

Project Title

Blood Will Tell?: Genetics and Madness

Project Mentor(s)

Amanda Louise Johnson

Project Summary

This study illuminates the role of genetic essentialism--that is, the belief that one's genes determine absolutely one's character--in historical conversations around mental illness.

Project Description

One part of the study will focus on several famous literary works that feature a family history of "madness," historicize them, and also discuss them in terms of the clinical literature on genetics and mental illness. With Fondren Fellows funding, furthermore, students interested in these topics will be able to work on this project without having to also do additional work their financial situations might otherwise require. As for impact, this project will comment on how genetic essentialism unnecessarily stigmatizes children growing up around or with mental illness, and how the prejudicial logic used in stigmatizing mental illness as a case of "bad genetics" both parallels and reinforces other forms of prejudice.

Key Tasks for Fellow(s)

The fellow will survey medical literature on the treatment of hereditary psychotic disorders, and compile an annotated bibliography summarizing clinical attitudes toward the mentally ill.

Qualifications

Ability to read secondary sources from different disciplines and discern their argumentative conclusions, supportive reasoning, and larger implications. Time management skills are also important.

Learning Outcomes

Students will learn firsthand the degree to which medical judgments, despite having their own evidentiary demands, are nonetheless still influenced by the culture in which the author writes. From there, students can see how this discipline can perpetuate cultural attitudes that, strictly speaking, should contradict this discipline's' ostensible logic.