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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

New Humanities and Literature

Course Code: ENG5EJ305(3) • Module 2 Notes

Unit 6: Introduction to Medical Humanities

Genealogy, Scope, and Ideological Mission of Medical Humanities

Medical Humanities is a vital, rapidly expanding interdisciplinary field that brings the insights of literature, philosophy, history, visual arts, and bioethics into dialogue with clinical medical practice. Born as a critical reaction against the extreme biomedical reductionism of 20th-century medicine—which increasingly viewed human illness purely as an engineering malfunction of cellular chemistry and mechanical organs—Medical Humanities seeks to restore the human person, emotional vulnerability, and narrative meaning to the core of healthcare.

Narrative Medicine: Rita Charon and Narrative Competence

Pioneered by physician and literary scholar Dr. Rita Charon at Columbia University, the concept of **Narrative Medicine** posits that clinical practice is fundamentally a narrative act. A patient does not present isolated biometric data; they present a complex, fragmented story of suffering, existential terror, altered relationships, and shattered life plans. Physicians require "narrative competence"—the literary ability to listen deeply, interpret metaphors, tolerate ambiguity, and bear witness to the patient's lived experience of illness. Medical Humanities bridges the tragic chasm between "disease" (the biological pathology diagnosed by science) and "illness" (the subjective, lived human experience of suffering).

Unit 7: "Darkness Visible" (from Narratives of Illness) – Thomas R. Cole et al.

Thomas R. Cole and the Hermeneutics of Pathography

In Chapter VII ("Narratives of Illness") of *Medical Humanities: An Introduction*, Thomas R. Cole, Nathan S. Carlin, and Ronald A. Carson examine the profound genre of **pathography**—personal illness memoirs written by patients navigating catastrophic medical diagnoses. The chapter focuses on William Styron's iconic 1990 memoir *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, which chronicles his descent into near-fatal clinical depression.

The Ineffability of Mental Agony and Narrative Reclamation

Cole et al. analyze how severe psychiatric illness poses the ultimate crisis of representation: how does one describe an agony that has no physical lesions, no outward bleeding, and shatters the very cognitive apparatus required to construct sentences? Styron uses haunting literary metaphors—comparing depression to a suffocating toxic fog, a relentless drowning, and a subterranean tomb—to make visible the invisible torment of the mind. Cole demonstrates that illness narratives perform crucial therapeutic and ethical work: by transforming chaotic biological torment into a structured narrative, the patient reclaims existential agency from the dehumanizing machinery of medical institutionalization.

Unit 8: The Medical Humanities: A Literary Perspective – Anne Whitehead

Anne Whitehead and the Critical Interventions of Literature in Healthcare

Anne Whitehead's foundational scholarly work *The Medical Humanities: A Literary Perspective* provides a rigorous theoretical mapping of how literary texts interrogate biomedical epistemology. Whitehead argues that literature is not merely a soft, ornamental add-on to train doctors to be "nicer" (the instrumentalist

view); rather, literature is a radical critical tool that exposes the blind spots, power asymmetries, and moral limits of modern medical institutions.

Challenging the Tyranny of the Cure

Drawing on critical disability theory, feminist epistemology, and post-structuralism, Whitehead deconstructs medicine's ideological obsession with triumphant linear narratives of "cure" and "recovery." Modern medicine often stigmatizes chronic illness, disability, and dying as clinical failures. Whitehead explores how literary narratives of chronic conditions and palliative journeys embrace vulnerability, bodily decay, and mortality without capitulating to despair. Literature insists that human lives that cannot be medically cured still possess profound meaning, dignity, and beauty.

Unit 9: The Test of My Life (Chapter IV) – Yuvraj Singh

The Somatic Vulnerability of the Elite Athlete

In Chapter IV of his autobiographical memoir *The Test of My Life: From Cricket to Cancer and Back* (2013), legendary Indian cricket all-rounder Yuvraj Singh—hero of India's 2011 ICC Cricket World Cup victory—chronicles his harrowing battle with a rare and aggressive mediastinal germ cell tumor (cancer) growing between his lung and heart.

Denial, Diagnostic Trauma, and Bodily Rupture

Chapter IV captures the agonizing psychological transition from national sports superstar to helpless hospital patient. During the peak of the 2011 World Cup, Singh experienced debilitating coughing fits, vomiting blood, and severe breathing difficulties, yet repeatedly suppressed his symptoms through sheer willpower and denial, prioritizing national victory over physical survival. The chapter documents the devastating shock of the definitive diagnosis, the journey to the United States for aggressive chemotherapy, the total loss of physical strength, the trauma of hair loss, and the terrifying confrontation with mortality. Singh's memoir deconstructs toxic hyper-masculine athletic expectations, revealing that true heroism lies not in physical invulnerability, but in the humility to acknowledge bodily fragility and endure grueling medical treatment with emotional honesty.

Unit 10: "R.I.P., My Love" – Tory Dent

Tory Dent and the Radical Poetics of HIV/AIDS

Tory Dent (1958–2005) was an extraordinary American poet, essayist, and art critic who lived with and died of complications from HIV/AIDS, having contracted the virus in her twenties during the 1980s. Her poetry collections (including *What Silence Equals* and *HIV, Mon Amour*) stand among the most searing, intellectually ferocious, and somatically unsparing records of the global AIDS pandemic.

Feminist Witnessing in the Shadow of Mortality

In "R.I.P., My Love," Dent confronts the terminal landscape of AIDS from the marginalized position of a heterosexual woman infected during an era when the disease was overwhelmingly coded in public discourse as an exclusively gay male affliction. Dent's verse is characterized by intense linguistic density, complex medical terminology, and raw physical immediacy. She documents the grueling reality of opportunistic infections, clinical drug trials, the terrifying wasting of the body, and the relentless grief of burying beloved friends. Dent refuses sentimental consolation; her poetry is a defiant act of feminist somatic witnessing, using language to assert the indelible presence of love and erotic vitality in the very face of approaching death.

Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 1)

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2. Somatic Vulnerability, Medical Power, and the Narrative Self

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 4)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 8)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 New Humanities Paradigms (Extension Cycle 9)

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