experiences that shaped perceptions of certain bodies as other, abnormal, queer, freakish, or disabled. Whether students write about their own experiences, or conduct an interview that addresses another’s, students will increase their awareness of the ways in which the body is labeled, controlled, and/or relegated by society construction of “normal” bodies. These essays will follow the conventions of other personal narratives we have read in this unit and address issues of subjecthood and the development of identity as it relates to the body.

Additional Assignments

Media Presentation Assignment:

Throughout the semester, students will sign up for one class period when they give a 10 minute talk about an example of the depiction of “normal” and/or “abnormal” bodies in current media. The example could come from a recent film, ad, YouTube video, blog, article, or any other media currently consumed by our communities. Students will give a summary of the outside source, provide a brief analysis of the ways it supports or subverts the current construction of “normalcy,” and provide a couple of thought-provoking discussion questions that put the source in conversation with other texts and ideas discussed in our class. These short presentations and discussions will allow the class to directly apply our course content to the world unfolding around them.

Group Discussion Summaries:

At the beginning of the course, students will be assigned to groups of 3-4 that they will maintain over the length semester. Each student will be assigned a number ranging from 1-4, depending on the size of the group. Roughly once a week, I will assign short writing prompts unique to each assigned number. For example, all of the students assigned the number one might be asked to write about the metaphors used to describe bodies in a particular text, while all of those assigned the number two might be asked to write about the ways these same bodies defy stereotypes, and so on. When students get to class, each member in the small group will have thought about our assigned reading from a different angle and will be given the opportunity to discuss and provide a written summary of their group’s larger takeaway. These will be gathered over the course of the semester.

CLASSROOM ENVIROMENT:

Our time together is made up of partner exchanges, group work, presentations, and class discussions. It is likely you may not agree with everything that is said or discussed in the classroom. Courteous behavior and responses are expected at all times. When you disagree with someone, be sure that you make a distinction between criticizing an idea and criticizing the person. Expressions or actions that disparage a person’s or race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, gender, gender identity / expression, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, or marital, parental, or veteran status are contrary to the mission of this course and will not be tolerated. Without respecting your own thoughts and the thoughts of your classmates, we will not get very far. All of our voices are valid and valuable and will be treated as such. (Read three more times with self-induced italics before proceeding.)