

Interpretation of Literature (ENGL:1200) Crises and Catastrophes

Course Description

Every era has its crises. Big or small, crises and catastrophes alter one's sense of self and relation to others. Their causes are as varied as the ways in which they are resolved, and each demands a unique resilience. We anticipate them. We respond to them. They call into question the stability of the world around us and ask us to reevaluate the way we think, act, and engage with one another.



Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (1602)

In much the same way, literature exposes us to the experiences and minds of others in ways that can alter our own. For example, a crisis can incite the opening pages of a novel just as a catastrophe might serve as a narrative climax. (One of the earliest definitions of the word “catastrophe” is actually “The change or revolution which produces the conclusion or final event of a dramatic piece”! [OED]) In a way, crises and catastrophes always imply their resolution in one form or another: No crisis lasts forever, for better or worse. In this course we will explore themes of crisis and catastrophe in our reading and ask questions that complicate them. How do we prepare ourselves and others for catastrophes? How is “crisis” felt and experienced? How can we become more resilient to catastrophes? How and why are some persons more vulnerable to crisis or catastrophe than others? How can we, as critical readers of literature and the world, be aware of how crisis and recovery informs and conditions our lives and behavior?

This course will include texts from across genres—including novels, short stories, poetry, and creative non-fiction—and throughout history. As a result, we will have the opportunity to think about how crises and catastrophes can be communicated in different forms at different moments, how crises come about and how we reflect on them, and how these questions relate to our own (inter)personal, local, and global crises. By allowing you to use and refine your skills of reading, speaking, and writing to respond critically and sensitively to literary texts, you will be able to see yourselves as readers, recognizing the influence of individual differences (such as gender, ethnicity, geography) and experiences on interpretation. Class discussions and additional reading assignments will also prompt you to consider the connections between individual texts and their broader cultural contexts. In addition to this interpretive work, we’ll take time to appreciate the joy of these stories, including the humorous situations, detailed settings, and the simple fun of reading about interesting characters in challenging situations.

Course Objectives:

- Make connections between and across texts of varying genre and historical context.
- Develop discussion skills by engaging consistently in critical conversation about texts and their relation to the world.
- Shape an understanding of self as a reader, with unique aesthetic tastes, critical standpoints, and readerly practices.

- Build reflective and analytic writing skills through a mix of journaling, informal prompt responses, and formal graded assignments.
- Examine and critically assess the role of crisis in shaping the lives, actions, and relationships of people who vary in race, gender, and class, and the role of people in causing and responding to crises and catastrophes.

Workload expectations

The University of Iowa expects a 3-hour credit course to entail at least 6 hours of outside preparation per week by students. Sample description: For each semester hour credit in this course, students should expect to spend two hours per week preparing for class sessions. This is a three credit hour course, so your average out-of-class preparation per week is six hours. This will fluctuate throughout the semester; some weeks will be a bit lighter and others more intense. Note also that these are standard departmental guidelines, and the number of hours you dedicate to reading for class will vary depending on your own reading speed and the text assigned. Sometimes (most times) reading slowly is better than speeding through!

List of all required texts

Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. Grand Central Publishing. ISBN: 978-1538732182

Powell, Nate. *Swallow Me Whole*. Top Shelf Productions, 2008. ISBN: 978-1603090339

Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume Publishing. ISBN: 978-0452273870

All required texts are available through the University Book Store (HawkShop), though you may be able to find more affordable copies through an online retailer. If purchasing your books through an alternative retailer, try to acquire a copy of the same edition/publisher as those listed above. All other course readings available on ICON and should be **printed out, annotated, and brought to class**.

Other required materials (to be brought to every class):

1 notebook (composition or spiral bound)

Writing utensil

Grading Scheme:

Engaged and Respectful Participation: 15%

Small Writing Assignment: 5%

Major Writing Assignment 1: 15%

Major Writing Assignment 2: 20%

Midterm: 15 %

Final: 15%

Notebooks: 15%

Final Portfolio: required to pass the class

Assessing Grades:

Grades for major assignments will be posted on ICON under “Grades” approximately two weeks after the due date. Your participation grades will be posted once at midterm and once at the end of the semester. Informal assignments will be mostly recorded in your class notebook, which will be collected at least twice during the semester. Your notebook grade will be posted once at the midterm and once at the end of the semester. **Note that a missed assignment is marked as a zero, so it’s**

important to complete all homework assignments and attend every class to avoid bringing down your grade.

My detailed grading policy is as follows:

A grade of C: You can earn a C by attending class regularly and punctually, completing with competence all of the work assigned and participating regularly in class activities. This requires 1) adequately meeting all criteria for assignments, and 2) completing reading assignments on time and being prepared to share your opinions on the texts in class and during discussions.

A grade of B: You can earn a B by fulfilling all of the C requirements while demonstrating a significantly higher level of effort and competence on all work assigned for the class. To earn a B you must show an interest in energetically, creatively, and critically engaging with the material and assignments. B work typically reflects independent thinking. The B student is self-reflexive and often asks questions such as “How can I make my work better? How can I revise this? How can I make my work unique and interesting? How can I help the class have productive and energetic discussions?”

A grade of A: To receive an A in the course, you must surpass the requirements for B work as well as demonstrate high-level critical thinking and original analysis. A students interrogate all sides of issues enthusiastically in order to clarify their own opinions. A students don't skip class, fail to honor deadlines for any reason, or show up unprepared to discuss the reading. A students will, instead, be willing to make intellectual discoveries and demonstrate an effort to inquire further into commonly understood issues.

A grade of D: You can earn a D by not fulfilling your responsibilities outlined under “Grade of C” criteria, and/or failing to show respect for or interest in your fellow students' presentations of ideas. A D student is a student who has many excuses but few completed assignments. For example, D students often fail to turn in reading responses or other informal work. D students are generally disinterested students who refuse to take an active role in making the class energetic and productive.

Statement on arithmetic rounding of grades

Grades are calculated on ICON by computing the grades of individual assignments as weighted according to the scheme above. Results will not be rounded up arithmetically. Hence, for example, 79.99 is a C+, not B-.

Assignment Details

The requirements and expectations of each writing assignment will be distributed via a printed assignment sheet (in class) and in an online digital copy (on the ICON modules page). You are highly encouraged to bring questions about assignments and drafts of your work to me (and the Writing Center, if you so choose) at any point in your composition process.

Notebooks

Throughout the semester you will keep a reading journal by responding to prompts posted on ICON and by completing in-class writing activities. I will collect notebooks twice during the semester. Each entry will be graded by a system of checkmarks and collated for a midterm and final

notebook grade, each of which will count as 7.5 points toward the 15% journal grade included in the above schema. The grading system is as follows:

- ✓+: Response demonstrates thoughtful consideration of and reflection on the prompt and exceeds the bare minimum requirements
- ✓: Response adequately addresses and meets the criteria of the prompt
- ✓-: Response does not address or respond in full to the prompt, and/or lacks in critical thought that moves beyond summary or surface level engagement with the text
- X: Missing entry

I encourage you to meet with me throughout the semester to check in about your notebook entries and confer with me about how to continue improving them.

Discussing Graded Work

I want to ensure that our conversations about graded assignments will be relevant and useful to you; to that end, I ask that you contact me **no sooner than 24 hours and no later than 7 days** after receiving a grade. This ensures that you have time to reflect on the work turned in and the grade received before contacting me, and that our discussion about it is not too long after the fact to be unhelpful or lacking in clarity.

Attendance policy

Students are expected to attend all classes and arrive on time. That said, I understand that occasionally, everyone needs to miss class. Therefore, each student is allowed **three absences** without penalty to his or her participation grade. You do not need to provide any excuse for these absences, though if you know ahead of time you will be missing class, an email is always appreciated.

Each unexcused absence beyond the permitted three will lower your final participation grade by **1/3 of a letter grade**. So, with one additional absence, an “A” becomes an “A-”, a “B-” becomes a “C+”. With two additional absences, an “A” becomes a “B+”, an “B-” becomes a “C”, etc.

There may also be other circumstances in which a student must miss class (e.g. illness, religious obligations, family obligations, athletics or other university activities, etc.) These absences should be documented properly with the University (this requires a form, available from the registrar.) These excused absences **will** count towards the aforementioned three, though you will not be penalized for excused absences accrued beyond the allowed three. For example, if you miss three classes to go to a debate tournament, and then decide to skip a fourth class later in the semester, it will lower your final grade. However, if you need to miss a fourth class for a family or medical emergency, and document it properly with the University, it will not lower your final grade. As always, extenuating circumstances exist and occur, and I am always willing to discuss these with you and seek ways to work toward your success in this class.

Please note that an absence is not the same as an extension, and I still expect you to turn in via Canvas any written assignments due that day. Any quizzes or exams missed due to absence cannot be made up, and will count as a 0.

For information on excused and unexcused absences, see <http://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences>

Late Assignment Policy

You are responsible for submitting all assignments on time and in the correct format as dictated by the assignment. If submitting online to an ICON dropbox, this means submitting a Word document (.doc or .docx) and not a PDF. I cannot accept major essays submitted via email. Late work will be **docked 1 letter grade** for every day late, beginning as soon as the original due date has passed. A “C+” paper that is one day late, for example, will be docked 1 letter grade down to a “D+”. Late major work submitted over four or more days after the due date will receive an automatic F.

If you miss class, you are still responsible for submitting work on time via ICON. **If the due date for one of these essays is nearing and you do not feel capable of turning in a completed assignment, please set up a meeting with me to discuss potential solutions.** If you are in class on the day class notebooks are collected, you must turn yours in to me; if you are absent, you must turn it in beforehand to avoid late penalties. Otherwise, you may turn it in during our next class meeting, or may leave it in my mailbox in EPB 310.

Technology in the Classroom

I expect that you will turn off/silence and put away all of your electronic devices (cell phones, iPads, iPods, etc.) before class begins. This includes laptops and e-readers unless otherwise specified or approved by me ahead of time. Inappropriate use of electronics during class time will negatively affect your participation grade. If, for any reason, you have a particular need (including but not limited to SDS accommodations) for iPads, cell phones, or laptops during class time, please come talk to me after class or during drop-in hours. There will be class periods, activities, and peer review sessions for which I allow and often encourage technology use. I will notify you of these moments as necessary.

CALENDAR OF COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

This is a tentative calendar and is subject to change. Updates will be posted to ICON and/or shared in class. Students are responsible for tracking course activities, readings, and assignments. Note midterm dates and significant deadlines, such as the last day to drop. The master calendar, which includes university holidays and other important deadlines, can be found here: <https://registrar.uiowa.edu/academic-calendar>

Week 1: January 20-24
Monday, January 20 is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (University Holiday)
Unit 1: Zoom In, Zoom Out: The Skills of Close Reading
T, 1/21: Introductions to the course, readings, and each other; Alice Walker, “The Flowers” (read in class) Th, 1/23: <u>The Skills of Close Reading</u> : Leslie Marmon Silko, “Storyteller” (ICON); Assign Small Paper
Week 2: January 27-31 (1/27 is the last day to drop the class without a ‘Withdraw’)
T, 1/28: <u>Language and Meaning</u> : N. Scott Momaday, “The Arrowmaker”; Zadie Smith, “Parents’ Morning Epiphany”
Unit 2: Migrants’ Crises
Th, 1/30: Tomás Rivera, selections (“The Salamanders”; “The Night the Lights Went Out”; “Zoo Island”; “And the Earth Did Not Devour Them”) [ICON] F, 1/31: Optional: “Imagining the Latina/o/x Midwest” Symposium at Iowa City Public Library https://imagininglatinidades.lib.uiowa.edu/schedule/imagining-the-latina-o-x-midwest/
Week 3: February 3-7 (3/16 is last day to drop in order to reduce fees & tuition)
T, 2/4: Viramontes, <i>Under the Feet of Jesus</i> , Book One, pp. 3-46 Th, 2/6: Viramontes, <i>Under the Feet of Jesus</i> , Book Two, pp. 49-90
Week 4: February 10-14
T, 2/11: Viramontes, <i>Under the Feet of Jesus</i> , Book Three, pp. 93-130 Th, 2/13: Viramontes, <i>Under the Feet of Jesus</i> , Books Four and Five, pp. 133-180
Week 5: February 17-21 (2/16 is the last day to Withdraw from the class without paying full tuition)
Unit 2: Creative Non-Fiction
T, 2/18: <u>Documenting Crises</u> : Valeria Luiselli, excerpt from <i>Tell Me How It Ends</i> Th, 2/20: <u>Art and Life</u> : Zadie Smith, “Joy”; Kiese Laymon, “Da Art of Storytelling”; Hanif Abdurraqib, “On Seatbelts and Sunsets” (ICON)
Week 6: February 24-28
T, 2/25: <u>Sudden Crisis</u> : Katherine Anne Porter, “The Future is Now”; Barry Lopez, “Apologia”; Jo Ann Beard, “The Fourth State of Matter” Th, 2/27: <u>Slow Burn</u> : Aldo Leopold, “Good Oak”; N. Scott Momaday, “The Way to Rainy Mountain” Midterm Exam Review

Week 7: March 2-6
<p>T, 3/3: MIDTERM EXAM Unit 3: Graphic Novels and Crises of Health Th, 3/5: Nate Powell, <i>Swallow Me Whole</i> (first 1/3; up to full page panel of a desk) Assign Major Essay 1</p>
Week 8: March 9-13
<p>T, 3/10: <i>Swallow Me Whole</i> (middle 1/3; up to a completely black full-page panel) Th, 3/12: <i>Swallow Me Whole</i> (remainder of graphic novel)</p>
Week 9: March 16-20 (SPRING BREAK)
<p>Work on Essay 1 and get a head start on the last readings of the semester, if you like—especially if you think you might want to include one of them in your final paper. Or, just enjoy the break you have earned!</p>
Week 10: March 23-27
<p>Unit 3: Catastrophic Poetics T, 3/24: “like disaster”: Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art”; Natasha Trethewey, “Incident”; Danez Smith, “Dinosaurs in the Hood” Th, 3/26: <u>Sex and Sexuality</u>: Tyler Okonma, “Garden Shed”; Danez Smith, “it began right here”</p>
Week 11: March 30-April 3
<p>T, 3/31: <u>Oil and War</u>: Juliana Spahr, “Dynamic Positioning” and “Tradition”; Muriel Rukeyser, “Poem (I lived in the first century of world wars)”; Ilya Kaminsky, “We Lived Happily During the War” Th, 4/2: Class-selected readings Major Essay 1 Due; Assign Major Essay 2</p>
Week 12: April 6-10 (4/6 is the last day to drop a class without Dean’s approval)
<p>Unit 4: “Natural” Disasters and Literary Forms T, 4/7: Claudia Rankine, “Hurricane Katrina”; Eula Biss, “Is This Kansas?” Th, 4/9: Meridel Le Sueur, “American Idyll, 1949”</p>
Week 13: April 13-17
<p>T, 4/14: Octavia Butler, <i>Parable of the Sower</i>, Ch. 1-5 (pp. 1-60) Major Essay 2 Rough Draft Workshop Th, 4/16: Butler, <i>Parable of the Sower</i>, Ch. 6-10 (pp. 61-115)</p>
Week 14: April 20-24 (4/14 is the last day to withdraw from a course without the Dean’s approval)
<p>T, 4/21: Butler, <i>Parable of the Sower</i>, Ch. 11-14 (pp. 116-166) Th, 4/23: Butler, <i>Parable of the Sower</i>, Ch. 15-18 (pp.167-224)</p>

Week 15: April 27-May 1

T, 4/28: Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, Ch. 19-22 (pp. 225-278)
Th, 4/30: Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, Ch. 23-25 (pp. 279-329) **Major Essay #2 Due**

Week 16: May 4-8

(Y)our Place

T, 5/5: Reading TBD

Th, 5/7: Reading TBD

FRIDAY, 5/8: Final Portfolios DUE to ICON (required to pass this class)

Classes Close on May 8

Final Exam Week: May 11-15

Exact Time and Location TBA by Registrar. Students are responsible for being available during that time once it is announced. Students should not make travel plans until knowing this final exam information.