Medicine and Literature  
Mini-Elective  
Spring 2009

Course Dates: March 30, April 6, 13, 20  
Mondays, 1:00-3:00 PM

Maximum Students: 8

Class Year: MS1

Course Director: Robin Maier, MD

Contact Information: Robin Maier, MD  
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rmmaier@yahoo.com

Registration: Betsy Nero, Office of Medical Education  
betsy@medschool.pitt.edu

Description:
Every text, every word we read or hear carries meaning because of all the  
other contexts and situations in which we’ve heard those same words before.  
This richly interconnected web of stories, words, phrases, and texts is the way  
our culture helps us to interpret and “imagine” our particular experiences in  
the world around us. This course will use many different kinds of culturally  
relevant literature (drama, poetry, children’s literature, popular fiction, clas-  
sics) to help us explore the ways our culture imagines and interprets the ex-  
perience of medicine. Our goal is to understand better how our own words in  
the office may echo the “divine healer”, the “mad scientist,” the “charlatan” or  
other mythological healers in our patients’ ears—so that we can consciously  
communicate more effectively with patients.

There will be four class meetings for two hours each. Each session will be con-  
ducted in a small group discussion format.

Students are expected to complete readings prior to the course sessions (20 –  
80 pages of fiction, poetry or drama), reflect in writing on the week’s readings  
(approximately 1 page each week except the first class meeting) and come  
prepared for vigorous discussion. For the final class session, students will be  
given the opportunity to suggest other culturally relevant texts for the class to  
consider.

We will read selections from Moliere, Dr. Seuss, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Gwen-  
dolyn Brooks, Jane Austen, J.R.R. Tolkien, the Bible, Mother Goose and more.

Objectives:
• To gain an appreciation for the various parts physicians play in the litera-  
ture of our culture.
• To learn to use the tools and systems of literary criticism to analyze litera-  
ture, and then in turn to analyze the “text” of a clinical medical encounter.  
• To gain an appreciation for the complex ways in which our own words and  
actions may be interpreted and misinterpreted within the clinical setting by  
patients who listen to us with ears and minds which have been prepared  
for the encounter by the literature, myths and stories of our culture.
Course Outline

Medicine and Literature

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Location:
All sessions
Scaife Hall, Room 460A&B

Requirements:
• Actively participate in all four course sessions.
• Complete reading assignments before each session, (20 – 80 pages of fiction, poetry or drama).
• Reflect in writing on the week’s readings (approx. 1 page each week except the first class meeting) and come prepared for vigorous discussion.