

A person wearing a white protective suit and a clear face shield with a Honeywell respirator filter is standing behind a chain-link fence. The background is a blurred green and brown.

OUTBREAK NARRATIVES: “Plague” in Film & Literature

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The spread of infectious disease within local communities and across the world makes visible the myriad ways in which our bodies belong to a larger body politic, as well as the many risks and rewards engendered by communal living. Our lives are intimately interconnected, tied together by sewer lines and subway schedules, global travel, international trade, doorknobs, handshakes, and the very air we breathe. Epidemic and pandemic illness forces us to contend with these interconnections – to recognize our vulnerability and our responsibility to care for others, because our own health and wellbeing depends on it. Thus, the way we write about epidemic illness, whether real or imagined, betrays our hopes and fears and frustrations with the current social and/or political order. Like ancient Biblical plagues, epidemic may be perceived as a punishment for individual sin, social immorality, or political corruption – a sign of the coming apocalypse.

Looking to purely imagined plagues and fictional interpretations of three historical epidemics – cholera, the “Spanish” influenza pandemic of 1918, and HIV/AIDS – as precursors to COVID-19, this course contextualizes our contemporary pandemic moment by exploring the broad social and symbolic implications of epidemic illness. Approaching “outbreak” as both a biomedical and narrative event, it places a strong focus on close reading and purposeful writing.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

This course is designed to introduce students to the conventions of outbreak narrative and to apply this critical-theoretical lens through the analysis of literary representations of real, historical epidemics and purely fictional plagues. Over the course of the semester, students will:

- Develop a nuanced understanding of the narrative conventions of “outbreak” by identifying common tropes used to describe epidemic disease in film and literature.
- Identify the symbolic, metaphorical, and/or allegorical dimensions of “outbreak” narratives.
- Interrogate our cultural fascination with outbreak and critique as sociopolitical commentary fictional “plague writing” and the conventions of “outbreak narrative” present in nonfiction prose, past and present.
- Interpret literary texts and film through close reading, critical discussion, and analytical writing.
- Refine their scholarly writing process through peer review and revision planning.
- Produce well-crafted academic prose by developing a clear and compelling argument (thesis) that accounts for its audience, is supported by textual evidence and, where appropriate, draws on properly cited scholarly sources.
- Historically contextualize and creatively process the COVID-19 pandemic through the creation of a “pandemic storybook” (inspired by the CDC’s Spanish influenza pandemic storybook) or a scholarly essay written for a general audience.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Please secure a copy of the following texts. Additional readings will be made available on Canvas.

- Christian W. McMillen, *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016)
- Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 1990) [NOTE: this text was required for Health Humanities as Craft, so you may have a copy already!]
- Alejandro Morales, *The Rag Doll Plagues* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991)
- Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1990)

GRADE DISTRIBUTION:

Your grade in this course will be calculated accordingly:

- Active and Engaged Participation: 10%
- Critical Analysis Papers (x4): 60% (15% each)
- Peer Review and Revision Reflections: 10%
- Final Project (Public Writing OR Pandemic Storybook): 20%
 - Final Project Prospectus: 5%
 - Final Project: 10%
 - Final Project Presentation: 5%

Revisions will be considered on a case-by-case basis for students receiving below a B on a Critical Analysis Paper. Students wishing to revise a paper must contact the instructor within 48 hours from the return of graded assignments. Submitting a revision does not guarantee that your grade will improve. Revised essays showing significant improvement may receive up to a B (to replace the original grade). Should a revised essay receive a lower grade than the original submission, the student will receive the higher of the two grades. Revisions to final projects will not be permitted.

Please note: I am happy to provide feedback on early drafts of Critical Analysis Papers and Final Projects. However, the feedback I provide on early drafts will not be totally comprehensive; that is, because your next draft will have improved does not mean that it is perfect. Receiving feedback on an early draft will not ensure you an A.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS:

Active and Engaged Participation: Students are required to be active participants in this course. This means showing up to class on time and having completed the assigned reading for the day, ready to meaningfully and respectfully contribute to class discussions. A meaningful contribution will demonstrate careful reading of the assigned text(s), remain relevant to the discussion, and offer new insight. Your presence is determined by your participation in this class; students who attend class without contributing to the conversation may be considered absent.

Engaged participation contributes a significant percentage of your overall grade because this is a seminar—a small, discussion-based course—rather than a lecture-based class. Our time together will be spent digging into the assigned readings/materials, wrestling with open-ended questions and evaluating the merits—and faults—of the aesthetic choices and theoretical investments presented in artistic and scholarly texts on the syllabus. Because this is a small group, it is all the more essential that everyone comes to class prepared for a lively, engaged conversation!

I understand that students may need to miss class due to extenuating circumstances, clerkship schedules, or other academic obligations. If you will be unable to attend class, please contact the instructor ASAP and we will find a way to accommodate your scheduling needs. Students are responsible for all course material despite any absences; students will be expected to complete assigned readings and watch the recorded lecture for any class sessions they may miss.

Critical Analysis Papers: Students will complete four short (3–4 pages, double-spaced, 1” margins, standard 12-point font) Critical Analysis Papers over the course of the semester, one for each of the first four modules in the course. These papers will, through critical analysis of one the primary texts (short stories, novels, poems, or films) assigned for the module, develop a thesis that provides an answer to one of the module’s guiding questions (see the Course Calendar for guiding questions). Students may opt to devise their own guiding question(s) for these papers, subject to instructor approval.

Peer Review and Revision Reflections: Because revision is an integral component of the writing process, students will engage in peer review of each of their Critical Analysis Papers and, based on this feedback (and that received from the instructor), will draft short (200–300 word) revision reflections summarizing what they learned through the peer-review process and detailing how they would revise their paper.

Final Project: The purpose of the final project is to more broadly and historically contextualize the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis outbreak narrative. How have news coverage, social media, and/or popular culture either uncritically repurposed or consciously resisted the conventions of outbreak narrative in the COVID era? How have we written—indeed, how are we *still* writing—the story of this most recent pandemic? Whose voices dominate these narratives and whose are overlooked (or even deliberately silenced)? Students may choose one of two options, detailed below.

- 1. Public Writing Project:** This project asks students to translate what we have learned and discussed over the course of the semester for a general audience by drafting a scholarly essay intended for a general audience that critically considers how COVID-19 echoes early pandemics and/or the conventions of outbreak narrative. Essentially, this essay will answer the question “what do previous pandemics teach us about the COVID-era?” or “how and why are the narrative conventions, themes, tropes, and/or symbolism we have discussed in class relevant to anyone other than film, literature, or health humanities scholars?” [This essay](#) by health humanities scholar Kirsten Ostherr provides a good model. This essay should be between 5–7 pages (double-spaced, 1” margins, standard 12-point font).
- 2. Pandemic Storybook Project:** This project invites students to think critically about how firsthand accounts inform our historical understanding of pandemic, as well as how they compare to fictional narratives. This project consists of three parts: (1) First, choose a narrative from the CDC’s [Pandemic Influenza Storybook](#) and analyze how this story relates to one of the fictional accounts of pandemic influenza we read in Module 3, then (2) write an entry for a COVID-19 Pandemic Storybook that represents your experience of the pandemic, and finally (3) acting as an archivist or historian, write a catalog description that contextualizes your COVID-19 Pandemic Storybook entry. To effectively contextualize your story, this catalog description will cite research that explains its references, identifies key themes, situates the story within the wider sociopolitical context, and explains your narrative’s significance as a record of this moment. Taken together, the written elements of this project should be between 5–7 pages (roughly 2 pages per element, double-spaced, 1” margins, standard 12-point font).

Students will be expected to turn a final project prospectus one week before their final project is due and will prepare a short presentation of their project to be delivered during our final class period; see below for further details.

Final Project Prospectus: Students will turn in a Final Project Prospectus one week before their Final Projects are due. The purpose of a project prospectus is to (1) describe your project, (2) outline a provisional thesis, and (3) provide a brief overview of the evidence you intend to include in support of your argument. An effective prospectus will provide an overview of the main idea (argument) you will flesh out and defend in your final project:

think of it as a preview. The prospectus is to be approximately 1 single-spaced page in length (standard 12-point font, 1” margins) and be written as a prose narrative (i.e., not a bulleted list or outline). A detailed assignment description will be available on Canvas well-ahead of the due date.

Final Project Presentation: Students will present their final project on the final day of class. Students are expected to prepare a polished, professional presentation using appropriate visual aids. These presentations should not only describe your final project, but also present its central argument and evidence in a different format. Students should also come prepared for a Q&A session following their presentation.

COURSE CALENDAR:

Module One: Outbreak, Narrative, and the “Outbreak Narrative”	
<p>Guiding Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When epidemic is imagined in fiction (rather than reported in newspapers, for example) what might it symbolize, politically, socially, and/or culturally? • What are the tropes, themes, and narrative conventions associated with “outbreak”? • How do stories about epidemic circulate outside of fiction—that is, what are the notable features of nonfictional outbreak narrative? • How do fictional representations of outbreak shape popular culture, politics, and/or scientific narratives about epidemic disease? • How does pandemic offer a productive perspective for understanding the history of colonialism and/or global capitalist networks? • What biases color the stories we tell about epidemic? 	
Week One (Jan 6)	
<p>INDEPENDENT STUDY: We will not meet in person this week. At your own pace, complete the assigned readings and short, introductory essay assignment (due Monday, January 10).</p>	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McMillen, “Introduction” (pp. 1-6) • Jill Lepore, “What Our Contagion Fables are Really About” (March 2020) and “How Do Plague Stories End?” (March 2021) • Nicholas LePan, “Visualizing the History of Pandemics” 	<p>Submit a short, introductory essay (500-600 words) to Canvas by midnight on Monday, January 10. In addition to reflecting on the assigned readings, consider why did you sign up for this course and what do you want to get out of it? What draws you to “plague” stories? What is it like to read and reflect on outbreak narratives in the midst of a pandemic?</p>

Week Two (Jan 13)	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morales, <i>The Rag Doll Plagues</i>, Book One (pp. 11-66) • Wald, “Introduction” and “Imagined Immunities” (pp. 1-67) • (Optional) Gerard, “The Plague in Literature and Myth” (17 pages) 	
Week Three (Jan 20)	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morales, <i>The Rag Doll Plagues</i>, Books Two and Three (pp. 69-200) 	Critical Analysis Paper #1 due Monday, January 24 (midnight). View Assignment Details and Submit on Canvas.

Module Two: Cholera	
<p>Guiding Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do outbreak narrative function as sociopolitical allegory? • What do outbreak narratives teach us about the societies we live within? That is, what social values, biases, and/or inequities do they reveal to us? • Is “plague” a social leveler? Why or why not? • What does the spread of infectious disease reveal to us about our place within local and global communities? What connections does it obscure or uncover? 	
Week Four (Jan 27)	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McMillen, “Cholera” (pp. 60-72) • Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (6 pages) • Phillips, “The Rich Can’t Hide from a Plague” (March 2020) 	Peer Review #1 in class on January 27. Submit completed peer review form and brief reflection (200-300 words) to Canvas by midnight on Friday, January 28.

Week Five (Feb 3)

INDEPENDENT STUDY: We will not meet in person this week. Focus on making a dent on the assigned readings, which we will discuss in class on Feb 10.

Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sayre et al., "Cholera!!! Caution to the Public" (4 pages) Averill, The Cholera Fiend (100 pages) Altschuler, "The Gothic Origins of Global Health" (26 pages) 	
Week Six (Feb 10)	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sayre et al., "Cholera!!! Caution to the Public" (4 pages) Averill, The Cholera Fiend (100 pages) Altschuler, "The Gothic Origins of Global Health" (26 pages) 	Critical Analysis Paper #2 due Monday, February 14 (midnight). View Assignment Details and Submit on Canvas.

Module Three: Influenza

Guiding Questions:

- How has the deadliest pandemic in recent history been remembered in American literature?
- Given the relative absence of references to the 1918 influenza pandemic in literature, how do non-literary narratives bear witness to the pandemic in cultural memory?
- How do flu pandemic stories employ the conventions of outbreak narrative and how/why does outbreak narrative fail to capture the "full story" or the flu (if at all)? (Asked another way, are pandemic flu stories outbreak narratives?)
- How does literature memorialize death, loss, and trauma?
- How is pandemic influenza tied to global networks of trade and travel, international politics, and World War I?

Week Seven (Feb 17):

Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> McMillen, "Influenza" (pp. 89-102) 	Peer Review #2 in class on February 17. Submit completed peer review form and brief reflection

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bristow, “It’s as Bad as Anything Can Be: Patients, Identity, and the Influenza Pandemic” (8 pages) • Outka, “Wood for the Coffins Ran Out: Modernism and the Shadowed Afterlife of the Influenza Pandemic” (21 pages) 	(200-300 words) to Canvas by midnight on Friday, February 18.
Week Eight (Feb 24):	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voigt, selections from <i>Kyrie</i> • Explore the CDC’s “Pandemic Influenza Storybook” • Belling, “Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918” (23 pages) 	
Week Nine (Mar 3): SPRING BREAK (no class)	
Week Ten (Mar 10):	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Porter, <i>Pale Horse, Pale Rider</i> (pp. 139–224) • Brooker, “Nightmare and Apocalypse in Katherine Anne Porter’s <i>Pale Horse, Pale Rider</i>” (20 pages) 	Critical Analysis #3 due Monday, March 14 (midnight). View Assignment Details and Submit on Canvas.

Module Four: HIV/AIDS
<p>Guiding Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does “plague” writing address national politics? That is, how does it prompt us to reflect on political systems and rhetoric? • How do outbreak narratives represent mass death and individual suffering? • How have the ways we record HIV/AIDS in America changed since the earliest days of the epidemic? • What biases and stigma inform HIV/AIDS outbreak narratives? • Are HIV/AIDS stories outbreak narratives? What conventions of outbreak narrative do they employ and which don’t seem to apply?

Week Eleven (Mar 17):	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McMillen, “HIV/AIDS” (pp. 103–118) • John McIntyre, “In Time of Plague: How Poetry About AIDS Has Shifted Through the Years” (November 2014) • Smith, selections from <i>Don’t Call Us Dead</i> • Cuadros, selections from <i>City of God</i> 	Peer Review #3 in class on March 17. Submit completed peer review form and brief reflection (200-300 words) to Canvas by midnight on Friday, March 18.
Week Twelve (Mar 24):	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sontag, “AIDS and Its Metaphors” • Kushner, <i>Angels in America</i>, Act I: “Bad News” (pp. 9–48) 	
Week Thirteen (Mar 31):	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch episodes 1–3 of <i>Angels in America</i> (2003 HBO miniseries; approx. 3 hours) • Waterman, “Plague Time (Again)” (24 pages) 	Critical Analysis Paper #4 due Monday, April 4 (midnight). View Assignment Details and Submit on Canvas.

Module Five: Outbreak Narrative in the COVID-19 Era
<p>Guiding Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have news coverage, social media, and/or popular culture either uncritically repurposed or consciously resisted the conventions of outbreak narrative in the COVID era? • How have we written—indeed, how are we <i>still</i> writing—the story of this most recent pandemic? • Whose voices dominate these narratives and whose are overlooked (or even deliberately silenced)? • What do fictionalized accounts of real epidemics tell us about our society’s collective hopes and fears? • What biases color the stories we tell about epidemic? • How do recent stories about fictional epidemic or pandemic illness reuse or reimagine familiar themes, tropes, or narrative conventions? • What is unique about contemporary outbreak narratives?

Week Fourteen (Apr 7):	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
NO READING DUE THIS WEEK. Class time will be devoted to peer review and final project development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer Review #4 in class on April 7. Submit completed peer review form and brief reflection (200-300 words) to Canvas by midnight on Friday, April 8. Final project proposal due Monday, April 18 at midnight. View assignment details and submit on Canvas.
Week Fifteen (Apr 14):	
INDEPENDENT STUDY + STUDENT CONFERENCES: We will not meet in person this week. Class time is dedicated to working on your final project and meeting one-on-one with the instructor to discuss your final project.	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
NO READING DUE THIS WEEK. Continue reading/research for your final project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final project proposal due Monday, April 11 at midnight. View assignment details and submit on Canvas. Final Project due Monday, April 18 at midnight. View assignment details and submit on Canvas.
Week Sixteen (Apr 21):	
Reading Due:	Writing Assignments Due:
NO READING DUE THIS WEEK. Class time will be dedicated to student presentations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final Project due Monday, April 18 at midnight. View assignment details and submit on Canvas. Students will present their final projects to the class on April 21; see Canvas for details.