

# The Literary (After)Lives of the Body

Freshman Seminar 33n  
Sever Hall 111, Wednesday 2-4

Spring 2009

Harvard University

Dr. Karen Elizabeth Bishop

## course overview

In this comparative literature class, we will examine a corpus of literary works that portrays the afterlives of dead bodies. We will attempt to decipher what the body reveals in death, what desires it embodies, what losses and sacrifices it signifies, and what ethical demands it places on the living. We will begin by considering the roles of the dead warrior, the ghost, and the suicide in the Greek and Roman epic and in dramatic works by Sophocles and Shakespeare; we will then turn our attention to the modernist body and the simulacrum of bodies caught in a visual and narrative feedback loop; finally, we will carefully examine the aesthetic and political manifestations of the dead, absent, embalmed, copied, errant, tortured, dismembered and buried body in some of the major works of twentieth-century Western literature. Students will be expected to handle the bodies we look at with respect and with the intellectual understanding that the dead body unleashes many secrets, points to many pasts, and often serves as an a priori trace of future historical events. We will do our best to learn to read these bodies and to locate them in their corresponding aesthetic and ethical contexts.

Our reading and discussions will be divided into the following topics: Re-mem-bering the Ancient Body; Intervention: the Dramatic Body; The Modernist Body; Bodies in a Feedback Loop; The War Body; The Mythical Body Turned Monument; The Aftermath of the Political Body. In addition to primary texts by Eliot, Faulkner, Bioy Casares, García Márquez, Wiesel, Ishiguro, Martínez, Krog, and Forché, we will read short stories, poetry and theoretical texts that foreground the rich afterlives of the body.

## required texts

Sophocles, Antigone (c. 442 B.C.)

William Shakespeare, Hamlet (c. 1600)

T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land (1922)

William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying (1930)

Adolfo Bioy Casares, The Invention of Morel (1940)

Gabriel García Márquez, Chronicle of a Death Foretold (1981)

Elie Wiesel, Night (1954)

Kazuo Ishiguro, A Pale View of Hills (1982)

Tomás Eloy Martínez, Santa Evita (1995)

Antjie Krog, Country of My Skull (1998)

Carolyn Forché, The Angel of History (1995)

a course reader with texts by Homer, Millay, Faulkner, Bierce, Perlongher, the Brothers Grimm, Améry, Baudrillard, and Agamben, among others.



## seminar requirements



Active, thoughtful, and constructive participation in our seminar is expected. Please be sure to come to each class having completed the weekly readings and assignments and prepared to engage in lively discussion.



Each week, you'll turn in a series of five questions that respond to the reading we're doing. Four of these may be straightforward and point to something you'd like to discuss with the rest of the seminar. The fifth question should be an attempt to further analyze or complicate the question you present. You can offer up a possible answer or answers to your own question, situate your query historically, culturally or politically, or discuss how the work hinges or unhinges upon this question. This whole effort should be approximately two pages long.



Each seminar participant will present a 20 minute presentation on one or a combination of our readings. We'll talk in seminar about the format these might take.



You'll turn in a three-page close reading of a judiciously selected passage. We'll discuss in class how to perform close readings and why knowing how is so important.



You'll each turn in, at your leisure, a creative writing project that features some manifestation of a body. We'll decide together what form this might take and whether or not you'd like to workshop your writing.



At the end of the seminar, you'll turn in a final project on a topic of your own choosing. This project may be interdisciplinary in theme and media; it may be a formal textual analysis; it may be more of a literature meets cultural studies project. We'll talk both individually and workshop our ideas for projects with the rest of the group.

## office hours and contact information

I will hold weekly office hours on Thursdays, 1-2, and by appointment, in Barker Center 032. Feel free to reach me by email at [kebishop@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:kebishop@fas.harvard.edu). You can also reach me by phone at my office at 617.495.3288 or, if urgent, at home at 617.987.8044.

## academic ethics

Plagiarism or cheating in any form will not be tolerated, and will be immediately subject to university disciplinary action. We will discuss in class what constitutes proper citation format.

**\*If you are a student with a disability, please speak with me about any accommodations you may need.**

**\*This syllabus is provisional and subject to change.**

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# Calendar of Readings and Assignments

## re - m e m b e r i n g t h e a n c i e n t b o d y

**week 1, 28 January**  
introduction to seminar

**week 2, 4 February**  
books XXIII and XXIV of Homer's Iliad and book XI of Homer's Odyssey  
Sophocles, Antigone

## i n t e r v e n t i o n : t h e d r a m a t i c b o d y

**week 3, 11 February**  
William Shakespeare, Hamlet  
John Hunt, "A Thing of Nothing: The Catastrophic Body in Hamlet"

## t h e m o d e r n i s t b o d y

**week 4, 18 February**  
T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land  
Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Exposure"  
e.e. cummings, "death's chimney"  
Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Epitaph for the Race of Man"

**week 5, 25 February**  
William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily"  
William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying

## b o d i e s i n a f e e d b a c k l o o p

**week 6, 4 March**  
Adolfo Bioy Casares, The Invention of Morel  
Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra"  
\*recommended film, "L'Année dernière à Marienbad" [Last Night at Marienbad], dir. Alain Resnais (1961)  
close readings due in class

**week 7, 11 March**  
Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"  
Gabriel García Márquez, Chronicle of a Death Foretold

## the war body

### week 8, 18 March

Elie Wiesel, Night

"Torture" from Jean Améry, At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities

"The Muselmann" from Giorgio Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive

spring recess: 21 – 29 March

### week 9, 1 April

Kazuo Ishiguro, A Pale View of Hills

## mythical bodies turned monument

### week 10, 8 April

Néstor Perlongher, "Corpses"

Tomás Eloy Martínez, Santa Evita, part I

### week 11, 15 April

Tomás Eloy Martínez, Santa Evita, part II

## the aftermath of the political body

### week 12, 22 April

the Brothers Grimm, "The Singing Bone"

Antjie Krog, Country of My Skull

\*recommended film: "In My Country," dir. John Boorman (2004)

### week 13, 29 April

Carolyn Forché, The Angel of History

presentations of proposed final projects

conclusions to class

reading period: 2 – 13 May  
examination period: 14-22 May  
final projects due 15 May

