

(Write it!) Disaster: Literary Form and Catastrophe
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Writing to his students, via the *New Yorker*, after campus closures due to the coronavirus pandemic, George Saunders asked: “What new forms might you invent, to fictionalize an event like this?” an event repeatedly described as “unprecedented” and “unimaginable.” In asking such a question, Saunders implicitly joined a line of writers who have understood the catastrophic and disastrous as calling for new forms of representation. Walter Benjamin, for one, has traced the impact of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755—a disaster “singular and strange”—on modern thought and literature from Voltaire to Kant and beyond; while, some decades prior, Daniel Defoe’s early experiments with the genre of the novel wrestle with, and are shaped by, the representation of extraordinarily violent storms and fatal plagues. Such literary and philosophical responses to crisis will be the center of this course, which will explore how a range of writers from the eighteenth century to the present—from Daniel Defoe to Jorie Graham, from Voltaire to Amitav Ghosh—have encountered and thought both within and beyond calamity and catastrophe.

Our first unit will consider representations of natural disasters and their aftermath—floods, thunderstorms, earthquakes, and hurricanes from the eighteenth to the twentieth century—alongside a variety of critical approaches toward the relation between humans and nature, environment, and climate. Our second unit will turn to narratives of plague and pandemic from the Romantic period to the AIDS crisis, alongside critical and theoretical works addressing questions of immunity, virality, medical science, and biological life. Our third and final unit will dwell with the contemporary to examine in greater detail the ways in which writers in the present continue to find new forms to imagine the unimaginable, with attention to literary responses to the social, political, economic, and ecological crises of climate change and their entanglement with global health crises, including the most recent pandemic.

Over the course of the semester, we’ll explore a range of forms and genres, including lyric and narrative poetry, novels and novellas (realist, sci fi, modernist), and drama, with forays into new media. And while work on questions of nature and immunity, of environmental and medical sciences, will form the core of each unit’s critical literature, we will also draw on a range of related theoretical approaches, among them Queer theory; critical race theory; the history and theory of science; and posthumanism.

Course Goals

By the end of this class you will have learned:

- How different literary forms from a range of historical moments represent disaster and catastrophe
- To describe and deploy a range of critical and theoretical approaches to literature
- To write a long work of literary criticism
- To locate and engage with relevant secondary sources

Course Texts

Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (ISBN: 9780199552351)

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (ISBN: 9780060838676)

Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (ISBN: 9780151707553)
J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (ISBN: 9780007221837)
Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (ISBN: 9781559363846)
Jorie Graham, *Sea Change* (ISBN: 9780061537189)
Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island* (ISBN: 9780374167394)
Additional readings will be available online.

Schedule of Readings

Week 1 – Introduction: Of Calamities in General

Primary readings: from Daniel Defoe, *The Storm & A Journal of the Plague Year*
Selections on the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 & responses (Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Benjamin)

Secondary readings: Scott J. Juengel, “The Early Novel and Catastrophe”
Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind”
George Saunders, “A Letter to My Students as We Face the Pandemic”

Suggested background (will be available on course site over winter break): Historical crises packet, featuring short selections from: *The Odyssey* (book 5); Thucydides *The History of the Peloponnesian War*; Genesis 6-9, Exodus 7-12; Pliny the Younger, Letters on the eruption of Vesuvius; *The Decameron*; *King Lear & Tempest*; Pepys’s diary

Unit One – Storm Clouds of the Anthropocene: Nature and Disaster in Literature

[This unit will survey literary representations of climate and natural disaster across three periods and genres (Romantic poetry; the modernist novel; postmodern science fiction). Each week will also work toward developing an understanding of criticism and theory on relations between humans and nature, with particular attention to literary applications of the concept of the Anthropocene. These critical questions will be approached from several different but related angles: theory and philosophy of nature; critical race theory; and theories of globalization and “the planetary.”]

Week 2 – Humans’ Nature: Poetry and Climate in the Nineteenth Century (theories of nature)

Primary readings: Romantic climate packet: Lord Byron: “Darkness”; William Wordsworth: selections from *The Prelude*; Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “Dejection: An Ode”; Felicia Hemans, “The Thunderstorm”; John Keats: from *The Fall of Hyperion* and “To Autumn”; P.B. Shelley, opening of *Laon and Cythna*; Charlotte Smith, from *Beachy Head* and “Sonnet Written during a Thunder Storm”
From John Ruskin *The Storm Cloud of the 19th Century*

Secondary readings: Jonathan Bate, “Living With the Weather”
Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, “Introduction,” from *Anthropocene Reading*
From Michel Serres *The Natural Contract*

Week 3 – The Storm This Time: Modernism and the Weather
(critical race theory)

Primary reading: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Secondary readings: Sonya Posmentier, “How the Hurricane Roars in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” from *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature*
Christina Sharpe, “Weather,” from *In the Wake*

Suggested: Kathryn Yusoff, “Note on Erasure,” and “Origin Stories for a New Epoch” in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

Week 4 - Library Visit / Research Orientation

Short Paper Due

Week 5 - World Building: Catastrophe, Globalization, and Science (Fiction)
(theories of globalization & “the planetary”)

Primary reading: J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*

Secondary readings: Thomas Davis, “Fossils of Tomorrow: Len Lye, J.G. Ballard, and Planetary Futures”
Excerpts from Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*
From Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*

Unit Two – Reading Contagion: Life, Literature, and the Body (Politic)

[This unit continues our survey through literary history and genre—theater in the late twentieth century, the novella in the early twentieth century, and the novel in the nineteenth century—with attention to narratives of plague and pandemic. Our critical readings in this unit will explore how questions about immunity, illness, medicine, and biological life can be treated in a literary context. The central theoretical and critical concept(s) we’ll consider in order to focus these questions will be biopolitics and biopower, which will be examined in relation to work in the history of science, Queer theory, and Black studies.]

Week 6 – Staging Pandemic: AIDS, Theater, and the History of Medicine
(history of science)

Primary readings: Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

Secondary readings: Daryl Ogden, “Cold War Science and the Body Politic: An Immuno/Virological Approach to *Angels in America*”
Michel Foucault, “The Right of Death and Power over Life,” *The History of Sexuality*

Week 7 – Protecting & Negating Life: Modernism and the 1918 Flu Pandemic
(history of science, continued)

Primary reading: Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

Secondary readings: Elizabeth Outka, “Untangling War and Plague” (on Katherine Anne Porter), from *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic*
From Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*

Suggested: selection from Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*

Week 8 – The End of Man: The Novel, Plague, and the Queer Future
(Queer theory)

Primary reading: Mary Shelley, *The Last Man pt 1*
Romantic Plague Packet (from Beddoes, *The Last Man*; from David Lyndsay, *The Last Plague*,
<https://romantic-circles.org/editions/mvs/lastman/plague.htm>)

Secondary readings: Barbara Johnson, “The Last Man,” from *A Life With Mary Shelley*
From Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*
Susan Stryker, “Biopolitics,” in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (short reference entry)

Optional: Edelman, “The Pathology of the Future, or the Endless Triumph of Life”

Prospectus Due

Week 9 – The End of Man, part 2: Romanticism and the Politics of Plague
(Black studies)

Primary reading: Shelley, *The Last Man*, pt. 2

Secondary readings: Ranita Chaterjee, “Our Bodies, Our Catastrophes: Biopolitics in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*”
From Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*

Unit Three – After the End: Contemporary Literature and The Future of Disaster

[This unit turns to contemporary literatures—poetry, the novel, and new media—and continues the examination of representations of environmental and health crisis. Where topics of weather and biology, natural disaster and pandemic were treated separately in weeks 2-9, this unit will think about their unknowable and unthinkable entanglements. In exploring the relations between climate and illness in the contemporary moment, we will continue to think with the concepts introduced in parts one and two of the course, but this unit will also introduce another theoretical approach to further develop this thinking: posthumanism.]

Week 10 – Composing the Unknown: Lyric and the Posthuman Environment

Primary reading: Jorie Graham, *Sea Change*

Secondary readings: Stacey Alaimo, “Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures”

From Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*

Suggested: Lynn Keller, “Introduction: Beyond Nature Poetry,” in *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*

Week 11 – Draft Workshop

Week 12 – Unthinkable Catastrophes: Realism, Climate Change, and Plague

Primary reading: Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island*

Secondary readings: from Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*
Melanie Finn, “Is Climate Change the 21st Century’s Black Death?” (review of *Gun Island*)
From Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*

Week 13 – The Viral Present: Social Media and COVID-19

Primary readings: Packet of social media / contemporary responses to covid19 (more to come): CoVid-19: Critical/Creative Studies in Music, Image Text (<https://www.criticalcreativestudies.com/>); “Now More So Than Ever” and “A Pandemic Novelist Takes to Twitter,” in *The Drift*; “Coronavirus Poems to the Editor” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/22/opinion/letters/coronavirus-poems.html>)

Secondary texts: Kim Stanley Robinson, “The Coronavirus is Rewriting our Imaginations”
N. Katherine Hayles, “Novel Corona: Posthuman Virus”
Arthi Vadde and Jessica Pressman, “Web 2.0 and Literary Criticism”

Final Paper Due

Assignments and Grade Breakdown

10% - Short paper. A 5-7 page due in week 4 of the semester. This should focus on one of the primary texts we’ve read, and should engage with at least one of the critical or theoretical works introduced in the first part of the course.

10% - Annotated bibliography and Prospectus. A two-page prospectus, and annotated bibliography with 8-10 sources, due by week 8 of the course.

10% - Weekly Critics Presentations/Reports. Twice in the semester (once in part one of the course, and once in part two), each student will serve as the class’s weekly critic. Your task as critic is to provide an overview of the arguments presented in one of the weeks’ secondary works. You

should identify **one central question** raised by that text, as well as **a set of passages from the week's assigned reading** that will serve as a basis for a class discussion of both the primary text and your chosen secondary work. Your report should be no longer than what you can fit on one page.

15% - Draft Workshop

40% - Research paper. The final assignment for the course, this paper is a 20-25 page research based paper. You are welcome to write on a text not on our syllabus, as long as (1) the text is approved by me at the time of the submission of your prospectus, and (2) your paper engages with one of the central theories of the course.

15% - Attendance and participation. Since discussion is an integral part of this course, attendance, preparation, and (active) participation are required. I expect you to come to class having completed (and annotated, and thought about!) the reading(s) for the week—reading(s) which you should bring in hard or digital copy to our section meetings. If you find speaking in class to be difficult for any reason, please get in touch with me as early as you can, and we can figure out a plan for participation together.