

For the Death of Me!

A Sociocultural Look at Death, Dying, and the Rituals and Beliefs that surround them.

SOCI 3249 - L21

***Times:* Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays & Thursdays 6:00 to 9:00 pm**

***Location:* Lowenstein 518
Summer 2018**

***Professor:* Dr. Katia Yurguis
E-mail: yurguis@fordham.edu**

***Office Hours:* by appointment only**

Course Overview and Goals:

What could be more universal than death? And yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without human or animal sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; they are eaten – raw, cooked, or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; they are dismembered, sealed in jars, or entombed in caves. Funerals are occasions for avoiding people or for holding large parties, for fighting or having orgies, for weeping or laughing in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reactions is but a measure of the universal impact of death (adapted from *Celebrations of Death*).

What can be more certain, more unavoidable than death, the great equalizer? And yet what an incredible effort we expend to prevent, delay, fight, ignore, or hide it from view! In our own society, mortality is spoken about in hushed tones, while the processes of death itself are left to a handful of highly specialized professionals. Meanwhile, those who show interest in the subject are labeled “morbid”, a term that the dictionary defines as, among other things, unwholesome, gloomy, and gruesome. But why would we deem as unhealthy or abnormal such an intrinsic part of the human experience? Wouldn't it be, instead, a bit extreme to so strenuously avoid something so utterly unavoidable, so unifyingly universal?

The primary goal of this course is to explore the social and cultural implications of the biological experience of human death and dying. Examples of topics that will be covered include: mortuary rituals and funerary behavior, the cultural construction of death, the effects of death on the social fabric, mourning and bereavement, end-of-life issues, as well as ethical and moral issues relating to death. Throughout the course, we will examine the fascinating variety of social and cultural responses to the biological fact of death. In doing so, we will explore Anthropological and Sociological literature that seeks to explain or interpret that tremendous variety. The course will be cross-cultural in its outlook and will require students to make conceptual connections between theoretical literature and empirical observations.

You will leave this course with the ability:

1. To better understand how society and culture shape our views and beliefs surrounding death and dying.
2. To discuss and compare the ritual, legal, ethical, moral, and religious responses to death and dying across different cultures.
3. To thoughtfully analyze issues regarding death, dying, grief, and bereavement, and to be able to cogently express said analysis through written and verbal communication.
4. To develop a healthier relationship with the natural processes of death and dying by understanding you own preconceptions and cultural biases, as well as socially prescribed guidelines.

In addition, because this is an EP-III course, a great deal of time will be devoted to the development of your writing and speaking skills. Some writing will be submitted, returned to you with suggestions for improvement, and then revised and submitted again for a final grade. I also expect everyone to speak in a variety of ways, ranging from the formal (presentations) to the very informal (participation in class discussion). I will set aside time in some class sessions to discuss writing and speaking, but you will not learn from me alone. You will also provide feedback to one another. Moreover, because the best way to learn how to write well is to *read* well, the assigned readings will be your best guides to good social scientific writing.

Required Books:

Doughty, Caitlin. (2014) *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and Other Lessons from the Crematory*. W. W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. ISBN 978-0393240238

Doughty, Caitlin. (2017) *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*. W. W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. ISBN 0393249891

Mitford, Jessica. (2000) *The American Way of Death, Revisited*. Vintage Books. New York, New York. ISBN 978-0-679-77186-9

*Murphy, Sarah. (2011) *Making an Exit: from the Magnificent to the Macabre – How We Dignify the Dead*. St Martin's Press. New York, New York. ISBN 978-1250015655 **Optional**

Roach, Mary. (2003) *Stiff: the Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. W. W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. ISBN 978-0393324822

****All additional readings will be posted on our Blackboard site (under "Content")**

Course Grading Guidelines:

Your final grade for this course will be based on a series of projects, including written work, class participation, and a research paper.

Short Personal Essay	15%
Obituary Project	15%
Proposal, Outline, & Annotated Biblio.	15%
First Draft	15%
Final Research Paper	20%
PARTICIPATION	20%
TOTAL	100%

A	Excellent. <i>Honors-level work, outstanding.</i>	96% and above
A-	Still excellent.	90 to 95%
B+	Very Good. <i>High level of performance</i>	86 to 89%
B	Good. <i>Solid & above average work.</i>	82 to 85%
B-	Still good. <i>Still above average performance.</i>	78 to 81%
C+	Above satisfactory. <i>Average level of performance.</i>	74 to 77%
C	Satisfactory. <i>Acceptable level of performance.</i>	70 to 73%
C-	Minimally acceptable.	66 to 69%
D	Passing but unsatisfactory.	60 to 65%
F	Failure. <i>Inferior performance.</i>	59% and below

General Paper Guidelines:

All papers and assignments should be double-spaced, with 1-inch margins all around, numbered pages, and typed in 12-point Times, Times New Roman or similar. All papers and assignments should include the student's name, the paper's due date, as well as a (working) title. If you feel so inclined, I am perfectly happy to accept papers printed on recycled paper or double-sided.

All papers and assignments are to be handed in at the beginning of class on the date they are due. Late papers will not be accepted – NO EXCEPTIONS!!! Unless previously approved by the professor, e-mailed papers will not be accepted.

Short Personal Essay:

For your first assignment you will be asked to write a short, personal essay relating to the general themes of this class. This paper can take either the form of personal narrative, creative non-fiction, long form journal entry, as well as a more structured academic account. This assignment focuses on the craft of narrative, emphasizing quality of writing (2 to 3 pages).

Obituary Project:

For this project you are asked to write an obituary (1 to 2 pages). In order to familiarize yourself with the genre, you will need to find examples in the media (the *New York Times* and the *Economist* are both great sources, but feel free to look elsewhere). Once you have an idea of what an obituary involves, you will use your imagination to create one yourself. This obituary can be of anything or anyone: a long-lost ancestor, a historical figure, a fictional character, a beloved pet, a doomed relationship, a bygone time, or a forgotten place.

Proposal, Outline, and Annotated Bibliography:

This is the first step towards the final research paper that you will submit by the end of the course. Here I am looking for one or two paragraphs stating your chosen topic, the reasons why you picked it, and what you envision your paper to look like. You will also include an outline as detailed as possible, even if you foresee it changing as the semester progresses. I expect you to submit a working list of sources you will be consulting and referencing in your final research paper. You should use 3 to 5 academic books or articles, some of these can be assigned class materials, but at least two must be independent sources you have researched (Wikipedia and such DO NOT count as scholarly sources!). Each source should be accompanied by a paragraph briefly summarizing its main contents, along with the why and how you are planning to use this material in your paper. (2 to 4 pages.)

First Draft

At this point, you should not only have a pretty clear idea of what your final paper will look like, but should have also done most of the footwork. This draft should include the “meat” of the paper. Basically, you will have begun filling in the sections you designated in your outline by incorporating your introduction, your literature review, your framing questions or points of inquiry, your discussion of the material, as well as a tentative conclusion. This draft will undergo several revisions. Aside from being revised/graded by me, it will also be work shopped in class. At the end of this process you will have the input of your professor, as well as of two of your peers (6 to 8 pages total).

Final Research Paper:

Your final paper should be between 8 and 10 pages in length. This is an academic research paper, and as such it should ask a question or formulate a hypothesis. Using the sources you have selected, you should attempt to answer your research question, or prove or disprove your hypothesis. This is the culmination of the work you have been doing throughout this course and, as such, it should reflect excellency in writing, familiarity with sociological and anthropological concepts, cultural sensitivity, and critical thinking.

Class Participation and Attendance:

This class is structured like a seminar, therefore participation is crucial and mandatory. It also represents 20% of your grade. This will be calculated based on a number of factors including not just the quantity but also the **quality** of class participation. **Showing up to class does not constitute active class participation.** I assume you are responsible adults and will attend class unless there is some unusual circumstance, thus I do not give specific points for attendance. **Attendance at all class sessions is mandatory.** As per Fordham regulations, your dean will be notified if you are excessively absent from class.

Please note: If you have a prolonged illness, an emergency, or otherwise find yourself missing too many classes and/or falling behind please contact me as soon as possible to discuss your situation. I am much more understanding *before* a missed class or a paper deadline rather than *after*.

Please be very aware of due dates. Late papers will not be accepted – NO EXCEPTIONS!!! Unless specifically stated on this syllabus or previously approved by the professor, e-mailed papers will not be accepted.

Lecture Expectations:

You are responsible for knowing the material and any announcements made during lectures whether or not you attend class. Please arrange with another student to get missed notes and announcements – I will not email you my lecture notes. Please do not disrupt other students' ability to hear lectures (e.g., do not arrive late or leave during class, remain quiet during lectures, be prepared to take notes before lectures begin, do not read or talk during lecture and do not begin packing your belongings before class ends). Please turn off your cell phones before lecture starts; texting during class will **not** be tolerated. Lectures may not follow the topics in the readings. Not all reading topics will be covered in the lectures. Lectures may go into greater or lesser depth on a topic than do the readings.

E-mail Policy and Etiquette:

If you need to contact me, I am always available via e-mail. I check my inbox regularly, so you should expect to hear back from me within one day. If I haven't replied in 24 hours, it is most likely that, for one reason or another, I didn't get your e-mail, so please e-mail me again. Feel free to e-mail me with questions and I will do my best to answer them electronically, however be aware that more complex or longer questions will probably require you to come to office hours or make an appointment with me. Please remember to always be clear, concise, and polite in all your online interactions and correspondence.

Academic Integrity:

Ideas are resources and thus are considered intellectual property, borrowing them without permission actually constitutes stealing. Please do not cheat or plagiarize in this or any other course. Anyone who cheats or plagiarizes will automatically receive an F on the assignment or exam, which may lead to a failing grade in the class. You should expect any cheating in this class to be brought to the attention of the Chair of the Department of Sociology, as well as your Dean’s office. Please familiarize yourself with the codes of academic conduct as outlines in the Student Handbook.

Disability Accommodation:

Disability Services (DS) is charged with the responsibility of providing accommodations for students with disabilities. Please contact their office NOW if you need assistance. You are expected to discuss arrangements for accommodations (and provide a letter of determination from DS) with Professor Yurguis at least two weeks before the accommodation is needed, for instance, two weeks before an examination.

Class and Reading Schedule

Disclaimer: The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus. Any changes will be announced in class and posted on our Blackboard website.

Week I: Introduction

Thursday, July 5 th	Introduction, Goals, and Objectives	NO READINGS
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Week II: Can We Please Talk About Anything Else?!

Monday, July 9 th LECTURE	<u>Personal Essay</u> is DUE	C. Doughty, “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”
Tuesday, July 10 th LECTURE		C. Doughty, “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”
Wednesday, July 11 th LECTURE		C. Doughty, “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”
Thursday, July 12 th DISCUSSION		J. Gorer, “The Pornography of Death” (on Blackboard)

Week III: The American Way of Death: Terror Management

Monday, July 16 th LECTURE	<u>Obituary Assignment</u> is DUE	J. Mitford, “The American Way of Death”
Tuesday, July 17 th LECTURE		J. Mitford, “The American Way of Death”
Wednesday, July 18 th LECTURE		J. Mitford, “The American Way of Death”
Thursday, July 19 th DISCUSSION		“What Does it Mean to Die?” The New Yorker (via e-mail)

Week IV: A Different Kind of Death: an Anthropological View

Monday, July 23 rd LECTURE	<u>Proposal, etc.</u> is DUE	C. Doughty, "From Here to Eternity"
Tuesday, July 24 th LECTURE		C. Doughty, "From Here to Eternity"
Wednesday, July 25 th LECTURE		C. Doughty, "From Here to Eternity"
Thursday, July 26 th DISCUSSION		"When Death Doesn't Mean Goodbye" NatGeo (via e-mail)

Week V: The Body: How Can the Dead Do All These Things?

Monday, July 30 th LECTURE	<u>First Draft</u> is DUE	M. Roach, "Stiff"
Tuesday, July 31 st LECTURE		M. Roach, "Stiff"
Wednesday, August 1 st LECTURE		M. Roach, "Stiff"
Thursday, August 2 nd DISCUSSION		TBD

Monday, August 6 th	<u>Final Research Paper</u> is DUE (via e-mail)	
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