

**HON 390: The Humanities Center Seminar on Pain**  
**Fall 2008--7:30-10:00 T--CRN 19981--D201**  
**Dr. Nels P. Highberg**

Office Location: A 212B  
Office Hours: 12:30-3:00 M, 12:00-4:00 T, 1:30-3:00 F and by appointment  
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Course Blog: <<http://seminaronpain.blogspot.com/>>

### **Why Are We Here?**

Everyone has felt pain. Even though postmodern and post-structural perspectives teach us to question the concept of "absolutes," "truth," and "objectivity," we cannot deny the universal familiarity we all have with pain. Even though experience with pain can be considered universal, in the moment of the experience, however, one often feels isolated and confused. These feelings often arise because pain is an indescribable, as well as an undesirable, entity. As Elaine Scarry notes in *The Body in Pain*, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is heard." Various academic disciplines have turned their theoretical lenses towards pain in an attempt to describe the indescribable, a task that proves difficult since pain is so varied. It can be physical, emotional, and/or psychological. For some, pain is a chronic, omnipresent element of daily life, while others take their lack of pain for granted until they are blindsided by it. Pain can also be a personal experience or a communal one, ranging from one person stubbing a toe against a doorframe to an entire city (or country) watching thousands die as towers crash to the ground. This seminar examines pain in all of its guises and through a variety of perspectives, which means we will discuss intense subjects that demand a professional attitude from all of us.

Enrolling in any course provides us with several opportunities, including many that we cannot anticipate when the course begins. I do hope by the end of the course, however, that you will be better adept at a few specific things. More specifically, in this course, we will work:

- To develop a deeper understanding of the ways writers and artists represent personal and communal experiences of pain;
- To raise awareness about how pain can incite political change and social action; and
- To strengthen skills in reading, writing, thinking, and other areas that define both a university education and life in a democratic, pluralistic society.

Essentially, by the end of this course, I want you to be a stronger and more articulate participant in conversations about pain and its effects on individual lives and society at large.

### **What Will We Be Doing?**

For Spring 2009, our attention shifts to the public lecture and film series that I have coordinated for the course. Each week, you will attend a lecture or a film. There will often be readings posted on Blackboard that you should read before class. After each

lectures, you will meet with the speaker and have the chance to ask questions about their talk and the readings, so please bring questions and comments to class. There will not but huge amounts of reading this semester, which should make it easier to complete all of it.

In addition to reading, you will also be doing a fair amount of writing. You will find out as the course progresses that I am a firm believer that writing is not just something you learn to do but also something that you do to learn. In other words, through writing, you can develop stronger ideas and refine your thinking. Your final course grade will be based on both informal and formal projects that you produce throughout the course.

**Blog Postings** (20 percent of final grade)

You will continue posting to the blog that you created last semester. This time, however, you will complete all postings within forty-eight hours after class. Your posts should respond to both the lectures or films and any readings you had for the day. Posts should always be substantial (at least a couple of hundred words in length) but can take many forms: asking questions, making connections, and describing reactions. I believe that these activities provide the greatest opportunity to use writing to learn, and they should help you complete your more formal assignments because, ultimately, they provide you with a chance to reflect, struggle, or experiment before receiving a hard and fast final grade.

**Opinion Essays** (40 percent of final grade)

You will write three opinion pieces much like those that appear in newspapers and magazines. Each one will be no longer than 600 words. In these pieces, you will relate the ideas and readings from the course to a news article that has appeared online or in print since July 15, 2008. The point is to relate what we have done in class (in either semester) to something that is happening in the world around us. Essay one is due on by email by noon on February 27, essay two on March 27, and essay three on April 24. You will not have the chance to revise any of these, but I will drop your lowest grade; your two highest grades will count.

**Visual Art Project** (20 percent of final grade)

As is typical in a humanities course, you have done and will do a fair amount of writing for me. This semester, you will create one visual project that I will explain in my greater detail on the class blog. This will be due in my office or by email by noon on Friday, April 10.

**Final Essay** (20 percent of final grade)

Your final project for this class will be an essay that answers this question: how can we learn to live with pain in our contemporary lives? I will discuss this essay in much greater detail on the class blog, but know now that it is due through email (in .doc or .rtf format) by noon on Friday, May 8.

## How Will We Be Working Together?

I feel a strong investment in the idea of you finishing this class as a much stronger writer, reader, and thinker than you were on the first day. Therefore, I want to do everything possible to help you learn all you can while we work together. Of course, your academic improvement depends mostly on your efforts and commitment, but I certainly need to do my best to create a space that makes learning possible. If you choose to join me in this endeavor, then there are certain things we should expect from each other.

**I expect you to attend every class and complete each reading and writing assignment on time.** If we are going to work together, then we have to count on each other to be here both physically and mentally. Sure, we all have the occasional off day, but a noticeable pattern of absences or lack of preparedness affects each of us because it decreases our opportunities to exchange ideas and learn. Therefore, (1) finish all reading, writing, and printing before you arrive to class and have work from other courses put away; (2) arrive on time and plan to be here for the entire session; (3) turn your cell phones off (I will keep track of the time and make sure we end on schedule, so checking the phone's clock is not necessary); and (4) complete all writing assignments by the stated deadline. Unless the prompt for an assignment says differently, I will not take any formal assignment more than a week late because we will have moved onto other things. Though you have a week to get it to me without a grade penalty, I will not comment on any assignment that is late for any reason, which means you lose a key opportunity to improve as a writer or increase your grade during any revisions (though even in these cases, I will be happy to meet with you in my office to talk about your work). We are not together for that long, and I want to use our time well. Engage fully with everything we do; I will do my best to guarantee that your engagement serves you well in the end.

**I expect you to put forth your best efforts for each activity and assignment.** Obviously, you will not learn anything if you do not do the work. When you do it, I hope you really try to do it well. In addition, I intend for much of our work to challenge you, which can feel daunting at times. Even when you feel discouraged or confused, I expect you to trust the process and try to the best of your abilities. That's when learning happens. For any writing assignment, I always expect your work to be your own. *Plagiarism in any form can lead to failing the assignment or the entire course*, and it completely robs you of the chance for academic improvement.

**I expect you to communicate with each other and me.** Passivity will get you nowhere in life or in this class. I know that not everyone likes to speak in class all the time but I would certainly like everyone to respond to each other's thoughts and the course content occasionally. Often, this will happen through specific in-class activities and questions, and it will sometimes occur online through Blackboard or other digital avenues. By communication, I also mean that I expect you to ask questions constantly about the assignments and your work on them. If you are confused or uncertain about anything, I need to know. Always let me know if you have any concerns about this course or your work in it. It is much easier on everyone if you let me know of any

potential problems as soon as they arise. Email me. Come by my office to talk or go over drafts of your assignments. Feel free to add me as a friend on Facebook (I never add students first, but I will accept any friend request initiated by a student). Stay in touch.

**You can expect me to offer clear and specific guidelines for each assignment.** I do not want class to feel like a game of "secret basketball" where you are constantly trying to get the ball through the hoop--or in our case, get an assignment done--and the hoop remains invisible, with me only telling you that you're off and need to do it again. I will never tell you what to write for any assignment, but I will be as clear as possible about what I expect the end product to represent and how I think you can get there. This also means that when I grade your essays, I will offer feedback that explains why you received the grade you received, and you can always come to my office and talk with me about your graded essays so that you can better understand why you earned what you earned and how you can improve the next time around. When it comes to the assignment prompts and other course documents such as the syllabus and schedule, know that they will always be available on online throughout the entire course.

**You can expect me to have an answer when you ask why any aspect of this class should matter to you.** I hate wasting time. I avoid small talk and chitchat if it seems pointless, which it often does. Nothing in this class--the readings, assignments, or activities--will constitute busy work. I will always have a reason for why we are doing anything we are doing, and you always have the right to ask me to provide that reason. You may not always like my answer or agree with it, but I hope you will believe that I have clear, purposeful intentions for everything I ask you to do.

**You can expect me to commit to this class with all that I have gained from my experiences as a teacher and my intellectual study as a researcher.** Clearly, I do not want you to coast through this class, and I promise I will not coast as well. I promise to use everything I can from what I have learned as a teacher, writer, and scholar to shape what we do in each individual class session and in the course as a whole. Furthermore, I want you to know that I teach this class because I really do care about the issues we cover in it. I believe that the things we do are not just interesting intellectual exercises but are things that impact our daily, material lives. You can see more about how the ideas I bring up in my classes relate to my everyday life on my blog, <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/highberg/blog/>>.

As you work throughout this course and others, do not forget the great resources provided by the university to assist you in your academic endeavors.

**Center for Reading and Writing** <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/crw/main.htm>>: Writing consultants are available for free, one-on-one consultations to go over your writing. They work with writers across the university and at all levels and will speak with you at any stage of the writing process. Stop by (A209) or call (768-4312) for an appointment. Use this service!

**Learning Plus** <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/LDSupport/>>: They offer academic support services to any student who has been diagnosed with a learning disability or attention deficit disorder. They offer individual consultations to assist you with test taking or any other course assignment. Stop by (A209) or call (768-4312) for an appointment.

**Counseling and Psychological Services** <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/CAPS/>>: According to their website, "CAPS' mission is to help students achieve their fullest potential, improve their quality of life, and successfully meet the challenges of college." Also, "CAPS provides a range of short-term counseling and psychological services to the university community. Services are available to full-time students at no additional cost. Part-time undergraduate and graduate students may utilize CAPS services for a nominal fee (students must be enrolled for a minimum of 6 credits). For students, these services may include individual counseling, couples counseling, and group counseling. Counseling services may be ongoing or on a crisis basis." Call 786-4482 or visit GSU 313 to make an appointment.