

UNCP5565 – Capstone: The Moral of the Story

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Hanging in the East Wing of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts is the magna opus of Paul Gauguin, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" (1897 - 98). Gauguin left family, friends, and a career in banking to flee to Tahiti in search of life's meaning. "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" is his ultimate representation of these philosophical questions. We will move through a different artistic medium – that of the short story – as we ask those same questions. We will examine complex plots and characters in the hopes of exploring our own stories. To do so, we will rely on close reading of the text, critical analysis, and personal reflection. Students should be willing to reflect upon not only the stories we read, but their own stories as well. We will share these stories with each other, as we continue to make meaning and write our own stories. The success of this course will depend on the full participation of its members. All readings should be carefully done and completed on time, and all students should be open to thoughtful reflection and discussion. These texts, reflections, and discussions will help us to explore our past, present, and

future selves. Within each self, we will focus on four areas of commitment that everyone faces – personal relationships, work and career, community and society, and spirituality in the search for ultimate meaning. Following is the timeline in which we will do so.

NOTES ON DATES: There is no class on the following Mondays –

March 5 – Spring Break

April 2 - Easter Monday

April 16 – Patriot’s Day

Part I - “WHERE DO WE COME FROM?”

1. (Jan. 22) – Getting Started

2. (Jan. 29) – Family

- Discussion Leaders – Juliana and Rachel
- Readings: "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease," by Jonathan Safran Foer; "The Veldt," by Ray Bradbury

3. (Feb 5) – Home Towns

- Discussion Leaders – Chandler and Sherri
- Readings: "I Bought a Little City," by Donald Barthelme; "Greasy Lake" by T.C. Boyle

Part II - “WHAT ARE WE?”

4. (Feb. 12) – Values

- Discussion Leaders – Jason and TJ
- Readings "Harrison Bergeron," by Kurt Vonnegut; "The Lottery," by Shirley Jackson

5. (Feb. 19) – Experiences

- Discussion Leaders – Allie and Sean
- Readings: "Lawns," by Mona Simpson;; "The School," by Donald Barthelme

6. (Feb. 26) – Relationships at BC

- Discussion Leaders – Erin and Tyler
- Readings: "Good People," by David Foster Wallace; "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Was Buried" by Amy Hempel

Part III - “WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

7. (Mar. 13) – Writer's workshop

- bring your story ideas and laptop to class

8. (Mar. 20) – Relationships

- Discussion Leaders –Rebecca and Kaitlyn
- Readings: "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," by Raymond Carver; "The Second Bakery Attack," and "On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl one beautiful April Morning," both by Haruki Murakami , Cat Person, by Kristen Roupenian

9. (Mar. 26) – Jobs, careers, vocations

- Discussion Leaders – Lauren and Jack

- Readings; [“The 400 Pound CEO,”](#) by George Saunders; ["Bullet in the Brain,"](#) by Tobias Wolfe
10. (April 10) – Putting together a life
- Discussion Leaders – Stephanie and Valerie
 - Readings: Reading: [“The Last Question,”](#) by Isaac Asimov; ["The Egg,"](#) by Andy Weir;
11. (April 24) - Present Short Stories
12. (May 1) - Dinner Meeting at the Sullivan home, 130 Harris Avenue, Needham, MA 02492

How a class runs:

- 1 Opening moments (15 – 20 minutes)
 - 1 Quiz – These are not meant to trick, but are helpful carrots in preparing us for class.
 - 2 Weekly Examen – Each week will repeat 3 basic notions – gratitude, a mindful replay of the week, and correction/improvement. We will keep a weekly journal of our Examens.
- 2 Discussion, Part I (60 minutes). Each week, two discussion leaders will facilitate our meeting. Part I will center on the week’s stories, and will be more of a textual analysis.
- 3 Break (10 minutes)
- 4 Discussion, Part II will focus on our own stories (45 minutes). This part will include more of a textual response, or personal reflections on the short stories.
- 5 Synthesizing moments (15 minutes)
 - 1 Final thoughts
 - 2 Looking ahead to the next week

Assignments

- Quizzes – 5 % - ongoing
- Participation – 25 % - ongoing
- Textual Response – 15 % - ongoing
- Textual Analysis – 15 % - ongoing
- Short Story – 30 % - Due April 20
- Final Examen/Exit Interview 10 % - Due Week of May 1

Quizzes

A quiz feels like a dumb thing for a senior seminar, but experience shows that the informal friendly atmosphere in a seminar can lead some people to slack off. Quizzes prove your preparedness. They involve no-brainer questions that show whether you read the material or viewed the film; no trick questions, no interpretative attempts. As long as you prepared the reading and/or viewing assignment, you’ll pass the quiz.

Participation

By taking a seminar, you make a covenant to give “four gifts”, with the expectation that you will receive them from each other: attention, preparation, contribution, and

leadership. This means that you must be present for all class meetings. You are allowed only one absence, after that, your course grade drops by 25% for each absence. If you think a particular absence should be an exception to the rule, e-mail me in advance to let me know the reason and I will determine if it is excusable. The “four gifts” mentioned above are:

1. *Preparation* is measured by the textual papers and quizzes.
2. *Attention* is shown by reflecting back to fellow students your awareness of what they have said by supporting them, disagreeing with them, questioning them, etc.
3. *Contribution*- Many people are uncomfortable when speaking in a group. Nevertheless, that is a necessary skill in life, and an education that did not help you overcome this would be an education that failed your needs. Capstone is all about shared communication. You are expected to take a regular part in class discussions. If this is new or uncomfortable for you, speak to the professor. Do not wait for the professor to tell you at mid-term that you are failing in participation. Take the initiative. After the first four or five classes, if you are not participating regularly, meet with the professor to discuss the steps you want to take to become more involved.
4. *Leadership* - Most discussions will be led by a team of two discussion leaders. This means that they must meet with each other in the week before class to develop their plan. In class, timing demands creative planning. You are urged, but not required, to make an appointment to discuss your strategy with me. The grade for this part of the course is a single collective grade shared by both leaders. The leaders’ role is not to lecture on their own opinions, rather, their role is to prepare a framework for the discussion and keep it moving. This includes:
 - doing more background work on the subject for the week; this can include information on the author, the subject, reviews of the book, or additional material from other sources
 - linking your background work to the main questions you will pursue in discussion
 - articulating your overall plan to the class by naming the questions you want to pursue. Pose questions that generate maximum discussion, not ones that just get answers.
 - being creative: making as many connections to our experience as you can: bring in news, film clips, music, to link our reading to our reality
 - getting everyone involved in discussion: when you see certain persons holding back from conversation, it is your job to draw them in. Calling on a person is not a threat, it is a way to let them know they are valued and desired.

Textual Response

These papers will be due weekly during weeks 2 – 10 (except during the week you are the discussion leader). The response paper is a brief (1 to 3 pages) personal reflection on the text. I will assign specific guiding questions, but in general will be seeking emotional responses to the stories. How are the stories familiar/not familiar to your own story?

Textual Analysis

These papers will also be due weekly during weeks 2 – 10 (except during the week you are the discussion leader). The analysis paper is also brief (1 to 3 pages), but rather than a personal reflection/reaction, it should interpret or analyze the readings. You will be asked to provide evidence within the text to support your views. They should clearly present a coherent and organized analysis to some aspect of the text – a theme, a particular scene, or a recurrent motif are some examples. I will also provide questions to help guide your analysis. You should refrain from any research for these.

Short Story

Our readings will culminate in you becoming the author of your own short stories. You will craft a short story – 1500 to 3000 words – which explores the themes of the class and place you in the role of author (and character if you wish). Throughout the semester, we will “workshop” ideas and methods in crafting our story.

Final Examen/Exit Interview

Your final examen will be a reflection on your daily/weekly events of the past semester. It should be a tool in which you state your appreciation, love, and gratitude for the important people in your life; you review your goals and objectives of the semester; and you seek the ways in which you can improve. Your final examen (3 to 5 pages) will be a tool for a discussion with the professor – a one on one “exit interview.” During that time, you will also deliver a SASE, addressed to your permanent home, which will be mailed to you in one year. The contents of the letter will be a one page note to yourself, in which you express what you do not want to forget, or may need to remind yourself, in a year’s time.