

**It is the sole responsibility of the student to check AIMS and their NEOMED email on a daily basis!**



**NEOMED**

COLLEGE of  
**GRADUATE  
STUDIES**

**COURSE SYLLABUS**  
**Course Prefix - Course # - Invalid**  
**Women: Narratives of Women's Illness**  
**Medical Ethics and Humanities**  
**AY: 2020-2021 Term: Spring**  
**Credit Hours: 3 Course Format: Didactic**  
**Class Dates: January 4 – February 28, 2021**  
**Course Schedule: Thursday, 5:15 – 7:15 pm via Zoom**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Western biomedicine has historically been dominated by male theorists and practitioners. How, then, has biomedical culture accounted for women's bodies, health, and illness? For other bodies deemed non-normative, including queer, trans, and non-binary bodies? Recent reporting on women's health issues and maternal mortality rates in the US, and the many personal narratives recounting inadequate attention to women-as-patients, suggests a deep-seated and ongoing problem with the way our medical system treats women.

As the semester progresses, we will trace the evolution of long-standing narrative tropes and conventions that shape the stories we tell about women's bodies and health in literary fiction, popular culture, and medical discourse. In addition to long-form journalism and memoir, the novels, short stories, poems, and films we will analyze expose an obsessive medicalization of women's bodies and a simultaneous, paradoxical neglect of women's health. Looking to literary and cultural representations of "hysteria" and women's mental health, beauty standards, sexuality, domestic abuse and sexual violence, reproductive health, and chronic illness, this course identifies persistent stereotypes of women as sickly, frail, or "crazy," as well as the ways in which women authors have resisted these stereotypes in their own writing about women's bodies, health, and sexuality.

**LOCATION:**

To protect student and instructor safety during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this course will be offered FULLY ONLINE in Spring 2021. The course consists of assigned readings, weekly reading reflections, and weekly Zoom discussions. To access Zoom please first download the following free link/app: <https://zoom.us> Once you sign up for a free account, you can then go into our AIMS site (learning management system) and we have a "ZOOM" tab where you can directly connect to the classroom.

**COURSE DIRECTOR:**

Rachel Conrad Bracken, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Family and Community Medicine  
G128  
[rbracken@neomed.edu](mailto:rbracken@neomed.edu)  
330.325.6447

Office hours by appointment only; email to schedule. Unless otherwise noted, I will return your emails within 24 hours. Email communication may be limited on evenings and weekends.

## PROGRAM COORDINATOR:

Philip Jenkinson  
Program Coordinator  
F-240  
[pjenkinson@neomed.edu](mailto:pjenkinson@neomed.edu)  
330.325.6501

## COURSE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

This course is designed to improve students' ability to:

1. Interpret literary texts and film through close reading, critical discussion, and analytical writing;
2. Apply the skill of literary close reading to the analysis of sociocultural and political discourse;
3. Recognize familiar narrative tropes and conventions used to represent women's bodies, health, and illness in literature, as well as how these narrative tropes and conventions inform contemporary gender norms, healthcare practice, and policy;
4. Consider how women writers engage and/or resist narratives of women's health and illness;
5. Evaluate, analyze, synthesize, and respond to humanities scholarship, including medical humanities and film/literary criticism; and
6. Develop clear and compelling writing that accounts for its audience, is supported by textual evidence and, where appropriate, draws on properly cited scholarly sources.

## CONTENT WARNING:

Over the course of the semester, we will encounter mature, difficult, troubling, and/or politically-fraught topics, including: domestic violence and sexual assault; rape; disordered eating; abortion; mental illness; suicide; and profanity. The nature of our inquiry into narratives of women's health, women's bodies, and women's sexuality demands that we address these difficult topics head on. Read the syllabus ahead of time so that you prepared in advance for potentially challenging topics and please feel free to approach Dr. Bracken if you'd like more information about a topic or reading.

As with any course on gender and sexuality, course topics are often political *and* personal. Readings and discussions might trigger strong feelings—anger, discomfort, anxiety, confusion, excitement, humor, and even boredom. Some of us will have emotional responses to the readings; some of us will have emotional responses to our peers' understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us in the classroom. I expect everyone to come to class prepared to discuss the readings in a mature and respectful way. If you need to leave or miss class, you are still responsible for the work you miss. If you are struggling to keep up with the work because of the course content, you should speak with me and/or seek help from the counseling center.

(Adapted from the [University of Pittsburgh's](#) Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Study Program).

## LEARNING STRATEGIES:

Reading, weekly reading reflections, and seminar-style class discussions.

## TEXTBOOKS AND READINGS:

Please acquire a hard copy of the following texts:

- Maya Dusenbery, *Doing Harm: The Truth About How Bad Medicine and Lazy Science Leave Women Dismissed, Misdiagnosed, and Sick* (Harper Collins, 2018)
- Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (any bound version is fine; no ebooks please!)

All additional readings will be made available online and/or on AIMS.

## ASSIGNMENTS:

**ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGED PARTICIPATION:** Students are required to be **active participants** in this course. This means showing up to class on time and having completed the assigned reading for the day, ready to meaningfully and respectfully contribute to class discussions. A meaningful contribution will demonstrate careful reading of the assigned text(s), remain relevant to the discussion, and offer new insight. **Your presence is determined by your participation in this class; students who attend class without contributing to the conversation may be considered absent.** Disrespect for the instructor or fellow students in the course WILL NOT be tolerated. Students who fail to respectfully participate in class discussions may

be asked to leave and marked absent for the day.

Attendance and participation contribute a significant percentage of your overall grade because this is a seminar—a small, discussion-based course—rather than a lecture-based class. Our time together will be spent digging into the assigned readings/materials, wrestling with open-ended questions and evaluating the merits—and faults—of the aesthetic choices and theoretical investments presented in artistic and scholarly texts on the syllabus. Because this is a small group, it is all the more essential that everyone comes to class prepared for a lively, engaged conversation!

**“WHY WOMEN’S HEALTH?” ESSAY ASSIGNMENT:** During the first week of the semester, students will work independently to research and write a short essay (2-3 pages, double-spaced, standard 12-point font, 1” margins, cited in MLA, APA, or Chicago) in which they explore why it is politically expedient and/or medically necessary to critically, consciously, and conscientiously engage with women’s illness narratives. ***Demonstrating close, careful reading of the assigned texts*** and drawing upon recent (published within the last ten years), peer-reviewed academic journal articles, long-form journalism, and/or students’ own experiences, these essays will propose an answer to the questions:

- Why must we think critically about the relationship between health, healthcare, and gender identity?
- How have women’s health issues been addressed in a historically male-dominated profession?
- Have the health professions adequately cared for women’s bodies and health? Why or why not?

**READING REFLECTIONS:** To process assigned readings and prepare for class discussions, students will be required to complete five Reading Reflections over the course of the semester. Reading Reflections, due at the start of class, are 250-300 word responses to one of the day’s Guiding Questions (see Course Calendar for Guiding Questions) that demonstrate close, careful reading of one or more of the assigned critical/theoretical texts.

**PRESENTATION & STUDENT-LED DISCUSSION:** Each student will be required to introduce and lead discussion of one of the primary texts \* (the films, stories, poems, and/or memoirs) we will read in this course. Depending on course enrollment, students may be asked to complete this assignment in pairs.

Pre-recorded presentations should briefly introduce the assigned text (including information about the author, the time and place of publication, relevant social and historical context, form/genre, etc.) and provide an overview of the tropes and themes relevant to our study of disability and embodiment. These videos, uploaded to AIMS by 5 pm on the Wednesday before class, should be roughly 15-20 minutes long.

Students will be tasked with leading discussion of their chosen primary text during our weekly Zoom class meeting; this entails developing thought-provoking discussion questions and engaging the entire class in a focused, meaningful conversation.

\* Note: “Primary text” refers to the films, stories, poems, or memoirs we will read over the course of the semester, as these are the subject of scholarly research in literary and media studies.

**CONFERENCE PAPER ABSTRACT:** Pitching one’s academic work to academic conference organizers is an essential skill for graduate students to master. To learn and practice this skill, students will pitch their final papers—to be written as conference papers—in response to a mock conference call for papers (CFP), to be drafted by Dr. Bracken, on the topic “Writing and Resisting Narratives of Women’s Health and Illness.”

As is customary for CFP’s in the (health) humanities, students will be asked to submit a 250-300 word paper abstract and brief author biography. The abstract must concisely and compellingly articulate the author’s argument, outline their theoretical and/or methodological grounding, indicate their project’s stakes/intervention, and demonstrate how their project aligns with the conference theme. Abstract drafting materials—including samples!—will be provided to students well in advance of the deadline.

**CONFERENCE PAPER:** The 15-20 minute conference paper (this correlates to roughly 7-9 standard, double-spaced pages of text) is an essential genre of writing for (health) humanities scholars. Students’ final, cumulative assignment for this course is to write (research > draft > revise > polish) a 7-9 page (double spaced, 1” margins, standard 12-point font) conference-style paper in response to a mock conference call for papers (CFP), to be drafted by Dr. Bracken, on the topic “Writing and Resisting Narratives of Women’s Health and Illness.” Additional assignment details and grading rubric will be available on AIMS in advance of the due date.

Completed conference papers are due by midnight on Sunday, February 28, 2021. Because final course grades are due by Thursday, March 4, 2021, **this deadline is FIRM**. Should you require an extension, you **MUST** contact Dr. Bracken to request extended time no later than 5 pm on Friday, February 22, 2021. Note that extension requests will be approved or denied at the course instructor’s discretion.

## ASSESSMENTS AND GRADING:

A grading system of an A, B, C or F (90-100: A; 80-89: B; 70-79: C; below 70 is Fail).  
A, B, C = Pass.

Assessment Tool	% of Total Course	Due Date
Attendance & Engaged Participation	15%	Throughout
Why Women's Health Essay	10%	1/9/2021
Presentation & Student-Led Discussion	10%	Throughout
Reading Reflections (x5)	25%	1/14, 1/21, 1/28, 2/4 & 2/11
Conference Paper Abstract	10%	2/21/2021
Conference Paper	30%	2/28/2021
TOTAL		

## COURSE POLICIES:

**NEOMED DISABILITIES AND ACCOMMODATIONS:** If you have a documented disability and wish to register with the Disabilities and Accommodations Committee, you may do so by completing the [Disability Registration and Accommodation Request Form](#). Additional information can be found on the website: <https://www.neomed.edu/learningcenter/accommodations/>. After completing the request form, please submit it to the Office of Student Affairs or email it to [accommodations@neomed.edu](mailto:accommodations@neomed.edu).

Students must register their disability as soon as possible to ensure that their request can be reviewed, and that any approved accommodations can be implemented in a timely fashion. If you have any questions about this process, please email [accommodations@neomed.edu](mailto:accommodations@neomed.edu), call 330.325.6735, or visit the Office of Student Affairs.

**CLASSROOM ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:** Refer to the NEOMED Student Handbook for the University policies on Attendance Requirements. The following policies are specific to this course: Attendance policy: Attendance is mandatory for every scheduled class in this course. In the event of illness or emergency, students must contact the Course Director immediately. If you miss a session, make sure to contact the faculty and course director. You will be required to watch the lecture (which will be video-taped) and complete assignments provided by the faculty member. You may be assigned additional make-up assignments beyond the syllabus course requirements as a make-up.

**Deadline policy:** The healthcare field has many situations in which timely responses literally make the difference between life and death. Even though none of the class assignments qualify as a life and death situation, professionalism requires timely responses. Therefore, all assignments must be completed and uploaded/turned in by the assigned deadline. Assignments not meeting the deadline requirements will not be graded and will result in the student receiving ZERO points for the assignment.

Procedure for Student Missing In-Class Assignments: Any student who finds it necessary to be absent from a scheduled in-class assignment due to an illness or emergency is required to request permission from the course director to miss the scheduled assignment. The student is to notify the affected course director of the reason for the absence prior to the absence or as soon thereafter as possible. Notification should be to the course director in the form of an email or phone call. Within the attendance guidelines of the Northeast Ohio Medical University, the course director will determine whether the absence will be approved and excused.

## ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT:

Students are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner. While grades are based on assigned points, students can fail this course due to unprofessional behavior. Students are expected to:

- Apply themselves to the coursework with seriousness and conscientiousness
- Attend class, arrive on time and return from breaks in a timely manner
- Come to class prepared with readings and homework completed
- Practice positive, constructive, respectful and professional communication skills

- Accept and benefit from constructive feedback
- Be open to people, ideas, and creeds that are unfamiliar; avoid stereotyping

Refer to the NEOMED Student Handbook (The Compass) for University Policy on Academic Misconduct.

Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED) students are expected to read, understand, sign and abide by the “Expectations of Student Conduct and Professional Commitment” while enrolled and involved in NEOMED, its partner institutions and hospitals, and NEOMED-sponsored activities. Failure to do so may result in referral and review by either the Committee on Academic and Professional Progress (CAPP) or Student Conduct procedures. Student conduct or professional behavior concerns should be reported by faculty, staff or students using the “[Conduct Concern Notes](#)” available through the Office of Student Affairs.

### STUDENT CONDUCT CODE

The Student Conduct Code definitions apply to all students enrolled at NEOMED for behavior on, or affecting, the campus. This includes study abroad programs and electives. All students are responsible for knowing, understanding and abiding by all university rules and regulations outlined within the Student Conduct Code and its definitions listed here. Violations of the Student Conduct Code may result in disciplinary action and subsequent sanctions which may include, but are not limited to probation, suspension, dismissal, or other sanctions addressing the behavioral issue.

### COURSE CALENDAR:

Readings marked with an asterisk (\*) are available as a pdf on AIMS. Hyperlinked readings are available online. All readings and assignments are subject to change; any changes to assigned readings, papers, and projects will be announced in class and/or via AIMS. **It is the sole responsibility of the student to check on AIMS and their NEOMED emails on a daily basis** for any changes to the course calendar.

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#### WEEK ONE (1/7): INDEPENDENT STUDY – WHY WOMEN’S HEALTH?

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Rather than meet over Zoom, class time for this week will be devoted to independent reading and completion of the “Why Women’s Health” essay, due Saturday, January 9 at 10:00 am.

#### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Why must we think critically about the relationship between health, healthcare, and gender identity?
- How have women’s health issues been addressed in a historically male-dominated profession?
- Have the health professions adequately cared for women’s bodies and health? Why or why not?

#### READING DUE:

- View course introduction video on AIMS
- “Man-made Medicine and Women’s Health: The Biopolitics of Sex/Gender and Race/Ethnicity,” Nancy Krieger and Elizabeth Fee \*
- *Doing Harm*, Parts I (introduction + chapters 1&2), Maya Dusenbery
- [“The Doctor Doesn’t Listen to Her. But the Media is Starting to,”](#) Ashley Fetters
- [“Why Men Don’t Believe the Data on Gender Bias in Science,”](#) Alison Coil

#### ASSIGNMENTS DUE:

- “Why Women’s Health?” Essay due Saturday, January 9 at 10:00 am. Submit on AIMS.
- Syllabus Quiz
- Sign up for Presentation & Student-Led Discussion

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#### WEEK TWO (1/14): METAPHOR & GENDER POLITICS

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#### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- How has women’s reproductive biology come to dominate our consideration of women’s bodies and health?
- What metaphors are used to describe women’s reproductive biology in science texts, literature, and cultural narratives writ large?
- How are narratives about women’s biology produced in scientific and literary texts, and how do these

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narratives perpetuate normative gender roles?

- In what ways have women authors reclaimed control over their bodies and their sexuality?

**READING DUE:**

- "The Body, Gender, and Sex," Alexandra Howson\*
- "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," Emily Martin \*
- "Of Termites and Ovaries on Strike: Rethinking Medical Metaphors of the Female Body," Anita Wohlmann \*
- "[When I'm Told to 'Buck Up' to 'Fight the Good Fight' to 'Pull Up My Bootstraps & Build Bridges' But I Am Not Ready But I Know Damn Well I Should Be Ready So I Try](#)," Katie Condon

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE:**

- Reading Reflection #1 due Thursday, January 14 at 5 pm

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**WEEK THREE (1/21): INVALIDISM: (CHRONIC) ILLNESS, DISABILITY, & WOMANHOOD**

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**GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- What does literature (including fiction, poetry, film, and personal narrative) add to conversations concerning the gendered dimensions of health, healthcare, and health disparities?
- How have women's bodies, illness, and health been represented in literature and culture throughout history?
- How are chronic illness and disability rhetorically figured as distinctly feminine states of being?
- How do women living with chronic illness and/or disabilities embrace the reality of their illness and/or disability without falling into stereotypical patterns of invalidism?
- How are disability and chronic illness used to dehumanize, defeminize, and/or desexualize women?
- How have medical practice and literary and cultural narratives of women's illness socially invalidated women and women's bodies?

**READING DUE:**

- Introduction to *Invalid Women*, Diane Price Herndl\*
- "The Social Construction of Disability," Susan Wendell\*
- "[Diagnosis: Female](#)," Andrea J. Buchanan
- "[Sick Woman Theory](#)," Johanna Hedva
- "On Being Ill," Virginia Woolf\*
- Selections from *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*, Molly McCully Brown\*
- "[Exacerbation 17: An Anti-hero's Journey with MS](#)," Martha Stallman

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE:**

- Reading Reflection #2 due Thursday, January 21 at 5 pm
- Presentation & Student Led Discussion: selections from *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded* due Wednesday, 1/20 and Thursday 1/21, respectively

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**WEEK FOUR (1/28): BLACK WOMEN'S BODIES**

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**GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- In what ways have the histories of race in the US shaped medical practice, especially in regard to women of color?
- What does it mean to be a woman? How are individual women's experiences of gender informed by their race or ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and/or (dis)ability?

**READING DUE:**

- Listen: "[Remembering Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey: The Mothers of Modern Gynecology](#)"
- Nikky Finney, "[The Greatest Show on Earth](#)"
- Selections from *Patient*, Betina Judd
- Selections from *Anarcha Speaks*, Dominique Christina
- "Power vs. Prosthesis," Audre Lorde \*

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE:**

- Reading Reflection #3 due Thursday, January 28 at 5 pm
- Presentation & Student Led Discussion: selections from *Patient* due Wednesday, 1/27 and Thursday 1/28, respectively
- Presentation & Student Led Discussion: selections from *Anarcha Speaks* due Wednesday, 1/27 and Thursday 1/28, respectively

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**WEEK FIVE (2/4): DOMESTIC ABUSE & SEXUAL VIOLENCE**


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**GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- How has overt violence against women been perpetuated by rampant misogyny and/or rape culture?
- What has been done to protect women?
- How and why is violence against women a (public) health issue? What are healthcare providers obligated to do to combat violence against women?

**READING DUE:**

- "A History of Women's Bodies," Rose Weitz \*
- "CDC Grand Rounds: A Public Health Approach to Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence," Howard Spivak et al \*
- [Victim's Letter to Brock Turner](#), Chanel Miller
- "Rape Fantasies," Margaret Atwood \*
- "[Sunshower](#)," Natalie Shapero

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE:**

- Reading Reflection #4 due Thursday, February 4 at 5 pm
- Presentation & Student Led Discussion: "Rape Fantasies" due Wednesday, 2/3 and Thursday 2/4, respectively
- Presentation & Student Led Discussion: "Sunshower" due Wednesday, 2/3 and Thursday 2/4, respectively

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**WEEK SIX (2/11): BEAUTY AND BODY IMAGE**


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**GUIDING QUESTIONS:**

- "What does it say about our culture that the desire for weight loss is considered a default feature of womanhood" (Gay 137)?
- How do weight and appearance impact women's health and wellbeing beyond a biomedical consideration of the comorbidities of obesity / above-average BMI?
- What effect do cultural beauty standards have on women's health?
- How have women resisted unhealthy beauty standards and cultivated a health body image?
- How are risks posed to women's health and wellbeing ignored or subordinated?
- What effect do cultural beauty standards have on women's health?
- How have women resisted unhealthy beauty standards and cultivated a health body image?

**READING DUE:**

- "Navigating Public Spaces: Gender, Race, and Body Privilege in Everyday Life," Samantha Kwan \*
- Watch: [Killing Us Softly 4](#), dir. Jean Kilbourne
- "The Birthmark," Nathaniel Hawthorne \*
- Selections from *Hunger*, Roxane Gay

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE:**

- Reading Reflection #5 due Thursday, February 11 at 5 pm
- Presentation & Student Led Discussion: "The Birthmark" due Wednesday, 2/10 and Thursday 2/11, respectively

- [“Everything You Know about Obesity is Wrong,”](#) Michael Hobbes (optional)

- Presentation & Student Led Discussion: selections from *Hunger* due Wednesday, 2/10 and Thursday 2/11, respectively

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### WEEK SEVEN (2/18): REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

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#### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Why have stories typically talked around the issue of abortion?
- How does addressing stories about abortion directly change the narrative, and what does this do to protect women’s health?
- How does a political preoccupation with abortion and access to birth control distract from maternal health and other reproductive health issues?
- Why and how is women’s reproductive health always inherently political? How do these politics complicate US healthcare providers’ ability to care for their patients?
- In what ways, and to what effect, are the histories of abortion, birth control, and reproductive health in the US both raced and classed?
- How does the complicated legacy of eugenics in the US inform biomedical and cultural narratives about abortion and reproductive health?

#### READING DUE:

- Preface and Introduction to *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in America*, Alexandra Minna Stern \*
- “The Black Community and the Birth Control Movement,” Jessie Rodrique \*
- “Women of Color and Their Struggle for Reproductive Justice,” Jael Silliman et al. \*
- [“Lost Mothers,”](#) Nina Martin et al.
- [“Hospital Know How to Protect Mothers, They Just Aren’t Doing It,”](#) Alison Young
- [“Black Mothers Keep Dying After Childbirth,”](#) Nina Martin and Renee Montagne
- [“If Americans Love Moms, Why Do We Let Them Die?”](#) Nicholas Kristof (optional)
- “Hills Like White Elephants,” Ernest Hemingway\*
- [“Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ from the Girl’s Point of View,”](#) Rachel Klein
- “The Empathy Exams,” Leslie Jamison \*
- Watch: episode one of *Shrill*

#### ASSIGNMENTS DUE:

- Conference Paper Abstract Due Sunday, February 21 at midnight
- Presentation & Student-Led Discussion: “Hills Like White Elephants” due Wednesday, 2/17 and Thursday 2/18, respectively
- Presentation & Student-Led Discussion: “The Empathy Exams” due Wednesday, 2/17 and Thursday 2/18, respectively

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### WEEK EIGHT (2/25): HYSTERIA AND WOMEN’S MENTAL HEALTH

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#### GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- How are representations of and responses to mental illness gendered?
- In what ways do representations of women’s mental illness symbolize oppressive gender norms and social expectations? Alternatively, how do representations of women’s mental illness resist traditional women’s roles?
- In what ways is mental illness employed as a literary trope? How does this inform the ways in which we respond to mental illness “IRL”?

#### READING DUE:

- [“Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental](#)

#### ASSIGNMENTS DUE:

- Conference Paper due Sunday, February 28 at



[Health](#)," Cecilia Tasca et al.

- *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath
- *The Hysterical Alphabet*, Terri Kapsalis and Gina Litherland (on reserve in the library)

midnight