

FOUZ4A 2025-2026

English Literature: Topics in Post-45 American Literature

American Madness: Contemporary U.S. Literature and Mental Health

David Lombard

Mondays, 10am-1pm (MSI 02.08)

1. Course Description

This course explores how late 20th- and 21st-century American literature represents and renegotiates experiences of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression. Through readings of (Young Adult) novels, memoirs, poetry, and graphic memoirs, this course examines the aesthetic, culture-specific, didactic, and ethical dimensions of writing about 'madness' (or serious mental health conditions). More precisely, it considers how literature can illuminate the lived realities of mental illness while also contributing to interrogating psychiatric authority and to promoting destigmatization. This course's comparative angle, alternating between seminal works published in the 20th century and more recent ones from the 21st century, explores how specific developments in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory (e.g., changes in approaches to treatment, diagnosis, and hospitalization, and the anti-psychiatry movement and the neurodiversity and Mad Pride movements) have affected general perceptions of mental illness as well as the literature about mental health itself.

The course places literary texts in conversation with critical theory and scholarship from the broad interdisciplinary field of the health humanities, drawing from disciplines such as graphic medicine, disability studies, Mad studies, feminist theory, affect theory, and the history of psychiatry. It investigates how authors give voice to interior states often misunderstood, stigmatized, and deemed unspeakable, and how narrative features can complement or resist clinical narratives. Since mental health conditions such as schizophrenia and depression have had gender, classist, and racist overtones in the U.S. context, special attention is also given to intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality in shaping how mental illness is experienced and represented.

Throughout this course, students will engage in analytical writing, discussion-based inquiry, and personal reflection, developing critical frameworks for reading narratives of mental health with contextual awareness while developing informed narrative empathy.

2. Course Activities

After two **introductory sessions**, which will frame the general topic in relation to theoretical discussions in the interdisciplinary field of the health humanities, the seminar will consist of (more or less) **biweekly sessions**, which you prepare in **group meetings**. Each group of some seven students will receive a set of questions to discuss in a group meeting, and each group will hand in a short two- to three-page paper on the basis of that meeting that will form the basis of the seminars. Group papers can be written by two students (each student *must* be involved in the writing of at least one group paper) in the course of the term.

3. Readings

You will be expected to get copies of three novels, two memoirs, and a graphic memoir. The short story is available online (see [here](#)) and the poems are available on Toledo. All theoretical texts are available either on Toledo (under "Course Documents") or online.

▪ Primary Texts

- Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964)
- Esmé Weijun Wang's *The Collected Schizophrenias* (2019)
- Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963)
- Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (2006)
- Ottessa Moshfegh's "Bettering Myself" (2013)
- Selection of poems:
 - ⇒ Lowell, Robert, "Waking in the Blue," from *Life Studies* (1959)
 - ⇒ Sexton, Anne, "The Addict," from *Live or Die* (1966)
 - ⇒ Glück, Louise, "Dedication to Hunger," from *Descending Figure* (1980)
 - ⇒ Coleman, Wanda, "The Saturday Afternoon Blues," from *Imagoes* (1983)
 - ⇒ Komunyakaa, Yusef, "Facing It," from *Dien Cai Dau* (1988)
 - ⇒ Cisneros, Sandra, "I Am So Depressed I Feel Like Jumping in the River Behind My House but Won't Because I'm Thirty-Eight and Not Eighteen," from *Loose Woman: Poems* (1994)
 - ⇒ Alexie, Sherman, "Grief Calls Us to the Things of this World," *Face* (2009)
 - ⇒ Diaz, Natalie, "My Brother at 3 A.M.," from *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012)
 - ⇒ Harjo, Joy, "I Am Not Ready to Die Yet," from *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (2015)
- Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1995)
- Ellen Forney's *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* (2012)

▪ Secondary Texts (Toledo)

- Beresford, Peter (2020). "'Mad', Mad Studies and Advancing Inclusive Resistance," *Disability & Society*, 35:8, 1337-1342.
- Berlant, Laura (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1-2; 95-119.
- Czerwiec, M. K. et al. (2015). "Introduction," in *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, edited by M. K. Czerwiec et al., University Park: Penn State University Press, 1-20.
- Jamison, Kay R. (1994). *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: The Free Press, 11-28.
- Kulbaga, Theresa A. and Leland G. Spencer (2025). "Autobiographical Epistemology: Legitimate(d) Knowledges in Life Narratives," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 48:3, 329-350.
- La Cour, Erin, and Anna Poletti (2021). "Graphic Medicine's Possible Futures: Reconsidering Poetics and Reading," *Biography*, 44:2&3, 1-23.
- Nord, Camilla (2025). "Are You Hurting? The Mental Illness Epidemic," *Times Literary Supplement*, June 20. Retrieved from <https://app.the-tls.co.uk/212318/content.html> (accessed on January 20, 2026).
- Price, Margaret (2015). "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia*, 30:1, 268-284.

- Rensin, Emmett (2025). "Ugly Truths: The Politics of the Mad Memoir," *Boston Review*, February 26, 13-15. Retrieved from <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/ugly-truths/> (accessed on January 20, 2026).
- Rudeen, Christopher R. (2025). "'Bound Tightly in the Pack': Cloth and Care in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*," *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 46, 451-464.
- Scull, Andrew (2022). *Desperate Remedies: Psychiatry's Turbulent Quest to Cure Mental Illness*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 248-255; 130-134; 357-359.
- Showalter, Elaine (1987). *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. London: Virago Press, 203-219.
- Staub, Michael E. (2011). *Madness Is Civilization: When the Diagnosis Was Social, 1948-1980*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1-7.

4. Class Schedule

Date	Primary Topic	Critical and Theoretical Texts / Podcasts
09.02	From Narrative Medicine to the Critical Medical/Health Humanities (Intro 1)	• Podcast “Health Humanities /w Prof Paul Crawford” (link here) • Podcast “Critical Medical Humanities /w Prof Angela Woods” (link here)
16.02	Contemporary American Literature, ‘Madness,’ and Disability (Intro 2)	• Beresford • Nord • Price (2015) • Staub
02.03	Greenberg, <i>I Never Promised You a Rose Garden</i>	• Rudeen • Scull (248-255) • Podcast “History of Psychiatry and Medicine /w Dr Chris Millard” (link here)
09.03	Wang, <i>The Collected Schizophrenias</i>	• Kulbaga and Spencer • Rensin • Podcast “Epistemic Injustice /w Prof Miranda Fricker and Prof Havi Carel” (link here)
23.03	Plath, <i>The Bell Jar</i>	• Scull (130-134) • Showalter
30.03	Poems (guest lecture Dr. Maria Boletsi)	• Podcast “Poetry and Lived Experience /w Prof Margarita Saona” (link here)
27.04	Moshfegh, “Bettering Myself”	• Berlant

	Vizzini, <i>It's Kind of a Funny Story</i>	
11.05	Jamison, <i>The Unquiet Mind</i>	• Jamison (1994) • Scull (357-359)
18.05	Forney, <i>Marbles</i>	• Czerwiec et al. • La Cour and Poletti • Podcast "Graphic Medicine /w Dr Ian Williams and Dr Muna Al-Jawad" (link here)

5. Group Papers—Practical Arrangements

- After the second session, you will be divided into groups of some five students. You will meet with this study group before each of the six (more or less) biweekly sessions. Each group will be given two specific **study questions** (via Toledo, "Course Documents," "Study Questions") that you try to answer during your meeting. Make sure you schedule the meeting in time, so you have time to write the group paper. If you experience problems in your group, make sure to contact me about this (david.lombard@kuleuven.be).
- On each occasion, two of you will be responsible for converting the discussion into a two-to three-page **group paper** (800-1200 words long). You are free to select who reports when.
 - In this paper, you present the group's **answers** to the two questions you have been assigned in the form of one or two essay-style answers. If your group has not come to a consensus about a particular question, you are welcome to state that difference of opinion (and offer arguments for the different positions).
 - Make sure the paper includes exact **page references** to and relevant (and typically short) quotations from both the theoretical and the literary texts.
 - You can include **extra material** that is not on the reading list, but that is in no way compulsory.
 - Make sure you clearly indicate the name of the group, the name of the **main author**, and the names of all the students who also attended the study group at the top of the page. Name your document "Group [name of group] [first and last name main authors]."
 - The main authors submit the group paper on Toledo (in a discussion forum; accessible to the rest of the class) no later than 8pm on the **Thursday before class**. This means the deadlines for submission are 26.02, 05.03, 19.03, 23.04, 07.05, and 14.05. Your work will serve as the basis of the class discussion.
- Each group will write six group papers in total. When you have had your turn serving as main authors, you can decide to write another report as main authors. This is especially useful in case several of you are not satisfied with their performance in their first paper as a main author.

6. Report from the Field

In addition to the group papers, I will ask you to **write an individual two-page report** on a topic of your choice, which must be somehow related to the content of the course (i.e., mental health, literature, and the arts and health humanities) and critically informative. This could be about an interesting book you have read and made you think of the course, an exhibition at a museum, a movie, a podcast, a provocative article, or a conference or scientific event you attended. Here are a few suggestions (but you are free to talk about other materials/places/events!):

- The [Museum Dr. Guislain](#) in Ghent;
- The [KAOS space for Art](#) in Brussels;
- The [Gasthuis Museum](#) in Geel;
- Events organized by the [Leuven Center for Health Humanities](#), [CHARM](#), or [Metrodora](#);
- The [Conversations about Arts, Humanities and Health podcast](#), and the [Medical Humanities Podcast](#).

7. Grade

Your grade will be determined by your participation in the course of the term (**continuous assessment**) (50%) and by your performance at the **oral exam** (50%).

- The **continuous assessment** itself consists of two components (worth 15% and 35% of the total grade respectively).
 - Your participation in **class discussions**. I expect you to have carefully and critically read the primary and secondary material, and to have thought about the study questions. In class, you should be ready to share your ideas with your colleagues.
 - Your performances in the **group papers**. This is an individual grade, and the group paper(s) for which you serve as a main author is the most important factor for this part of the grade. Peer evaluation at the end of the term is another one.
- The exam is an **oral exam**, which will be partly **open-book**. You are allowed to bring copies of all literary works and of all critical and theoretical texts that have been made available on Toledo. The exam will consist of two parts. For the first, you will be presented with **one comparative question** about two or more of the literary or theoretical and critical texts. The questions will test [1] your insight in the texts, [2] your ability to connect the texts to the general topic of the course, and [3] your ability to relate the texts, both literary and non-literary, to each other. In the second part of the exam, you hand in your **two-page report from the field** and do an **eight-minute presentation** on the topic of your report, linking it to the themes and texts in the course. You will be asked to register the topic of your choice before the start of the exam period (so that everyone does not present on the same topic).