

**THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, THAN ARE DREAMT
OF IN YOUR PHILOSOPHY:
THE WEIRD, THE UNCANNY & THE HORRIFIC IN LITERATURE**



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Location: Zoom <https://vccs.zoom.us/j/84546763653>
Meeting times: Thursdays 11:00 – 12:30
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

General Course Purpose

Teaches students to use close readings of literary texts as a springboard for discussion about history, psychology, sociology and the human condition.

.Course Prerequisites/Co-requisites

A willingness to read books and talk about them.

Course Objectives

The primary objectives of the course are:

- 1) to engender in students an appreciation of literature and its role in illuminating, mirroring and transforming society;
- 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

It is an unfortunate truth that the majority of modern scholars of literature have, until quite recently, dismissed genre fiction – science fiction, fantasy, horror, mysteries, romances, and Westerns – as infantile escapism; something to be read by the “unwashed masses” but not suitable for “serious” readers.

Stories that include horror, the uncanny, and the weird have, in particular, been neglected. The irony is that these form the very oldest elements in storytelling. As H. P. Lovecraft notes in his essay, “Supernatural Horror in Literature”, “the horror-tale is as old as human thought and speech themselves.” While there is much wrong (even monstrous) with Lovecraft, both as a writer and as a person, in this passage he is correct. For as long as there have been stories, there have been monsters, the uncanny, and the weird – Huwawa the Terrible in *Gilgamesh*, Medusa in Greek mythology, Grendel in *Beowulf*, the demons and dragons of medieval romance, the three Weird Sisters of *Macbeth*, and, of course, Macbeth himself, the stepmothers and wolves of fairy tales, and the list goes on.

This class will address why fiction that includes the supernatural, horror, the uncanny, the weird, deserves to be read. It is enough, of course, to say that art that provokes a sense of awe in us deserves reading. The best writers of these types of fiction do, often, evoke that sense of awe. Beyond that, though, these writers frequently use the fantastic in ways that help us acknowledge, confront, and, if we are lucky, overcome the horrors of reality.

The Monsters are Due at NOVA

Horror as a genre is built around one truth: that the world is full of fearful things. But the best horror tells us more. It tells us how to live with being afraid. It tells us how to distinguish real evil from harmless shadows. It tells us how to fight back. It tells us that we *can* fight the worst evils, whether or not we all survive them – and how to be worthy of having our tales told afterward.

- Ruthanna Emrys

With these areas of interest in mind, we will want to consider the following questions:

- 1) H. P. Lovecraft writes that, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” Is he right, and, if he is, what does that suggest about human nature?
- 2) What is the difference between horror and terror? What makes a story horrifying, terrifying, uncanny, or weird?
- 3) What do the settings of these stories (dark forests, haunted houses, bedrooms with yellow wallpaper, suburbia, laboratories, etc) tell us about the nature of fear, and about what different people are afraid of?
- 4) How does the fiction we are reading enhance our understanding of social issues, individual issues, and the human condition?
- 5) Where do terror and horror reside? Is it in the unnatural world, the natural world, the human Other, or in ourselves?

(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: Saadawi, Ahmed
Title: *Frankenstein in Baghdad*
ISBN-13: 978-0-14-312679-3

Textbook 2

Author: Algernon Blackwood
Title: *Ancient Sorceries and Other Weird Stories*
ISBN-13: 978-0142180150
The collection includes “The Willows”

Textbook 3

Author: Shirley Jackson
Title: “The Lottery”
ISBN-13: 978-1563127878

The Optimist

In reading books that frighten us, we have the choice of whether to explore our fears... or not. But if we do, we come away either knowing that the monsters can be defeated, that the forest doesn't go on forever and that the darkness can be driven back or - at the very least - we find ourselves one step closer to the light.

- Lou Morgan

The Pessimist

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

- H. P. Lovecraft

Textbook 4

Author: Neil Gaiman

Title: *Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions*

This collection includes “Don’t Ask Jack,” “The White Road,” and “Only the End of the World”.

Textbook 5

Author: Arthur Machen

Title: *The Great God Pan and The Hill of Dreams*

ISBN-13: 978-1438287751

Textbook 6

Author: M. R. James

Title: *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*

ISBN-13: 979-8553928292

This collection includes “The Mezzotint”.

Textbook 7

Author: Julio Cortázar

Title: *Blow-Up: And Other Stories*

ISBN-13: 978-0394728810

This collection includes “House Taken Over” and “The Night Face Up”.

Textbook 8

Author: Ambrose Bierce

Title: *The Collected Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce*

ISBN-13: 978-1420967272

This collection includes “A Psychological Shipwreck” and “Moxon’s Master”.

Textbook 9

Author: John Campbell Jr.

Title: *Who Goes There*

ISBN-13: 978-0982332207

An assortment of other texts will be provided as handouts or online.

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)

<i>AUGUST 26</i>
<p>Class introduction</p> <p>LISTEN BEFORE CLASS: Neil Gaiman, "On Why Scary Stories Speak to Us" (Prof. Martin)</p> <p>READ BEFORE CLASS: Coltan Scrivner, "Why Horror Films Are More Popular Than Ever" (All) Ruthanna Emrys, "Reading Horror Can Arm Us Against a Horrifying World" (All) Lou Morgan, "Why Do We Read Scary Books?" (All) Algernon Blackwood, "The Willows" (Prof. Amey) Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" (Prof. Amey)</p>
<i>SEPTEMBER 16</i>
<p>READ BEFORE CLASS: Ahmed Saadawi, <i>Frankenstein in Baghdad</i> (Prof. Amey)</p>
<i>SEPTEMBER 30</i>
<p>READ BEFORE CLASS: Neil Gaiman, "Don't Ask Jack" (Prof. Martin) Neil Gaiman, "The White Road" (Prof. Martin) Neil Gaiman, "Only the End of the World" (Prof. Martin)</p>
<i>OCTOBER 14</i>
<p>READ BEFORE CLASS: Jeanette Winterson, "Dark Christmas" (Prof. Martin) Carmen Maria Machado, "My Body, Herself" (Prof. Martin) Carmen Maria Machado, "Horror Story" (Prof. Martin)</p>
<i>OCTOBER 28</i>
<p>READ BEFORE CLASS: Arthur Machen, "The Great God Pan" (Prof. Bowen) M. R. James, "The Mezzotint" (Prof. Bowen)</p>
<i>NOVEMBER 4 (Note: This class will be held 3:30-4:30)</i>
<p>READ BEFORE CLASS: Julio Cortázar, "House Taken Over" (Prof. Schröder) Julio Cortázar, "The Night Face Up" (Prof. Schröder)</p>
<i>NOVEMBER 11</i>
<p>READ BEFORE CLASS: Ambrose Bierce, "A Psychological Shipwreck" (Prof. Coren) Ambrose Bierce, "Moxon's Master" (Prof. Coren)</p>

NOVEMBER 18

READ BEFORE CLASS:

John W. Campbell, "[Who Goes There](#)" (Prof. Bowen)