

# MCS Selective

## Theater and the Experience of Illness

Studying literary narratives of illness improves our understanding of what it means to suffer and to be a patient. Hopefully, this helps us become more sensitive and humane doctors. Poems, essays, stories and novels all have their use. However, theater has something special to offer; watching a performance is a communal activity evoking a response that goes to the very core of what it means to be human. Contemporary theater is filled with depictions of illness that can both entertain and educate. In short, theater provides a wonderful way to understand the human condition that is more real than any textbook.

### Instructor



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### Syllabus

In this seminar course we will use the power of theater to explore what it means to be ill by reading plays about cancer, AIDS, stroke, and mental illness. You will be asked to read a play before each class discussion. (As there are four plays to read, you may want to get a head start over the summer). There will also be an experiential component to the course. We will devise and develop our own dialogue and scenes in an effort to understand character and the creative process. No prior experience is necessary, and no acting will be required, but participants should be prepared to try their hand at playwriting.

### Educational Objectives:

At the conclusion of this course you will be able to:

1. Describe how illness is expressed in literary works.
2. Demonstrate enhanced empathy for the patient experience.
3. Develop creative writing skills.
4. Improve critical reading and communication skills.

### Evaluation:

Students are expected to attend all four sessions, to read all four plays, and to participate in discussions. Some writing will be done in class, and some will be done outside and brought in

to share. The quality of the writing exercises will not be graded so much as the effort involved and the thought behind it.

### **Outline**

Week 1: Before the first class, please read Margaret Edson's "Wit." The author of this moving play was inspired by her work in the cancer unit of a hospital, and it has often been used to illustrate negative aspects of the patient experience in medical facilities. There will also be a writing exercise that will prepare for what is to come. Please bring pen and paper.

Week 2: We will discuss Larry Kramer's "The Normal Heart." In this case, in addition to being a playwright, the author is a person living with AIDS and a noted activist. This is a play with a strong political agenda, an example of theater as patient advocacy. There will be a short writing assignment that will have required some outside work, and whose results you will share in class.

Week 3: Arthur Kopit's "Wings" attempts to capture the thoughts and communications of a person who suffers from organic brain syndrome with aphasia. The experience of suffering as expressed through internal monologues provides a starting point for work on our own writing.

Week 4: In the final class we look at "Next to Normal," a contemporary musical about a woman suffering from bipolar disorder and the effects of her illness on her family. We also conclude our work on our own writing.

### **Class Size**

Minimum 6

Maximum 10