

Murder and the Imagination
ARTS 310
Spring 2009
W 6-8:30 p.m.
KH 232

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Materials:

Texts:

The Bacchae, by Euripides, ed. by Stephen Esposito, Focus Classical Library, 2004
Double Indemnity, by James M. Cain, Vintage Crime, 1992
The Talented Mr. Ripley, by Patricia Highsmith, Vintage Crime, 1955
Presumed Innocent, by Scott Turow, Warner Books, 1987
Brutal Imagination, by Cornelius Eady, A Marion Wood Book, Putnam's Sons, 2001
The Pillowman, by Martin McDonagh, Dramatists Play Service, 2003
Other materials provided by instructor

Course Description: Arts and Ideas courses are part of the UNCA liberal arts core curriculum, and take an interdisciplinary approach to the arts. Through lectures, films, video, artwork, etc., students are introduced to the creative process and presented with methods for analyzing and evaluating works of art. Over the course of the semester, we will consider and discuss the seemingly universal fascination with murder as a subject/focus/inspiration for artists.

This section will focus specifically on the public's appetite for murder. From ancient times to modern – as religious sacrifice, motivated by hatred, justice, greed, lust, insanity, or patriotism – killing has always fascinated us. Through the examination of visual art – photography by WeeGee and Robert Capa, paintings by Goya, Picasso, Cezanne, and others – films such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, television programs like *CSI* and *Dexter*, and works of literature such as *The Bacchae*, *Brutal Imagination*, *The Pillowman*, and *Double Indemnity*, we will look at how the taking of human life has triggered, stimulated, and troubled the artistic imagination. We will discuss government-sanctioned murder, as evidenced by war and the death penalty, the taboos of patricide and matricide, and the glamorization and fetishization of killing.

Attendance:

This class only meets once a week; therefore any absence is extremely detrimental to the flow of the course. Unless there is a true emergency, you will be expected to be here on Wednesdays promptly at 6 p.m. Two absences will result in a grade reduction of half a letter. This means that an A- will become a B+, and a B- will become a C. Two late arrivals will equal one absence. MISS CLASS AT YOUR PERIL! Note: Please turn off cell phones before entering class. You will be held up to public ridicule if you disturb class with a ringing phone. Also – and I can't believe I have to say this – thou shalt not send or receive text messages in class.

Late Work:

I have learned from experience that accepting late work results in more work for me, confusion in general, and, anarchy, ultimately. Therefore, all assignments are due by the end of the day on the due date. Late work will not be accepted, and you will receive a zero for the assignment. No exceptions.

In-Class Presentations:

You will be required to lead a discussion (approx. 15-20 min.) on the readings/works for that week. Tell us what connections you made, what interested, inspired, disturbed, or confused you. Come up with a list of questions to ask the class. Find outside research about the topic to share.

Response Papers:

Each week you will be expected to bring in, or produce in class, written responses to works read/watched/or seen. These responses will be collected and/or shared in class. They will also provide the basis for in-class discussion. Your responses will be evaluated on your engagement with the piece, how thoughtfully and deeply you are interacting with the material. **DO NOT GIVE A PLOT SUMMARY OR OVERVIEW.** Center your responses around the following areas: 1) On the level of content: (What is this about? How do you react to what it's saying?) 2) On a subjective basis: (What personal associations do you make? What did the piece make you think of? How did it make you feel?) 3) On an intellectual level: (What ideas or questions does this raise for you?) 4) On the level of style: (What sentences/scenes/images struck you as interesting or beautiful or strange? What worked well for you in the piece?) **DO NOT RESPOND WITH "I DIDN'T LIKE THIS," OR "I COULDN'T RELATE."** It isn't necessary that you like a piece, or that you relate to it, delve deeper and tell me what specifically (see above questions) made it difficult for or obnoxious to you.

Final Project:

Since this course focuses on murder as a fertile subject for art and the imagination, the final project will require you to do your own imagining. You will be asked to create an original artwork – literature, visual art, music, drama, multimedia – that deals with murder as its subject, and that takes into consideration, through homage, gesture, parody, or thematic design, at least two of the works you've encountered in the class this semester. Besides creating the piece, you will give a final presentation of 5-10 minutes in class. You will talk about what you've done, and about the process of its creation. The final project must be accompanied by a 3-5 page paper explaining this process. In the paper you will explain how the project fits with the kinds of work and discussion we explored in class, and you will take me through your thinking process for the project itself.

Evaluation:

Your final grade will be determined by a combination of factors. Class participation is crucial. However, it is not enough to simply talk in class; **the substance and relevance of your participation will weigh heavily.** To aid in discussion, you may be asked to write and share freewrites in class. These may or may not be collected. About 50 percent of your grade will be based on class participation, (contributing to discussions, sharing freewrites and exercises, working in groups, etc.); another 25 percent will be determined by the responses you write for each of the works; and the last 25 percent will be based on the quality of your final presentation/paper. If you have questions regarding your grade at any time during the term, please do not hesitate to ask.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE:

W 1/14 GUEST INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Sophie Mills

Hand out syllabus

Introduction to The Bacchae

W 1/21 Introduction to course

Where do we find it? Cue Psycho Killer. Music, movies, newspapers, books, TV shows, art work
 Tabloids/Hitchcock/Scandal/Columbine/Virginia Tech/Jeffrey Dahmer/Ted Bundy/OJ Simpson/
 /Boston Strangler/Dexter/CSI/Law&Order SVU/2Pac/Eminem/Marilyn Manson/Kasabian/Brian
 Jonestown Massacre/

Why are we obsessed with murder?

Read Cain & Abel. Red Barn Murder. Poe. Agatha Christie.

Show Hitchcock clips

Motives for murder?

Murder is wrong, unless it's right: state-sanctioned murder: war and death penalty, jihad, crusades

Read The Bacchae

W 1/28 The Spirits Moved Me

Discuss The Bacchae – response paper due

Raves and Mosh pits: mob mentality; Manson murders

Watch Helter Skelter

W 2/4 War and the Death Penalty

Visual representations of war: Capa, Goya, Picasso, etc.

In-class responses

Death penalty: excerpt from Dead Man Walking

Read Double Indemnity

W 2/11 Greed and Lust

Film and roman noir

James M. Cain

Show Double Indemnity

Response paper due

W/218 What's race got to do with it?

Response papers due

Modern Othello: The OJ Simpson case

The Bogeyman: Susan Smith/Charles Stuart

Read Presumed Innocent to p. 210

W 2/25 Vengeance and Jealousy

Eye for an Eye: The Emotional Circuitry of Violence

Finish Presumed Innocent

Response papers due

W 3/4 NO CLASS. INSTRUCTOR OUT OF TOWN

W 3/11 NO CLASS. SPRING BREAK

W 3/18 Crimes of Passion

Watch Presumed Innocent

Response paper in class

Show Chicago jailhouse sequence

Losing your head – Texas dentist runs over husband

Read Brutal Imagination

W 3/25 Hate Crimes

Discuss Brutal Imagination

Response paper due

Brandon Teena

James Byrd Jr.

Matthew Shepard

Watch Boys Don't Cry

Read The Talented Mr. Ripley

W 4/1 Serial Murder and Psychopathy

Read David Frank Schmid in class

Watch The Talented Mr. Ripley

R 4/2 Preying on the Disenfranchised: Prostitutes, Runaways, and Orphans

Jack the Ripper, Robert Yates, Green River Killer, Jeffrey Dahmer

Read The Pillowman

R 4/9 Ed Gein – Cottage Industry

Inspiration for Psycho, Texas Chainsaw Murders, and James Gumm from The Silence of the Lambs

Discuss The Pillowman

Response paper due

R 4/16 Presentations

R 4/23 Presentations

R 4/30 Presentations