Witnessing War
Signature Course
ENG 14320

Prof. Rachel Galvin
Departments of English and Comparative Literature

T/Th 11:00-12:20am | Ryerson 276
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Course Description

War is a defining phenomenon of the twentieth century, yet there is no consensus on how to represent it. How can the experience of extremity or atrocity be described? Who might provide a more trustworthy account of events—a soldier, civilian eyewitness, news reporter, or philosopher? How do political bias and propaganda complicate our understanding of the reliability of war stories? We begin by evaluating arguments about war and its representation by a range of international writers including Wilfred Owen, Tim O’Brien, and Viet Thanh Nguyen. Next, we explore the intellectual’s role in witnessing war by reading Primo Levi’s autobiographical account of Auschwitz, The Drowned and the Saved, alongside critical texts by thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edward Said, Susan Sontag, and Judith Butler. In the course of the quarter, we’ll examine a range of classic writings on war by Carl von Clausewitz, Immanuel Kant, Ernst Jünger, Hannah Arendt, and others. In the last part of the quarter, we consider responses to the United States’ involvement in the wars of the twenty-first century, including Phil Klay’s story collection Redeployment and a range of contemporary poetry from Don Mee Choi, Mónica de la Torre, Philip Metres, Solmaz Sharif, Juliana Spahr, and C.D. Wright. We conclude with a look at war as represented in painting and photography, and a discussion of Susan Sontag’s controversial New York Times article about the American use of torture at Abu Ghraib prison. Throughout the quarter, guest speakers will visit class, including an Iraq War veteran and artist, Aaron Hughes; and Thomas Krasnican and Nick Paraiso, two UChicago graduate students and Naval officers, who produce a podcast, Thank You for Your Service.

Required Texts & Materials

Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others [ISBN 9780312422196]
All other course material is available on Canvas. Please download PDFs.
Evaluation
20% Midterm Essay (750-1250 words)
30% Final Essay (1500-2000 words)
20% Short writing assignments for discussion section
10% Two brief response papers to guest speakers
20% Good citizenship and participation

Response Essays: After each discussion with a guest speaker, you will write a brief response essay within 48 hours and upload it to Canvas. The essay should provide an analytical reflection on the visit, connecting it to the themes and debates of our seminar, and may also involve personal and aesthetic reactions to the artwork/reading/discussion.

Papers: Should be typed in 12-point font and double-spaced, with pages numbered.

Citizenship: Consistent attendance, thoughtful preparation, and lively, democratic participation are expected and enthusiastically encouraged. Come to each session on time and well prepared, having read the material carefully. Please note: Lectures will be mixed with class-wide discussion and brief exercises, so make sure that you read the assigned texts carefully and that you come to lecture ready with questions and comments.

Note 1: Our reading schedule may be modified during the quarter. Check your email for updates.

Note 2: In this class we’ll be reading disturbing texts and looking at disturbing images with regularity. Because it is integral to the study of war, we will be examining issues related to violence, cruelty, vulgarity, racism, torture, dehumanization, rape, death, and genocide. Your course assistants and I are here to discuss any issues or concerns.

UNIT 1: WAR & LITERATURE

Week 1: What Use Is Literature in Wartime?

Day 1 - Tues., Oct. 1
Introduction to Course
Jessie Pope, “The Call”
Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est”
Siegfried Sassoon, “The Glory of Women”
World War I recruitment posters

Day 2 - Thurs., Oct. 3
Emily Dickinson, “It feels a shame to be alive” (1862)
Peter Gizzi, “Protest Song” (2008)
James Scott Campbell, “Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism,” New Literary History 30, no. 1
Kate McLoughlin, “War and Words,” in The Cambridge Companion to War Writing

Fri., Oct. 4 - Discussion Section
**Week 2: How to Write a True War Story**

*Day 3 - Tues., Oct. 8*
  Thomas Hardy, “The Man He Killed” (poem, 1902)

*Day 4 - Thurs., Oct. 10*
  *The Things They Carried*, 155-233

*Fri., Oct. 11 - Discussion Section*

**Week 3: War Poetry, Elegy, and Civilian Guilt**

*Day 5 - Tues., Oct. 15  Guest lecture: Brandon Truett*
  César Vallejo, “Brief Responsory to a Hero of the Republic” and “Here, Ramón Collar”
  W.H. Auden, “September 1, 1939,” “Musée des Beaux Arts,” “Refugee Blues,” and “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”
  Jordana Mendelson, “Josep Renau and the 1937 Spanish Pavilion in Paris,” from *Documenting Spain*

*Day 6 - Thurs., Oct. 17 Post-9/11 Poetry and National Security Affect*
  Juliana Spahr, “Note,” “Poem Written after September 11, 2001,” “December 2, 2002”
  Mónica de la Torre, “Imperfect Utterances”
  Philip Metres, “(echo /ex/)” and “Home Sweet Home” from *Sand Operas*
  C.D. Wright, excerpt from *Rising, Falling, Hovering* (bottom of p. 62-65)

*Fri., Oct. 18 - Discussion Section*

**UNIT 2: WAR & PHILOSOPHY**

**Week 4: Theories of War & Witnessing**

*Day 7 - Tues., Oct. 22  TA guest lecture: Juan Diego Mariátegui*
  Carl von Clausewitz, Book One from *On War* (1816-1830), p. 75-89 and 100-104.
  Ernst Jünger, excerpt from *Storm of Steel*
  Michael Walzer, Chapter 9, “Noncombatant Immunity and Military Necessity,” in *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*
Day 8 - Thurs., Oct. 24
Primo Levi, preface (p.11-22); “The Memory of the Offense” (p.23-35) in The Drowned and the Saved; and “Shema” (poem)
Video testimonies from Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center

Fri., Oct. 25 - Discussion Section

**Week 5: World War II Testimony & Memory**

Day 9 - Tues., Oct. 29  **TA guest lecture: Jack Dragu**
Primo Levi, “The Grey Zone” (36-69); “Shame” (70-87), in Drowned & The Saved

Day 10 - Thurs., Oct. 31
Paul Celan, “Death Fugue” (poem)

Fri., Nov. 1 - Discussion Section

**Midterm Essay due Sunday, Nov. 3, at 6pm on Canvas**

**Week 6: America’s Wars with Iraq and Afghanistan**

Day 11 - Tues., Nov. 5
Class Visit: Thomas Krasnican and Nick Paraiso, Naval officers and M.A. students in the Harris School of Public Policy

Come prepared with questions to ask Thomas and Nick

3 podcast episodes from Thank You for Your Service:
Optional listening: “Phil Klay on America’s Moral Contract with Its Service Members” (May 14, 2019, 49 min). Note: We will be discussing Klay’s stories and article on 11/26. You can listen to his interview for that day instead if you’re short on time.

Meanwhile: Begin reading Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others. We will discuss on 11/12 and 11/14.

Day 12 - Thurs., Nov. 7  Film by Errol Morris, The Fog of War (2003)
Due: Brief Response Essay on Visit from Thomas and Nick

Fri., Nov. 8 - Discussion Section

Week 7: The Ethics of Witnessing

Day 13 - Tues., Nov. 12
Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, p. 1-94
Folder of images mentioned in Sontag’s book available on Canvas

Day 14 - Thurs., Nov. 14
Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, p. 96-126

Fri., Nov. 15 - Discussion Section

UNIT 3: REPRESENTING WAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week 8: Visual Art, Violence, & Torture

Day 15 - Tues., Nov. 19
Jan Mieszkowski, “Looking at the Dead,” in Watching War

Optional: Seymour Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” The New Yorker (May 2004)
In-class Viewing: Artwork by Francisco Goya, Otto Dix, George Grosz, Käthe Kollwitz, Fernando Botero, Daniel Heyman
Nick Ut (1972) photo of 9-year-old Kim Phuc fleeing napalmed village
Day 16 - Thurs., Nov. 21  
Class Visit: Iraq War veteran, artist, and activist Aaron Hughes  
Come prepared with questions to ask our guest!

Fri., Nov. 22 - Discussion Section  
**Due: Brief Response Essay** on Visit from Aaron Hughes

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**Week 9: Contemporary U.S. War Literature**

Day 17 - Tues., Nov. 26  
Phil Klay, “Two Decades of War Have Eroded the Morale of America’s Troops,” in  
_The Atlantic_ (May 2018)  
Stories from Phil Klay’s _Redeployment_ (2014)  
“Money as Weapons System” p.77-118  
“Unless It’s a Sucking Chest Wound” p. 237-270  
“After Action Report” p. 29-52  
**Optional:** “Prayer in the Furnace” p.129-168  
**Optional:** “Phil Klay on America’s Moral Contract with Its Service Members,” _Thank You for Your Service_ podcast (May 14, 2019, 49 min).

**Thurs. Nov. 28  No Class - Thanksgiving**

No Discussion Section

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**Week 10: Contemporary Poetry and War Culture**

Day 18 - Tues., Dec. 3  
Essay: Patrick Deer, “The Ends of War and the Limits of War Culture”  
Solmaz Sharif, “Look”  
Ocean Vuong, “Self-Portrait with Exit Wounds”  
Don Mee Choi, “Suicide Parade,” “Ugly=Nation,” “Woe Are You,” “My father was hardly himself,” “The Tarzon’s Guide to History,” from _Hardly War_  
Layli Long Soldier, “38”  
Warsan Shire, “Home”

No Discussion Section

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**Sunday, Dec. 8, Final Essay Due at 6pm on Canvas**