American Madness (English 127A)

Course Description

Americans often like to think of themselves as unconventional, independent, careless of social norms -- but when does this individualistic spirit tip over into eccentricity and even insanity? Since the earliest days of the United States, American writers have obsessively documented the limit cases of acceptable human behavior: fathers who murder their families, daughters who sink into isolation, servants who rebel against their masters, soldiers who desert their regiments. Which of these actions are indicative of madness, and which are manifestations of a rational purpose? The answer may seem obvious to you, just as it seemed obvious to a physician in 1850 -- but your opinions would be diametrically opposed.

In this course, we will read classic works of American literature that challenge our understanding of mental illness, placing these texts in the context of the historical development of psychiatry and other sciences of the mind over the course of the nineteenth century. Madness, we will find, often assumes different forms in men and women, white Americans and African-Americans, capitalists and laborers -- suggesting that social influences cannot be cleanly separated from biological dispositions in our understanding of insanity. Delving into the bizarre annals of nineteenth-century madness -- the world of Ahab’s “monomania,” Edgar Allan Poe’s “brain fever,” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “hysteria” -- will not only illuminate the fundamental tensions and conflicts of American culture, but will give us a new perspective on the construction of mental illness and health in the contemporary United States.

Course Goals

This course is primarily intended to familiarize you with canonical works of American literature and to help you navigate some of the discourses -- race, class, gender, disability -- that have structured American history and literature. By the end of the quarter, you should be able to:

1) Identify and produce a historical timeline of major styles, genres, and motifs in American fiction.

2) Understand (in broad strokes) the historical evolution of ideas about the mind, cognition, and psychiatric illness over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

3) Appreciate the role of structural inequalities and identity categories in both literary production and psychiatric diagnosis.

4) Make connections between literary and scientific texts, both historical and contemporary, that investigate issues of cognition, rationality, and agency.

Required Texts


All other texts will be available on our Coursework site.

**Course Requirements**

1) **Attendance and Participation.** This is a small, discussion-based class, so your presence and participation are crucial. If you know you need to be absent for a class session, you *must* notify me ahead of time in order to receive a make-up assignment. In-class activities may include large-group discussions, small-group projects, and individual writing assignments. 20% of final grade.

2) **Short Presentation (10-15 minutes).** Introduce the class to a psychiatric concept that was codified or popularized during the nineteenth century (examples: hysteria, monomania, phrenology, addiction). Explain the historical context of its emergence and link it to at least one of our course readings. 30% of final grade.

3) **Final Paper (3600-4800 words).** Analyze an American literary text *not* included on the syllabus using the tools we've practiced in class; in other words, apply our historical and psychiatric lens to a work of literature. We will workshop a draft of this paper in week 10; a detailed assignment sheet for the paper will be distributed in class. 50% of final grade.

**Stanford Honor Code**

From [http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/communitystandards/integrity/honorcode](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/communitystandards/integrity/honorcode):

1. The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:
   a. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
   b. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.

2. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.

3. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

For the purposes of this course, the honor code requires that you do not plagiarize. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of another person’s words *or* ideas. Words copied verbatim from
another source must be quoted and the source must be cited. When you paraphrase words or ideas from another source, you must acknowledge the original author unless the ideas are common knowledge.

Students with Documented Disabilities
Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaе).

Course Schedule

WEEK 1: A Brief History of Madness
1.1
Introduction.
Read in class: Emily Dickinson, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain”

1.2
Read before class: Edgar Allan Poe, “The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether”
Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization (excerpts)

WEEK 2: Hearing Voices
2.1
Read before class: Charles Brockden Brown, Wieland, Chapters 1-14

2.2
Read before class: Charles Brockden Brown, Wieland, Chapters 15-end

WEEK 3: Faith as Hallucination
3.1
Read before class: Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Minister’s Black Veil,” “Young Goodman Brown,” and “Ethan Brand”

3.2
Read before class: John Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven* (selections)
Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back* (selections)

**WEEK 4: Hysteria and other Female Complaints**

4.1
Read before class: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

4.2
Read before class: Harriet Prescott Spofford, “Circumstance”
Emily Dickinson, selected poems

**WEEK 5: Racialized Psychology**

5.1
Read before class: Charles Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,” and “Dave’s Neckliss”

5.2
Read before class: Richard Wright, *Native Son* (selections)

**WEEK 6: Metaphysical Madness**

6.1
Read before class: Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (selections)

6.2
Read before class: Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Imp of the Perverse”

**WEEK 7: The Physiology of Madness**

7.1
Read before class: Silas Weir Mitchell, “The Case of George Dedlow” and *Fat and Blood* (selections)

7.2
Read before class: London, *John Barleycorn; or, Alcoholic Memoirs* (selections)
Harry Levine, “The Discovery of Addiction”

**WEEK 8: Psychology and the Supernatural**

8.1
Read before class: William James, *Essays on Exceptional Mental States* (selections)
8.2
  Read before class: William James, *Principles of Psychology* (selections)

**Week 9: NO CLASSES (Thanksgiving Break)**

**Week 10: Final Paper Review**

10.1
  Peer review in class. *Please circulate a copy of your draft by 12:00 p.m. on Sunday.*

10.2
  Final paper presentations

  **Final papers are due on Friday, December 16.**