

**“WE ARE SUCH STUFF
AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON”:
THE PROBLEM AND EXPERIENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN
LITERATURE AND SCIENCE**



Every story I create, creates me. I write to create myself. ~ Octavia E. Butler

We are the cosmos made conscious and life is the means by which the universe understands itself. ~Brian Cox – *Wonders of the Universe*

There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures. ~bell hooks – *Killing Rage*

Thinking is an act of the soul whereby it becomes conscious of itself and of other things outside itself. ~Carl Jung - *Symbols of Transformation*

It's the question of consciousness, perhaps the oldest philosophical question of all: are we matter? Or are we spirit and matter? What is consciousness if there is no spirit? Questions like that are of perennial fascination and they haven't been solved yet, thank goodness. ~ Philip Pullman – Interview on *The Book of Dust*

Thus waking consciousness is dreaming — but dreaming constrained by external reality. ~Oliver Sacks – *An Anthropologist on Mars*

Although I think that life may be the result of an accident, I do not think that of consciousness. Consciousness cannot be accounted for in physical terms. For consciousness is absolutely fundamental. It cannot be accounted for in terms of anything else. ~Erwin Schrödinger

Instructors: Michael Amey, Amy Coren and Rachel Martin

Email: mamey@nvcc.edu; rmartin@nvcc.edu

Office: Bisdorf / AA 0252

Location: Bisdorf 379

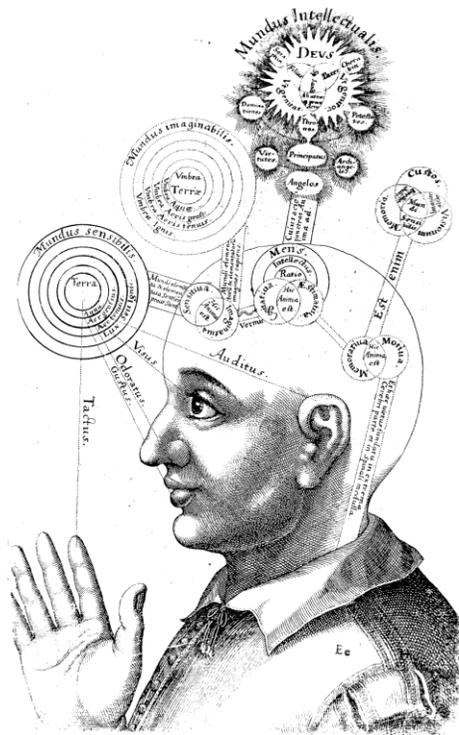
Meeting times: Thursdays 2:00 – 3:30

Blog: <https://thespoilers.blog/> This is a work in progress. The instructors will be publishing their own stuff here as well as material relevant to the books under discussion.

Course Description

This semester we are tackling an enigma that has puzzled neurologists, psychologists, philosophers, theologians and artists for centuries – the problem and experience of consciousness. The problem that consciousness poses is that we do not have a single definition of what consciousness is, nor do we have a clear sense of how consciousness arises from our material bodies, or how common consciousness might be in the universe. Complex questions abound:

- Is there a brain-mind divide, and if so, what bridges the gap? The mind-body duality is something that Western philosophers, like Renee Descartes, struggle with. This (supposed) division also raises ethical problems – for example the questions regarding when consciousness enters and leaves life (questions with profound ramifications for the abortion debate and end of life care for individuals with severe brain damage).



- If humans are organic machines who possess (or are possessed by?) consciousness, can non-organic machines possess (be possessed by consciousness)? While this question has belonged to the domain of science fiction authors, like Isaac Asimov, who envisioned the positronic brain, developments in Artificial Intelligence increasingly raise the possibility of non-organic sentience or consciousness. Alan Turing suggested that when computers could

**The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and you—beside—**

**The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As sponges—Buckets—do—**

**The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—
~Emily Dickinson, c. 1862**

convince humans that they were human that computer intelligence would match human intelligence. The Turing test, in which computers and humans compete to convince, strictly through communication, judges that they are human, is conducted annually, with the best computer program respondent winning the “most human computer” award and, intriguingly, the best human respondent winning the “most human human” award. The problem with this process, though, has been brilliantly pointed out by Catherynne M. Valente in her novel, *Silently and Very Fast*:

Long before you were born a man decided that there could be a very simple test to determine if a machine was intelligent. Not only intelligent, but aware, possessed of a psychology. The test had only one question. Can a machine converse with a human with enough facility that the human could not tell that she was talking to a machine? I always thought this was cruel--the test depends entirely upon a human judge and human feelings, whether the machine feels intelligent to the observer. It privileges the observer, the human, to a crippling degree. It seeks only believably human responses. It wants perfect mimicry, not a new thing. It's a mirror in which men wish only to see themselves.

- Can consciousness be disembodied? Many cultures believe that the spirit or soul of an individual can exist outside of a body. There is no scientific evidence to back up this belief, but, at the same time, most of us understand our consciousness as somehow being separate from our bodies. After all, the body a person possess as a two-year old is fundamentally different from the body a person possess as a twenty-year old, but we would still say that the person is one and the same. Oliver Sacks and Jean-Dominique Bauby explore, from the positions of doctor and patient, respectively, the question of what happens to consciousness when it is trapped inside a body. If consciousness exists only within bodies, do the specifics of sex, race or ability

impact consciousness? Is there an innate difference between male and female consciousness, or are any such (alleged) differences to be chalked up to cultural indoctrination? This question of consciousness informed by body becomes particularly arresting when we think of transgender identities.

- Is consciousness dependent on memory? If a person has no memories, can she be said to be conscious? Oliver Sacks explores this problem with a patient whose memories ended in 1945.
- What is the relationship between consciousness and society? In past courses we have discussed the feral child phenomenon. Can an individual with no connection to the rest of humanity develop and maintain consciousness? What happens to consciousness for individuals who are marooned on desert islands, a la Robinson Crusoe, or who, as is frequently the case in our own country, are placed in solitary confinement? What role, if any, do language, cultural norms and the gaze of the Other play in creating our sense of self? These questions are particularly important to creators of utopias and dystopias, like Ursula K. Le Guin, who, in *The Dispossessed*, plays with the role of language in creating and shaping consciousness.
- How can consciousness be conveyed through art (particularly literature?) Some authors, like Virginia Woolf, have perfected stream of consciousness narrative modes that are meant to convey the complexity of consciousness.

General Course Purpose

Provides students with the opportunity to use literature as a springboard for discussion about the human condition.

.Course Prerequisites/Co-requisites

A willingness to read books and talk about them.

Goals:

The primary objectives of the course are:

- 1) to engender in students an appreciation of literature and its role in illuminating all aspects of the human condition;
- 2) to teach students how to use literary theory and reading strategies to explore literature;
- 3) to familiarize students with terminology used to discuss literature and the conventions used to write about literature;
- 4) to help students discover the connections between literature and other academic disciplines;
- 5) to develop and foster in students the ability to think critically and to express their ideas cogently

Recommended Texts:

The following texts are listed in alphabetical order by the author's last name, and do not indicate the order in which they will be read.

(Obviously, this is not a class in the traditional sense, so readers are encouraged to find whatever editions of the texts are most affordable. Also, it is likely that readings may get cut if the pacing of the class seems too hectic, so fear not.)

Textbook 1

Author: Bauby, Jean-Dominique
Title: *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*
ISBN-13: 978-0375701214

Textbook 2

Author: Chopin, Kate
Title: *The Awakening*
ISBN-13: 978-0486277868

Textbook 3

Author: Le Guin, Ursula K.
Title: *The Dispossessed*
ISBN-13: 978-0061054884

Textbook 4

Author: North, Claire
Title: *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*
ISBN-13: 978-0316399623

Textbook 5

Author: Piercy, Marge
Title: *Woman on the Edge of Time*
ISBN-13: 978-0449000946

Textbook 6

Author: Sacks, Oliver
Title: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*
ISBN-13: 978-0684853949

Textbook 7

Author: Tononi, Giulio
Title: *Phi: A Voyage from the Brain to the Soul*
ISBN-13: 978-0307907219

Textbook 8

Author: Wells, H. G.
Title: *The Invisible Man*
ISBN-13: 978-1420955637

Course Requirements

- ◆ Participation – everyone should come having done (some) of the readings, and be willing to talk about them.
- ◆ Keep a notebook – this won't be collected (obviously), but I want to encourage everyone to keep a notebook about readings and class discussions.

Grading:

This is the best kind of class – a class for the love of learning – so there are no grades or credit to be earned. Just come and enjoy.

Class Schedule (This is a flexible schedule, which means that, as necessary, discussions may continue on to subsequent weeks. The schedule may also change, but we will inform you of any major changes in advance)

WEEK 1:	
January 11	Class introduction
WEEK 2:	
January 18	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Dispossessed</i> , chapters 1-7
WEEK 3:	
January 25	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Dispossessed</i> , chapters 7-conclusion
WEEK 4:	
February 1	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Awakening</i>
WEEK 5:	
February 8	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Awakening</i>
WEEK 6:	
February 15	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Woman on the Edge of Time</i>
WEEK 7:	
February 22	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Woman on the Edge of Time</i>
WEEK 8:	
March 1	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Invisible Man</i>
WEEK 9:	
March 8	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Invisible Man</i>

WEEK 10:	
March 15	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Fifteen Lives of Henry August</i> , chapters 1-45
WEEK 11:	
March 22	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Fifteen Lives of Henry August</i> , chapters 45- conclusion
WEEK 12:	
March 29	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat</i> , chapters 1-13
WEEK 13:	
April 5	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat</i> , chapters 13 – conclusion
WEEK 14:	
April 12	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The Diving Bell and the Butterfly</i>
WEEK 15:	
April 19	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>PHI: A Voyage from the Brain to the Soul</i> , Part 1
WEEK 16:	
April 26	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>PHI: A Voyage from the Brain to the Soul</i> , Part II and III