

The Wound:
Violence, Trauma, Cure

“I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” Kafka, 1904

Despite Kafka's admonishment,¹ literature has been upheld as a therapeutic space since antiquity. Poems and dramas represent violence and woundedness and they purportedly aim to help people cope with the inevitable afflictions of the human condition. How does the restaging of brutal suffering figure as a hope for its cure? In this seminar, we will explore all three aspects of the wound: the violence that causes it; the trauma of its pain; and the possibility of treatment—even if therapy may transpire by the (re-)opening of wounds as suggested by Kafka.

To do so, we will read texts that rework myths from the Trojan War to represent wounds of battle, gender, slavery, displacement, and colonialism. We will investigate epic poetry and tragedy both as performative art and as texts. Authors include: Sophocles, Kleist, Derek Walcott, Christa Wolf, Margaret Atwood, Anne Carson, and Ursula Krechel. We will study theoretical interventions on trauma by scholars such as Gilles Deleuzes, Carol Jacobs, Ruth Leys, Cathy Caruth, and others. We'll also observe the recent use of Greek tragedy for PTSD therapy by the “Theater of War” project.

Discussions in English. Reading in original languages encouraged but not required: all texts are available in translation.

¹ “Ich glaube, man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen. Wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt, wozu lesen wir dann das Buch? Damit es uns glücklich macht, wie Du schreibst? Mein Gott, glücklich wären wir eben auch, wenn wir keine Bücher hätten, und solche Bücher, die uns glücklich machen, könnten wir zur Not selber schreiben. Wir brauchen aber die Bücher, die auf uns wirken wie ein Unglück, das uns sehr schmerzt, wie der Tod eines, den wir lieber hatten als uns, wie wenn wir in Wälder vorstoßen würden, von allen Menschen weg, wie ein Selbstmord, ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns.” Kafka, letter to Oskar Pollak, 27. Jan, 1904

Syllabus

	Primary Reading	Secondary	Deadlines
Jan. 8	Introductions, Shared Planning (<i>Odyssey xix</i>)		
Jan. 15	Sophocles, <i>Ajax</i> (5 th century BCE)	<i>PTSD:</i> Doerries	
Jan. 22	Kleist, <i>Penthesilea</i> (1809)	<i>Language & Trauma:</i> Jacobs	
Jan. 29	Walcott, <i>Omeros</i> (1990)	<i>Trauma Studies:</i> Caruth, Leys	CFP workshop
Feb. 5	Walcott, <i>Omeros</i> (1990)	<i>Postcolonial Trauma:</i> Craps, Ifowodo, Ramazani	
Feb. 12	Wolf, <i>Kassandra</i> (1983)	<i>Wound & Event:</i> Deleuze, Hell	
Feb. 19	Atwood, <i>Penelopiad</i> (2005)	<i>Gender & Trauma</i> Rekdal, <i>Nightingale</i> (2019)	Abstracts Due
Feb. 26	Krechel, <i>Stimmen aus dem harten Kern</i> ("Voices from the hard core," 2005)	<i>War & trauma:</i> Whitman, Böll	
Mar. 4	Carson, <i>Norma Jean Baker of Troy</i> (2019); Euripides, <i>Helen</i> (412 BCE)	<i>Gender & Trauma:</i> Blondell	Panel Planning
Mar. 11	Conference (c. 15-min. talks, 5-min responses)		

Titles in bold you should procure; all others (along with required secondary literature) will be made available via Canvas.

For further reading for each text, see the assignment pages on Canvas.

Books

- Sophocles, *Ajax*
 - Translation of your choice. The bi-lingual Loeb Classical Library edition (trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones) is available online through UW Library. John Moore's translation in the Grene/Lattimore U. Chicago series is also good.
- Euripides, *Helen*
 - Translation of your choice. The bi-lingual Loeb Classical Library edition (trans. David Kovacs) is available online through UW Library. Richmond Lattimore's translation (U. Chicago) is also reliable.

- Heinrich von Kleist, *Penthesilea*
 - The best English translation of Kleist's *Penthesilea* is unfortunately out of print [trans. Joel Agee, with illustrations by Maurice Sendak (!), Harper, 2000]. Used copies are available from online sellers. Other translations are also acceptable. The authoritative German text is in *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Helmut Sembdner (available from DTV).
- Derek Walcott, *Omeros*
 - Available in UW bookstore.
- Christa Wolf, *Kassandra*
 - German editions and the English translation (Jan van Heurck) are widely available from online sellers.
- Margaret Atwood, *Penelopiad*
 - Be sure to read the novella rather than—or in addition to—the theatrical version.
- Ursula Krechel, *Stimmen aus dem harten Kern*
 - Bi-lingual version available in UW bookstore.
- Anne Carson, *Norma Jean Baker of Troy*
 - Should be available in UW bookstore – if not, I will scan it for you.

Course Requirements

- **Participation** (15% of final grade): Includes “opening question” when name is drawn. Full points awarded by default.
 - **Opening Question:** Pose some problem based on the text, something you found confusing, vexing, or surprising concerning a central issue. Focus on at most 3 sentences, and speak for about 5 minutes. After your presentation, the class will freely discuss the question.
- **Abstract** (10% of final grade): c.250-300 words. Submit a proposal to our cfp!.
 - A good abstract will designate the scholarly discourse to which you are making a contribution, and be both a clear précis of your argument and a tantalizing teaser for your paper. Due Feb 19.
- **Conference Talk & Response** (75% of final grade):
 - An **oral presentation** (c.15 minutes) that articulates a problem posed by the text(s) and explores this question through an engaged reading. A good paper will *develop* an idea over the course of a well-organized essay. Introduce the stakes and motivation for your question, build an argument through cogent yet creative analysis, and clearly show what progress has been made in a conclusion. Keep in mind your listening audience.
 - Each student will also **serve as a respondent** to a colleague's paper. These will not be pre-circulated, so you will have to listen carefully and think on your feet. This will be great practice (in a friendly, non-threatening environment) for your professional development as an academic!