

# English 741

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Katy Ryan, ENGL 741, Fall 2001, American Literature Seminar  
ENG 741: American Literature Seminar

*Committing Bodies, Reading Suicide*

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Office Hours: Tues. and Thurs. 1:15-2:15 and by appt.

## Course Description

Suicide is difficult to read. Despite the hermeneutic crisis it often provokes, self-inflicted death is ubiquitous in literature precisely as a sign: it both generates and structures fictions about self, community, and nation. I anticipate that we will move uneasily between the material practice of self-destruction and its literary representation, aware that bodies and texts are never opposed, overtly unopposed in this case: the medical determination of suicide follows from acts of reading: examining the body, reconstructing patterns of behavior, interpreting notes. We will read a range of theoretical, fictional, poetic, and theatrical texts that suggest the persistent unclarity and strange appeal of suicidal acts. We will consider why suicide has accumulated such explanatory force and why it persists as a trope in twentieth-century American literary texts.

The syllabus is divided into five interrelated sections

1. The Language of Suicide
2. Falling in Public
3. Framing Histories of Race in America
4. Intertextual Desire: Colonialism, War, Memory
5. Performing Death

In the first section, we will briefly survey the history and language of suicide in Western culture. Then, we will consider how literary theorists have adapted language about death to describe the

modern experiences of reading and writing. The remaining sections gather literary texts that share a common engagement with history and political resistance.

"Falling in Public" introduces the literary, psychoanalytical, and medical conflation of passivity and femininity with self-destruction. Here, we read novels in which female characters fall, literally or figuratively, to their deaths. The third section turns toward modern and postmodern negotiations of race in texts that are explicitly structured by self-destructive acts. Borrowing from Huey Newton, we will distinguish between "revolutionary" and "reactionary" suicide. The fourth section focuses, in part, on what Julia Kristeva has referred to as the "most conspicuous sign" of modern writing--intertextuality. We will consider the relationship between power and suicide in novels that either engage with a previous literary text (*Wide Sargasso Sea* : *Jane Eyre*. *Travesty* : *The Fall*) or position suicide as an entryway into the impossible task of representing historical calamity (*Asphodel* : World War One. *Maus* : the Holocaust). The final section offers three quite different theatrical texts that enact the precariousness of the modern self onstage. We will conclude the semester with *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath's posthumous publication that performs, with uncommon force, the myth of the modern suicidal poet.

### **Requirements:**

In addition to not killing yourself, you are required to be a Resident Expert for one week. You will focus on one week's reading with particular attention. That day, you should come to class with several guiding observations or questions and some related additional material. We will look to you to make connections and keep the conversation moving.

Each week, you will write a one-page, single-spaced, informal response to the readings.

A twenty-page research paper will be due on a date of our choosing. You should talk with me about your project around mid-semester.

### **Required Texts**

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*

William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*

H. D., *Asphodel*

John Hawkes, *Travesty*

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Fae Myenne Ng, *Bone*

Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

Course Packet available at Mountainlair Copy Center

**Course packet will include (in order):**

\* indicates a handout

\*Emile Durkheim. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. 1897. Trans. John A. Spaulding and

George Simpson. New York: Free Press, 1951. [Preface (34-39), Introduction

(41-53), 145-151, (276), 277-294]

Sigmund Freud. "Mourning and Melancholy." 1914-1916. *Complete Psychological*

*Works*. Vol. XIV. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1957. 243-58.

---. "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman." 1920-1922.

*Complete Psychological Works*. Vol. XVIII. Trans. James Strachey. London:

Hogarth Press, 1955. 147-72.

Georges Minois. *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*. Trans. Lydia

G. Cochrane. [Chapter 11 (278-301)]

Kay Redfield Jamison. *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*. New York: Random

House, 1999. [Chapter 1 (11-25)]

Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath.

New York: Noonday Press, 1977. 142-48

Ross Chambers. "Reading, Mourning, and the Death of the Author." *Narrative* 5.1

(1997): 67-76.

Peggy Phelan. "Not Surviving Reading." *Narrative* 5.1 (1997): 77-87.

\*Alan Warren Friedman. *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. [Chapter 1 (5-30)]

Margaret Higonnet. "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide." *The Female Body in Western*

*Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman. Cambridge:

Harvard UP, 1986. 68-83.

Elisabeth Bronfen. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. New

York: Routledge, 1992. [Chapter 13 (269-290)]

Diana Fuss. "Freud's Fallen Women." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6.1 (1993): 1-23.

Lisa Lowe. *Immigrant Acts*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 121-127

\*Richard Gray. *The Life of William Faulkner*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. 136-150.

\*Patricia McKee. *Producing American Races: Henry James, William Faulkner, Toni*

*Morrison*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. [Chapter 3 (99-122)]

\*Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski. "The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota."

*Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine: A Casebook*. Ed. Hertha D. Sweet Wong. New

York: Oxford UP, 2000. 13-26

\*Huey P. Newton. *Revolutionary Suicide*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.

- \*Deborah Anne Moreland. "The Suffragettes, the Great War, and Representation in H. D.'s *Asphodel*." *Sagetrieb* 14.1/2 (1995): 243-260.
- \*Lawrence Rainey. *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998. [Chapter 5 (146-168)]
- \*Gayatri Spivak. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243-261.
- \*Jean Rhys. *The Letters of Jean Rhys*. Ed. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly. New York: Viking, 1984. 260-269.
- \*Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn. "The White Creole Woman's Place in Society." *Across the Lines: Intertextuality and Transcultural Communication in the New Literatures in English*. Ed. Wolfgang Kloos. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998. 177-190.
- \*James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 12-41.
- Jeanne C. Ewert. "Reading Visual Narrative: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*." *Narrative* 8.1 (2000): 87-103.
- Marianne Hirsh. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. [Chapter 1 (17-40)]
- Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. I. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1980. [Part 5 (135-159)]
- Rita Ferrari. *Innocence, Power, and the Novels of John Hawkes*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996. [Introduction (1-13)]
- Joseph M. Conte. "'Design and Debris': John Hawkes's *Travesty*, Chaos Theory, and the

Swerve." *Critique* 37.2 (1996): 120-138.

\*Adrienne Kennedy. *Funnyhouse of a Negro. Adrienne Kennedy in One Act*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.

\*Djuna Barnes. *The Death of Life. At the Roots of the Stars: The Short Plays*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon P, 1995.

Linda Wagner, ed. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984.

Introduction (1-19).

Elisabeth Bronfen. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 1992. [Chapter 18 (395-407)]

**Recommended Texts** (\* are available at bookstore)

A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*

Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (novel)

James Baldwin, *Another Country* (novel)

Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*

Shari Benstock, "'The word which made all clear': The Silent Close of *The House of Mirth*" in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*

Jeffrey Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide*

Svetlana Boym, "*Death in Quotation Marks*": *Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*

Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*

Geoffrey Canada, *Reaching Up for Manhood* (epilogue)

Hayden Carruth, "Suicide" (essay) in *Suicides and Jazzers*

Velina Hasu Houston, *Tea* (play)

\*David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (play)

\*Kay Redfield Jamison; *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*

Abbas Kiarostami, Dir. *Taste of Cherry* (film)

Hirokazu Kore-eda, Dir. *Mabarosi* (film)

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (creative memoir)

Howard Kushner, *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land* (repl. *American Suicide*)

\*Karl Marx, *Marx on Suicide*, eds. Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson

Mary McCarthy Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*

\*Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*

Dorothy Parker, "Big Blond" (short story)

Eric Rofes, *"I Thought People Like That Killed Themselves": Lesbians, Gay Men,  
and Suicide*

Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls* (play)

Dorothy Smith, "No One Commits Suicide: Textual Analysis of Ideological  
Practices." *Human Studies* 6 (1983): 309-359.

James Welch, *The Death of Jim Loney* (novel)

Alan Wolfe, *The Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan: The Case of Dazai Osamu*

## **Calendar**

## **The Language of Suicide**

Aug. 22:

Anne Sexton, "The Truth the Dead Know," "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire

Further," "Kind Sir: These Woods," "Wanting to Die," "Suicide Note," "Music Swims Back to Me," "Oh," "Sylvia's Death," *Selected Letters*

- Diana Hume George, chapter 8, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987.
- Adrienne Rich, "Anne Sexton: 1928-1974." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979.

Introduction to Durkheim

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Aug. 29

Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*

Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy." 1914-1916.

Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*.

Kay Redfield Jamison, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*.

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Sept. 5

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*.

Ross Chambers, "Reading, Mourning, and the Death of the Author."

Peggy Phelan, "Not Surviving Reading."

Alan Warren Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*.

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**Falling in Public**



Sept. 12

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

- Margaret Higonnet, "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide."
- Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic.*

Chapter 13

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Sept. 19

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

- Sigmund Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman."
- Diana Fuss, "Freud's Fallen Women."

Sept. 26

Fae Myenne Ng, *Bone*

- Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts.*
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### **Framing Histories of Race in America**

Oct. 3

William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*

- Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. 136-150.
  - Patricia McKee, *Producing American Races: Henry James, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison.* Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
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Oct. 10

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*

- Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski, "The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota."

Ernest Hemingway, "Indian Camp"

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Oct. 17

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

- Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.
  - Cowley and Mannix, *African Slave Trade*
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### **Intertextual Desire: Colonialism, War, Memory**

Oct. 24

H. D. *Asphodel*

- Deborah Anne Moreland, "The Suffragettes, the Great War, and Representation in H. D.'s *Asphodel*."
  - Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*.
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Oct. 31

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

- Gayatri Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism."
- *The Letters of Jean Rhys*.
- Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn, "The White Creole Woman's Place in Society."

Nov. 7

Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*

- James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge*
- Jeanne C. Ewert, "Reading Visual Narrative: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*."
- Marianne Hirsh, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*.

Paul Celan, from *Selected Poetry and Prose*

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Nov. 14

John Hawkes, *Travesty*

- Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*
  - Rita Ferrari. *Innocence, Power, and the Novels of John Hawkes*.
  - Joseph M. Conte, " 'Design and Debris': John Hawkes's *Travesty*, Chaos Theory, and the Swerve."
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Nov. 21 Thanksgiving Holiday

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## **Performing Death**

Nov. 28

Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

Sam Shepard, *Suicide in B-Flat*

Djuna Barnes, *The Death of Life*

film: *Thelma and Louise*

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Dec. 5

Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*

- Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*. Chapter 18 (395-407)
- Linda Wagner, ed. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*.