

ENGL693

Special Topics in Disability Studies: Disability and the Problem of Perception

This course deals with three different types of disability, each exemplifying a different problem of perception. Blindness concerns the inability to perceive, and requires compensatory strategies of using other senses. The second type, dwarfism, represents the problem of being perceived as “deformed,” even monstrous. The third type of disability, chronic pain, cannot be perceived or measured by others. The readings for this course will include texts and images from different periods and genres: fiction, drama, poetry, memoir, and film. To discuss blindness as personal experience and cultural construct, we’ll consider biblical accounts of healing the blind, Milton’s passages on blindness (sonnets, letter, the invocation to Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, and *Samson Agonistes*), and a modern text (Oliver Sacks, “To See and Not See,” in *An Anthropologist on Mars*). To understand real and fictive dwarfs, we’ll visit the Prado to see paintings of court dwarfs by Velasquez (including “*Las Meninas*”), and we’ll read Jonson’s *Volpone*. We’ll discuss the fate of the court dwarf in the autobiography of an 18th-century dwarf, Joseph Boruwlaski, and in works by Sir Walter Scott and Edgar Allan Poe. We’ll read Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop* and take a look at Barnum’s Tom Thumb in order to explore how dwarfs shifted from courtly figures to villains, or miniatures of the middle class ideal. We’ll discuss Todd Browning’s film, *Freaks*, and a recent film, *The Station Agent*. From the psychic pain of disability we’ll turn to physical pain as disability. Readings will include Seamus Heaney’s version of *Philoctetes*, Fanny Burney’s account of her mastectomy, and poems by Emily Dickinson and George Herbert. Students in this course will explore these three aspects of disability as “medical” and as “social”, and will understand the problems of representing disability. Theoretical selections will include works by Francis Bacon, William Hay, Rosemary Garland Thomson, Tobin Siebers, David Mitchell and Susan Snyder, Susannah Mintz, David Morris, Elaine Scarry, Ato Quayson, and Robert McRue.

Schedule:

Thursday, Jan. 17: first class

Tuesday, April 9: last class

Jan. 17 Introduction: Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (pp. 1-33)

Section I: Blindness: Disability as Loss and Gain

Jan. 24 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (40-112); Milton, sonnets (“When I Consider,” sonnet to Lawrence Skinner, “Methought

I saw”); Invocation to *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 3; Letter to Leonard Philaras, 28 September 1654 (online via Google); Milton’s poetry is available online at the Milton Reading Room)

Jan. 29 Milton, *Samson Agonistes* (available online at Milton Reading Room)

Jan 31 Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*

Section II: Dwarfism: Object and Subject

Feb. 5 CLASS WILL MEET AT THE PRADO; Velasquez: Las Meninas, portraits of dwarfs; Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 34-59)

Feb. 7 Nick Page, *Lord Minimus*; Ben Jonson, *Volpone*; Francis Bacon, “Deformity” (available online)

Feb. 12 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (70-95); William Hay, *On Deformity(EEBO)*; Joseph Boruwlaski, *Memoirs* (available on ECCO:4Eighteenth-Century Collections Online; Pius XII University website)

Feb. 14 Scott, *Peperil of the Peak*, ch. 16, 33-36 (online); Poe, “Hop Frog” (online)

Winter Break (Feb. 21-25)

Feb. 26 *Old Curiosity Shop*

Feb. 28 *Old Curiosity Shop*

Mar. 5 *Old Curiosity Shop*

Mar. 7 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (96-134); Freak Shows; Tod Browning, *Freaks*

Mar. 12 *The Station Agent*

III: Pain: Sacred, Social, Natural

Mar. 14 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (pp. 59-69; 96-119; 187-96); Fanny Burney, letter to her sister describing her mastectomy (online)

Mar. 19 Emily Dickinson, lyrics about pain; George Herbert, “Affliction” poems

Mar. 21 student presentation

Easter Break (Mar. 22-April 1)

Apr. 2 student presentation

Apr. 4 student presentation

Apr. 9 student presentation