TOPICS & GENRES IN LITERATURE: DEATH & DYING
IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Instructor: Dr. Sharon Talley
Office: FC 258
Office Hours: T 2:30-5:30; W 10:30-11:30; R 8:30-9:30 (and by appointment)
Telephone: 825-3265
E-mail: sharon.talley@tamucc.edu

Course Description: We will start from the assumption that death is not just a biological act but a cultural phenomenon that is historically specific and determined. Death itself is a narrative act—except in the case of our own deaths, it always will be mediated by the telling. In this course, you will gain a deeper understanding of death and dying and broaden your perspectives on this motif as it is reflected in American literature. Specific issues and topics for study will include the stages of death and mourning, the sentimentalizing of death, the rituals of death and mourning, death and the body, the desire for death, and the modern denial of death.

Student Learning Outcomes: Students who successfully complete the course will be able to:
- analyze American literature in the context of critical theories, cultural differences, and historical changes;
- demonstrate competency in literary research at the graduate level; and
- integrate research with their own critical insights.

Required Texts to Buy:
William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
Earnest Gaines, *A Lesson before Dying*
Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883*
Marsha Norman, *Night Mother*
Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Elegies in Blue*

Required Texts to Print: Included with your syllabus is a supplemental reading list of secondary texts. Portions of many of these texts (as well as some brief literary texts) are required readings that are available on Blackboard (approximately 450 pages total). I ask that you examine these works (as well as others) so that you can bring to our class discussions the critical observations of experienced scholars as well as your own insights. Having an understanding of these critical and theoretical conversations should also help you to formulate your own theses for your writings and presentations. If possible, I recommend that you print all these readings at the beginning of the semester, so you are sure to have them available when you need them.

Evaluation and Grading:
Reading journal 25 points
Short study 15 points
Class participation: 10 points
Discussion facilitation: 15 points
Independent research project:
  Critiques of two sources: 3 points
  Annotated bibliography: 5 points
  Abstract of your argument: 2 points
  Final paper: 25 points

A=90-100 pts.; B=80-89 pts.; C=70-79 pts.; D=60-69 pts.; F=below 60 pts.

**Reading Journal:** Throughout the semester, you will keep a journal in which you respond to and engage with the readings in an academic conversation. Please be sure that you type each entry and write about each of the assigned readings (theory and literature). The purpose of this assignment is not to summarize the readings. Instead, use the journal as a learning tool to raise questions, to make connections, and to engage critically with the texts that we read. On the week of your discussion facilitation, you are not required to turn in a reading journal. Otherwise, a journal entry for the week’s readings is due at the beginning of class each Tuesday from 2/5 through 4/30. Since the main purpose of the journal is to help you prepare for class discussion, late journals will not be accepted.

**Short Study:** You will expand one of your journal entries into a short study of four to five pages (typed and double-spaced). Arguing from a firm cultural/historical base and theoretical framework, the essay should analyze one of the primary texts as a representation of attitudes about some aspect of death and dying in America. While it will be appropriate to cite relevant secondary sources that we have read and discussed in class, this paper does not require sources outside our class readings, and the emphasis should be on your own insights and interpretation. The paper will be evaluated on the complexity, sophistication, and originality of your thesis, the selection and strength of the evidence that you use to support your claims, the clarity and coherence of your interpretive argument, your personal engagement with the primary text and related theory, and your command of MLA documentation requirements, writing conventions, and surface features.

**Participation and Attendance:** Because this course is a graduate seminar, attendance and participation are fundamental to success. You are expected to prepare all assignments on time and come to class prepared and willing to discuss the readings. In this class, the responsibility for originating and maintaining discussion rests principally with—and equally among—the students, rather than with the instructor. The course format will consist of both teacher- and student-facilitated discussion. In addition, students will work in small groups throughout the semester to discuss the readings. Consistent and informed participation in class discussion is essential, and attendance is required. You can miss one class without penalty; for every subsequent class you miss, two points will be subtracted from your class participation grade.

**Discussion Facilitation:** You will also be responsible for facilitating approximately 30-minutes of class discussion and related activities for one of the primary texts. Your task is not to present the material that we read but instead to lead us in examining a significant issue of your choice that is relevant to that day’s reading assignment. Do not read to the class. Instead, teach the class by using appropriate small group activities, support materials, visual aids, handouts, etc. On the class session immediately following, you will also provide a one-page self-assessment that describes and critiques the facilitation and related preparation (including a bibliography of the research that you
did). Note: You will need to contact me by the Thursday before your presentation to let me know what you plan to cover.

**Independent Research Project:** Using an historically and culturally grounded approach and one or more theories we have identified and/or critiqued over the semester, you will research and write a 12-15 page (typed and double-spaced) study that addresses a cultural/historical dimension of death and dying in America in relation three literary texts of your choice, at least one of which should not have been read for the course. Your objective in this paper will be to research, develop, and prove a *specifically focused and original thesis* about the issue as you see it constructed, reflected, and/or critiqued in the literary text(s). For instance, I might decide to use Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches*, and Phelp’s *Gates Ajar* to trace evolving attitudes toward death in the nineteenth century that support the thesis that the antebellum movement to domesticate death was 1) reinforced as a result of the U.S. Civil War to minimize the role of the body and 2) simultaneously enlarged to accommodate the nation’s need for justification, consolation, and reconciliation. All papers must incorporate a relevant body of scholarly secondary research (i.e., death theory, literary criticism, historical/cultural contextualization, etc.). Some scholarly periodicals are now available online, but other online materials are merely abstracts, which are not acceptable end sources. Allow enough time to order full-text copies of these articles through interlibrary loan. To help you research and prepare the final paper, you will:

- Prepare a one- to two-page (typed and double-spaced) critique of each of two secondary sources not read for class. These critiques should analyze and evaluate the sources, pointing to the relevance they have for your purposes.
- Prepare an annotated bibliography of all of the sources you plan to include in your paper, including a two- to three-sentence explanation of the relevance of each source. This bibliography should be in MLA form.
- Prepare a one- to two-page (typed and double-spaced) abstract of what you plan to argue in your paper. Such an abstract, which should include your thesis, can often be revised slightly to form the introduction of the paper.

The final paper, which will be due at the end of the semester, should adhere to MLA documentation requirements. Students will share their research insights during the last class, and we will also peer review complete drafts during this final class session.

**Late Assignments:** Please contact me by e-mail or telephone if an emergency arises and you cannot attend class. I will not accept late assignments unless you have made previous arrangements, and neither journals nor the final paper will be accepted late for any reason. An “Incomplete” will be given at my discretion only and must involve exceptional circumstances. To qualify for consideration, you must have satisfactorily completed two-thirds of the course requirements and met graduate standards for attendance and participation.

**Academic Advising:** Upon entering the MA in English Program, each student is assigned a faculty mentor by the Graduate Coordinator. You should make an appointment to meet with your faculty mentor every semester to develop a degree plan and monitor your progress toward graduation. Your faculty mentor can also answer questions and provide valuable information about the comprehensive examination, other degree requirements, Ph.D. programs, and career opportunities. To finalize your degree plan and register for graduation, you must also meet with the Graduate
Student Academic Advisor in the Academic Advising Center for the College of Liberal Arts. This office is located in Driftwood 203E and can be reached at (361) 825-3466.

**Graduate Student Academic Integrity Statement:** English graduate students are expected to “conduct themselves in accordance with the highest standards of academic honesty” (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Graduate Catalog). The Student Code of Conduct defines Academic Misconduct as cheating, plagiarism, multiple submissions, complicity, fabrication, falsification, and misrepresentation; in addition to “any behavior specifically prohibited by a faculty member in the course syllabus or class discussion” (*Student Code of Conduct*, Article III, 1. Academic Misconduct). Academic misconduct is a serious offence that will result in the professor assigning a serious penalty, possibly including failure for an assignment, failure in a course, or recommendation for dismissal from a program (*TAMUCC Graduate Catalog, Academic Honesty*). For each Academic Misconduct case, the faculty member must file a record, including a description of the disciplinary action taken, along with any materials involved, with his or her college dean, who will forward a copy to the Office of Student Affairs. Further information regarding the judicial process is available on the website of the Office for Student Affairs.

**Grade Appeal Process:** As stated in University Rule 13.02.99.C2, Student Grade Appeals, a student who believes that he or she has not been held to appropriate academic standards as outlined in the class syllabus, equitable evaluation procedures, or appropriate grading, may appeal the final grade given in the course. The burden of proof is upon the student to demonstrate the appropriateness of the appeal. A student with a complaint about a grade is encouraged to first discuss the matter with the instructor. For complete details, including the responsibilities of the parties involved in the process and the number of days allowed for completing the steps in the process, see University Rule 13.02.99.C2, Student Grade Appeals, and University Procedure 13.02.99.C2.01, Student Grade Appeal Procedures. These documents are accessible through the University Rules Website at [http://www.tamucc.edu/provost/university_rules/index.html](http://www.tamucc.edu/provost/university_rules/index.html). For assistance and/or guidance in the grade appeal process, students may contact the Office of Student Affairs.

**Students with Disabilities:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please call or visit Disability Services at (361) 825-5816 in CCH116. If you are a returning veteran and are experiencing cognitive and/or physical access issues in the classroom, or on campus, please contact the Disability Services office for assistance at (361) 825-5816.

**Blackboard 9.1:** To log into Blackboard, go to: [http://bb9.tamucc.edu](http://bb9.tamucc.edu). You must have a NET ID (also known as an Active Directory account or “Islander ID”) to log in. For instructions on how to get this account and more information about using Blackboard, go to: [http://distance-education.tamucc.edu/student_resources.html](http://distance-education.tamucc.edu/student_resources.html). If you need additional help at any time to access, download, or print course materials on Blackboard, please contact the Island Online (IOL) Help Desk by telephone at (361) 825-2825 or by email at iolsupport@tamucc.edu.

**Tentative Class Schedule (subject to change):** Blackboard readings = BB

Note: You must bring a copy of the readings assignments to class each week.
**T 01/29**  
Course Overview

## Dealing with Death

**T 02/05**  
**Mourning & Grief: A Look Backward**  
BB #1 and 1A: “Two Songs,” “Like Flowers Continually Perishing,” “La comadre Sebastiana/Doña Sebastiana,” “The Ghost Wife,” Bradstreet (selected poems), Taylor (“Upon Wedlock and Death of Children”), Kelly (“Death in Mexican Folk Culture”), Kastenbaum (“The Personification of Death”), Metcalf (“Death Be Not Strange”), Aries (“Western Attitudes toward Death”), Choron (from *Death and Western Thought*), Stannard (“Death and the Puritan Child”).

**T 02/12**  
BB #2: Whitman (excerpts from *Song of Myself* and *Drum Taps*), Bierce, “What I Saw of Shiloh,” Piatt (selected poems).  
Laderman: 63-72, 96-102, 123-35.

**T 02/19**  
**Stages of Death and Mourning**  
BB #3 and 3A: Selzer (“The Discus Thrower”), Silko (“Lullaby”), Hempel (“In the Cemetery”), Kübler-Ross (from *On Death and Dying*), Van Gennep (from *The Rites of Passage*), Lewis (“A Grief Observed”).

## The Meaning of Death

**T 02/26**  
**Giving Death Meaning: The Elegy**  
BB #4: Sacks (from *The English Elegy*), Paz (“The Day of the Dead”)  
Sáenz, *Elegies in Blue*.

**T 03/05**  
**Giving Death Meaning: Sentimentalizing Death**  
BB #5 and 5A: Stowe (ch. 26 from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), Twain (ch. 17 from *Huckleberry Finn*), Sigourney (“Death of an Infant” and “’Twas But a Babe”), Alcott (“My Contraband”), Douglas (“Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-1880”), Bataille (from *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*).  
Laderman: 51-62.

**T 03/12**  
**Giving Death Meaning: The Rituals of Death & Mourning**  
BB #6 and 6A: García Márquez (“The Handsomest Drowned Man”), Jackson (“The Lottery”), Girard (from *Violence and the Sacred*).  
CRITIQUES DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS

**SPRING BREAK 3/18-22**

**T 03/26**  
BB #7 and 7A: McKay (“If We Must Die” and “The Lynching”), Holloway (from *Passed On*), Becker, (“The Terror of Death”), Weisberg (“This Is Your Death”), Zeisel and Gallop (“Death Penalty Sentiment in the United States”).  
Gaines, *A Lesson before Dying*. 
Death & the Body

T 04/02
Abjection
BB #8 and 8A: Bassein (from Women and Death), Ariès (from The Hour of Our Death), Gorer (“The Pornography of Death”), Kristeva (from The Powers of Horror). SHORT STUDY DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLAS

T 04/09
Dead Bodies
BB #9: Felluga (“Modules on Freud: Transference and Trauma”)
Faulkner, As I Lay Dying.

The Desire for Death

T 04/16
BB #10 and 10A: Robinson (“Richard Cory”), Sexton (selected poems), Plath (selected poems), Lifton (from The Broken Connection), Higgonnet (“Speaking Silences: Women’s Suicide”), Kristeva (from Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia), Shneidman (“Suicide as Psychache”). ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS

T 04/23
Norman, Night Mother
ABSRACT DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS

Denying Death

T 04/30

T 05/07
SHARE RESEARCH INSIGHTS & PEER REVIEW COMPLETE DRAFT OF FINAL PROJECT

FINAL PROJECT DUE IN MY OFFICE (FC 281) BY THE DATE AND TIME SCHEDULE FOR THE FINAL EXAM (NO EXTENSIONS)
ENGLISH 5349: DEATH & DYING IN AMERICAN LITERATURE
SUGGESTED SECONDARY SOURCES


Coffin, Margaret M. *Death in Early America: The History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burials, and Mourning*. Nashville: Nelson, 1976. (Bell/Reserve)


Garcia Godoy, Juanita. *Digging the Days of the Dead: A Reading of Mexico’s Dias de Muertos*. Boulder: UP of Colorado, 1998 (Bell/Reserve; Talley)


