

The key is turned. Extend yourself.

It is the Nile, the sun is shining,

Everywhere you turn is luck.

— Louise Glück, “The Undertaking”

English Department Capstone Conference



ENG 495

Capstone Conference

5 December 2025

Kirkhof Center

Grand Valley State University

Allendale, Michigan

Why a Capstone Conference?

The English Capstone provides several important opportunities for English majors not offered elsewhere in the curriculum: the opportunity to reflect individually on the intellectual impact of majoring in English (reflective writing); the opportunity to engage in the development and writing of an extended paper (senior thesis); and the opportunity to participate in the public presentation of the thesis work (departmental student conference).

Our Capstone course underscores the department's principles and values: to cultivate critical reading and reflection; to produce excellent writing in a variety of forms; to speak, read, and write effectively; and to achieve literary, analytical, pedagogical, and theoretical skills.

This conference is the culminating event for the English Capstone course. It requires that students publicly present a project for which they have been responsible from its inception to its final form. The presentation makes concrete the expertise that students have accrued in the research process and allows them to speak as authorities on their topic. No matter what career our students enter, public speaking is an essential skill, as is the act of distilling complex knowledge into a compact yet comprehensible package. Thus, this final assignment for the Capstone course is the one that perhaps most clearly transitions students out of the major and into the next phase of their lives. We see this element of the course as a way to help students recognize each others' accomplishments—and to help them be proud of their own as they move forward into their various futures.

Schedule

Session One: 11-11:50 a.m.

Panel A & B

Session Two: 12-12:50 p.m.

Panels C & D

Session Three: 1-1:50 p.m.

Panels E & F

Notes

Students will present in the order in which they appear in this program; a question-and-answer session will follow once all students on the panel have presented their papers.

Should you have questions, issues or concerns during today's program, please contact faculty in KC 2264.

Panel A
KC 2266

**Transformational Encounters with the
Marginalized in Shakespeare**

Facilitators: Dr. David Álvarez &
Mr. Roy Black

Grace Beal
‘The Shrew
Reimagined:
Cultural Rebuttal
& Feminist
Reinterpretation of
The Taming of the
***Shrew*’**

This paper examines how narratives of female transformation in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Gil Junger's 1999 film *10 Things I Hate About You* reflect shifting cultural definitions of women's agency. Through a comparative textual and cultural analysis, the project situates Shakespeare's play within the gender ideology of early modern England, where female obedience functioned as both moral expectation and social stability. Katherina's "taming" is read as a dramatization of patriarchal containment, revealing how female resistance was neutralized through performance, discipline, and marriage. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation Theory, the paper further argues that *10 Things I Hate About You* operates as a feminist rebuttal and reinterpretation rather than a simple modernization and retelling. The film rewrites the arc of transformation into one of self-actualization, framing Kat Stratford's emotional openness not as submission but as an extension of her autonomy shaped by late-1990s feminist and postfeminist discourse. This analysis demonstrates that adaptations of Shakespeare serve as cultural conversations that inherit his narrative structures while challenging the ideological foundations beneath them. Ultimately, the paper contends that Shakespeare endures not because contemporary audiences accept his gender politics, but because his works provide an adaptable framework through which each generation can critique, resist, and redefine the meanings of power, identity, and agency.

Jaden Moser
‘Shakespeare,
Propaganda and
Social Activism’

This thesis acts as an analysis of *The Tempest* with a focus on the racially problematic aspects of Shakespeare's play, specifically regarding Caliban and his relationship to Prospero as well as other characters. I take a look at the language used toward Caliban within the confines of the play, as well as how Shakespeare portrayed him. I investigate the history of Shakespeare and colonial Europe to detail how the

Bard became an American essentiality and how theatre, *The Tempest* in particular, can be used to push a political agenda or propagandize. As well as *The Tempest*, I analyze Aimé Césaire's parody *Une Tempête* highlighting how Césaire reframes and restructures *The Tempest* in an attempt to rebuild mentalities held by oppressors and the oppressed. I spotlight the African Grove Theatre, which I use as historical example of theatre as activism. Aside from Shakespeare, I dive into *Topdog/Underdog* to examine how it builds positive images of African American men by coming at their struggles from a standpoint of empathy rather than spectacle. I also highlight works by Fasthorse, who dealt with casting issues and wrote a play to protest them. Throughout the paper, I use the concept of imagology to examine how depictions of a people or nation affect the public's mental image of them.

Panel B
KC 2270

The Power and Poverty of Language

Facilitators: Dr. John Gibbons &
Dr. Rob Rozema

Miles Droski
‘The Cost of
Correctness:
African American
English, Code-
Meshing, and
Linguistic Justice
Education’

Debates over code-switching and code-meshing continue to shape how teachers approach African American English in the classroom. While some scholars argue that code-switching provides students access to academic and professional spaces, others contend that it requires students to suppress their cultural, communal, and personal voices. This paper argues that teachers should adopt code-meshing as their primary pedagogical approach and that code-switching reinforces linguistic prejudice with measurable psychological harm to Black students' sense of language and identity. Drawing from sociolinguistic research, classroom-based studies, and case analyses, I show how code-switching promotes internalized linguistic inferiority, restricts student engagement, and upholds the dominance of Standard American English as the communicative norm. By contrast, code-meshing affirms students' full linguistic repertoires without sacrificing academic rigor. Building on work by Vershawn Ashanti Young, April Baker-Bell, Geneva Smitherman, and others, I further argue that linguistic justice requires moving beyond mere inclusion toward the dismantling of Standard Language Ideology in instruction and assessment. The

paper concludes with practical strategies for implementing code-meshing, fostering a culturally sustaining classroom that values authenticity over conformity. Ultimately, teachers must become agents of linguistic justice who challenge, rather than surrender to, discriminatory societal expectations.

Ava Ermiger
‘When “I” Becomes
We: Mary Oliver and
the Power of
Accessible Poetic
Language’

Mary Oliver was a contemporary American poet who devoted her life to witnessing and celebrating the natural world. With her approachable voice and emotionally resonant verse, she transforms the first-person pronoun “I” into a radical act of accessibility. Instead of a mirror, the “I” scattered throughout her work behaves as a portal or vessel to readers, encouraging them to step through the pages and into her words of wonder. Her “I” calls us to notice what often goes unnoticed and appreciate the wonders of this world. This pronoun bridges the gap between reader and poet, acting as a guiding hand, inspiring contemplation. Her work invites readers into conversations about spirituality and the quiet, yet profound, mysteries of everyday life. By stepping away from the role of poet, instead choosing that of the fellow citizen, neighbor, and friend, Oliver’s voice allows the inaccessible to be plucked from the trees like blackberries from a bush. She allows individuals to indulge in poetry without the bitter aftertaste of academic elitism. In doing so, she expands the boundaries of the poetic genre, creating a space where readers of all backgrounds can approach her language with curiosity rather than intimidation. Oliver’s poems remind us that attention requires devotion, and the simplest moments often carry the greatest truths.

Foster Hazen
“Poverty of Language”
and the (Im)possibility
of Private Pain:
A Comparative Analysis
of Woolf &
Wittgenstein’

In *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf describes a “poverty of language” that surrounds the state of suffering, in which we do not have the words to accurately describe the pain event, which she believes isolates the sufferer from the healthy world in an innately private experience. However, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein uses a hypothetical “private language” to show that, no matter how inaccurate the words are, language itself conjures even private experiences into the public sphere due to our reliance on a communal syntax. Through a comparative analysis, the complex role of linguistics in communicating pain is exposed: suffering is incommunicable in its substance, yet inevitably public

in its expression. Through a close reading of Woolf's theories on the inadequacy of pain and Wittgenstein's language games, a framework is constructed that shows that these contradictions coexist in states of suffering. This framework presents a new perspective on the paradox of pain's dual nature, with implications for future research in narrative medicine, the philosophy of language, and the literary representation of sensory states.

12 p.m.

SESSION TWO

Panel C **KC 2266**

The Multidisciplinary Architecture of Fandom

Facilitators: Dr. David Álvarez &
Dr. Brian Deyo

Bran Hurst
'University Architecture
as Intellectual
Infrastructure:
Fan Studies and the
Necessity of a
Multidisciplinary Hangout
Space on Campus'

As human culture adapts to the advent of the internet, there are technological, political, and societal changes occurring at a rate that outpaces the ability of traditional university disciplines' ability to keep up, troubling longstanding ethical methodologies, and necessitating the renovation of our intellectual toolkits. Fan studies is an emerging discipline that provides an opportunity to practice the combined application of perspectives as far ranging as the humanities, sociology, computer science, archival studies, and law through the examination of the structures, roles, and functions of online fan communities. Educational philosopher Edgar Morin warns of the dangers of 'blind intelligence' in academia, wherein academic hyper-specialization becomes a threat to society itself. Conversely, in "Interdisciplinary Methodologies for the Fan Studies Bricoleur," Jacobs (2020) outlines the many obstacles and benefits of pulling from disciplines with conflicting methodologies, theoretical languages, and ethical standards. This presentation focuses on how fan studies has equipped me to better identify and disentangle the ethical challenges of performing traditional literary analysis on fan fiction.

Kendyll Miller
**‘More Than a Social
Media Trend:
Dark Academia as a
Literary & Cultural
Movement’**

Dark Academia (DA), often referred to as an online subculture or aesthetic, has drastically increased in popularity across social media platforms over the last few years. Despite DA’s strong ties to social media, its roots are typically said to have stemmed from Donna Tartt’s 1992 text, *The Secret History*. Unfortunately, DA as a literary genre has garnered limited exploration and research in the academic space, developing the need to understand its literary and cultural implications further. This presentation explores how DA originated as a literary genre, later informing the online subculture seen today. An examination of *The Secret History* highlights connections between DA and the Romantic and Gothic literary movements. Furthermore, the sublime and the grotesque are found to work together to inform DA as a literary genre, including its overall reception. In understanding DA’s literary origins, an analysis of DA’s appearances on social media sites, such as Tumblr, TikTok, and Pinterest, can illuminate connections between the literary genre and its social media presence.

Panel D
KC 2270

**Social and Psychological Perspectives
on Literature**

Facilitators: Dr. Tierney Powell &
Dr. Shinian Wu

Arlo Mason
**‘How Social
Darwinism Fuels the
Imperialist Mindset in
The War of the Worlds’**

My paper focuses on the representation and understanding of the critique of imperialism within *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. It is a book fundamentally interested in imperialism and the future of the British empire, which is shown through the invasion by the Martians in the British countryside and the devastation that follows. I will specifically look at the first and last sections of the book, as they show the thought processes and character development of the unnamed narrator before and after the invasion. By comparing the beginning and end of the book and applying the lens of Social Darwinism to these sections, we can see how the narrator’s seemingly undying loyalty to Social Darwinism as an ideology, despite the traumatizing events that take place in the middle of the novel, is what keeps the narrator from fully deconstructing imperialism and its motives, undermining the critique of imperialism shown throughout the book.

Alexis Arthur
‘Murder Mysteries
& the Mind:
A Psychological Study
of Christie’s *Evil Under*
the Sun* and *A Murder
***is Announced*”**

This presentation will explore Agatha Christie’s usage of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and the uncanny in her writing, specifically her novels *Evil Under the Sun* and *A Murder is Announced*. Research on the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, as well as the cozy and hardboiled mystery subgenres, provide a basis for my study of Christie’s influences and her divergence from common conventions of the genre to the implementation of psychology in her novels. I then move into a close reading of *Evil Under the Sun* and *A Murder is Announced*, comparing Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple’s utilization of psychological theory in their investigations. I also analyze the pervasive use of the uncanny in the two novels to build tension and emphasize the characters’ realism. In *A Murder is Announced* in particular, the uncanny is masterfully sewn into the background of the investigation and the overall narrative, hinting towards the solution of the crime while driving up the tension and fear of the readers. Christie’s use of psychological theory not only develops more psychologically complex detective fiction, but also holds a mirror up to the psychoanalytic experiences of England during the Interwar period, encouraging readers to incorporate psychology into their day to day lives.

Chelsea Kuklewski
‘The Psychological
Connections between
***The Little Prince* &**
Antoine Saint-Exupéry’

The focus of the research is to identify the ways in which Antoine de Saint-Exupéry approached his writing of his famous book *The Little Prince* by using the lens of biographical criticism. With this concentration on the author’s life, aspects of Saint-Exupéry’s childhood are first compared to his adult life during the period of World War I and World War II in order to understand the importance of his mindset while writing the story, using the text of the book itself along with the perspectives of several writers who have examined the psychological components of the story. These biographical elements are then applied to the story, notably in regards to the relationship between the characters of the pilot and the little prince who each learn to deal with grief. In addition, Saint-Exupéry’s religious views as a Catholic are examined to further realize the mindset of the author in creating the fox in the story to be a spiritual advisor to the little prince, with the latter applying what he has learned from the former in his outlook on life. The psychological perspective of Saint-Exupéry, combined with the religious undertones of his point of view, ultimately reveals the ways in which the characters

operate within the story of *The Little Prince* as they give advice and heal from their grief; this lens allows for readers to better connect with the characters as such factors relate to Saint-Exupéry's lived experiences.

1 p.m.

SESSION THREE

Panel E
KC 2266

Pedagogical Approaches to Social Issues

Facilitators: Mr. Roy Black &
Dr. Brian White

Riley Smith
**'Towards a Trauma-
Centered Curriculum:
Literature as a
Pedagogical Tool for
Healing & Critical
Consciousness'**

The rising threat of gun violence in the American education system calls for a reshaping of educational practice. This paper argues that Trauma-Informed Education moves beyond a passive acknowledgement of trauma and toward a sustainable interventional practice. Literature centered, Trauma-Informed education provides space to critically address psychological, social, and academic impacts of school shootings on students. This response is productive through conscious use of texts that un-pack violence, trauma, identity, and healing. Educators will cultivate a space for emotional safety, critical consciousness, and autonomy needed for students to process traumatic realities and engage meaningfully with difficult content. This approach not only restores a sense of safety in the school environment, but also exemplifies literature as a revolutionary pedagogical tool capable of fostering resilience, empathy, and critical awareness. Ultimately, this paper aims to prove that Trauma-Informed education is the future for a more successful and student-centered teaching approach that calls on educators to acknowledge there is no one way in which to resolve traumas. In essence, Trauma-Informed education is a framework that will guide towards a trauma-centered school, when accompanied with responsive literature instruction, which will aid in promoting healing, safety, and encourage students to be active learners.

Alexandra Vantil
***Get Out: Teaching a
Revolutionary Film
in the Secondary
Classroom'***

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* offers a compelling story that would engage high school students while they critically analyze how the film presents themes such as race, identity, and social dynamics. The film itself blends psychological thriller with commentary of societal pressures/dynamics that make for a smooth transition into how students will be able to discuss and examine issues like cultural appropriation, bias, and systemic racism. The film is packed full of symbolism, which makes for a great teaching opportunity about how these themes impact the world around us, even if we aren't ourselves impacted by them. This thesis explores why and how to integrate horror films like *Get Out* into secondary education classrooms. Applying works from teachers or professors who heavily encourage teaching horror, as well as research that involves the appeal of horror to this specific age group, both have supported my argument throughout the piece. Films like this enrich students into deeply understanding the experiences of marginalized groups and how to support their development to becoming a socially conscious and culturally literate member of society.

Elijah Kidder
***'Ruby Payne:
A Starting Point for a
Conversation About
Students Impacted
by Poverty'***

The aim of this presentation is to examine how Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* provides educators a good starting point for discussing the topic of poverty. The research will examine the fundamental principles of Payne's Hidden Rules about poverty, what does and does not work in the present day, and lastly, it will cover what strategies educators can use moving forward to create a safe, inclusive, supportive, and empathetic learning environment. Strategies that are going to be highlighted for creating said environments are making use of mentor texts such as Francisco Jimenez's *The Circuit*. Other strategies highlighted in this research that support the idea of inclusive classrooms, for example letting students use their first language in the classroom, are backed up with data. Research about what teachers should go through in their practicum year of teaching is also highlighted. Data on what future educators have gone through is to note the importance of how to move forward as educators.

Panel F
KC 2270

Women of their Time (and Ours)

Facilitators: Dr. Lindsay Ellis &
Dr. Tierney Powell

Lilah Wolfer
‘The Silence that Spoke’

Being born into a generation that is giving women the recognition we deserve has made me proud. But in doing this, we must not forget about those who preceded us, for Ophelia’s story is one that has been failed by society. Although she is a literary character in the play *Hamlet*, created by Shakespeare, her story has been heard for generations around the world as the passive girl who accepted the patriarchy and killed herself when the pressure became too heavy. Male ideology took hold of her from the start and I decided that it was time to rethink some of our historical interpretations of her. I needed to look back at Ophelia with a new lens—a feminist one. To effectively complete this task, I took a step back into history and researched the world of the 1600’s. As I did this, I looked at the cultural norms that were present at the time and sought to understand how they could have created the foundation of Ophelia’s reception. Moving down the timeline, I researched prominent philosophers who had a role in feminist movements, ranging from René Descartes to Judith Butler. It was also important that I looked at art and its reception, specifically the pre-Raphaelite era and the Victorian Age. With all of this evidence presented, I was able to make the argument that Ophelia was a strong-willed feminist whose silence spoke louder than words.

Keerstin Wolters

This essay examines Meg March as the moral center of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, arguing that her quiet steadiness represents a powerful, often overlooked form of nineteenth-century feminine virtue. Drawing on the traditions of domestic fiction and Enlightenment-influenced moral restraint, the paper situates Meg within a lineage of heroines like Austen’s Jane Bennet, whose goodness emerges through balance, self-command, and emotional clarity. Through close readings of key scenes, particularly Meg’s transformation at the Moffats’ party and the challenges of her early married life, the essay demonstrates how Meg’s growth unfolds not through dramatic rebellion, but through daily acts of reflection, relational care, and intentional love. The analysis also integrates a personal perspective on eldest-sisterhood,

highlighting how Meg's role resonates with real-world experiences of early responsibility, emotional labor, and self-formation within the family. Ultimately, the essay argues that Meg embodies a distinctly American evolution of domestic virtue, a model of ethical maturity rooted in empathy, steadiness, and the quiet labor of nurturing others. Rather than portraying virtue as constraint, Alcott presents Meg's self-possession as a transformative moral force, one that anchors her family and offers readers a compelling redefinition of feminine strength.

**Honoring Student
Writing in the
Persuasive and
Personal Essay,
Poetry, Fiction,
& Drama
Held in Conjunction
with the Departments
of Classics &
Writing**

Named in honor of former department member E. William Oldenburg, this annual contest offers GVSU students first-place prizes of \$100, second-place prizes of \$75, and third-place prizes of \$50 in each of the following categories:

- Personal, analytical, or persuasive essay written by a freshman;
- Personal essay written by a sophomore, junior, or senior;
- Analytical or persuasive essay written by a sophomore, junior, or senior;
- Poetry written by any GVSU undergraduate student (a portfolio of three to five poems would be an appropriate entry, and a single poem would not be considered);
- Fiction written by any GVSU undergraduate student (one short story per entrant);
- Drama written by any GVSU undergraduate student (one short play per entrant);
- Essay, poetry, fiction, or drama written by a GVSU graduate student.

Entry Requirements:

- Entries must have been written while enrolled at GVSU;
- Entries should be typed, double-spaced, and submitted with a detachable cover sheet indicating:
 - title of work;
 - category entered (please specify graduate or undergraduate);
 - contestant's name and student ID;
 - address, phone number, and e-mail for March and April of the academic year;
- Place contestant's name on the cover sheet only, not on the entry itself.
- Entries are submitted via the English Department website.

All winners who have not been or currently are a student employee at GVSU must complete an I-9 Form, which may be obtained and turned in to Student Employment (104A STU). Entries are accepted online through the English department website.

**The Robert C.
Chamberlain
Scholarship**

**A Tuition Scholarship
for Junior English
Majors
Demonstrating
Excellence in Writing**

Eligibility Requirements

- Students must be English majors;
- Students must have Junior status;
- Students must have at least a 3.0 GPA;
- Students must be full time;
- Students must demonstrate financial need by filing the FAFSA.

Application Requirements

Each student must submit:

- A short letter explaining why the student qualifies for this scholarship;
- Two pieces of writing, at least one from a class at Grand Valley State University.

**The Gilbert R. and
Patricia K. Davis
Endowed Merit
Scholarship**

**A Merit Scholarship
for Full- or Part-Time
Junior and Senior
English Majors**

Eligibility Requirements

- Students must be a Junior or Senior declared English major;
- Students must have completed 30 credit hours at GVSU;
- Students must have at least a 3.0 GPA;
- Students may be full or part time (part-time students are especially encouraged to apply);
- Financial need is not a criterion;
- Students who receive the award as Juniors are eligible to receive the award as Seniors if they maintain their eligibility.

Applications Requirements

Each student must submit:

- An essay of up to 1000 words explaining why the applicant chose to major in English.

**The English Faculty
Scholarship for
New Majors
A Scholarship Made
Possible through the
Generosity of GVSU
English Department
Faculty Members**

Eligibility Requirements

- Applicants must be a declared English major at the time of application
- Applicants must be a currently-enrolled student with fewer than 60 credit hours completed (1st or 2nd year student) during the semester of application
- Cumulative 2.5 grade point average or better
- First-generation college student

Application Requirements

Each student must provide answers to the following questions:

- Are you the first person in your immediate family to pursue a college degree (neither parent/guardian(s) has a four-year degree)?
- In 100-200 words (1-2 paragraphs), explain why you are applying for this scholarship, why you should receive the award, and how it will assist you in achieving your academic goals.

Students must also include an academic writing sample, minimum three full pages in length, submitted for a class during your freshman or sophomore year.

**Robert Franciosi
American Literature
Scholarship
A Scholarship
Created to Assist
English Majors who
Express Interest in
American Literature**

Eligibility Requirements

- Applicants must be accepted for or currently enrolled at Grand Valley State University;
- Applicants must be an undergraduate junior or senior enrolled full-time or part-time with a major in English with Language & Literature or Secondary Education emphasis;
- Applicants must be a resident of Michigan;
- Applicants must have completed 30 credit hours at GVSU with a 3.0 or higher cumulative GPA;
- Applicants must be meeting satisfactory academic progress (<https://www.gvsu.edu/financialaid/satisfactory-academic-progress-sap-17.htm>).
- Preference will be given to students who demonstrate an interest in American Literature.
- Financial need may be considered and will be demonstrated by the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Application Requirements

- Please describe in 1,000 words or less your experience studying American Literature and why you feel it has been valuable.

**Shinian Wu Study
Abroad Scholarship
A Scholarship
Created to Assist
Students who
Express Interest in
Studying Abroad**

Eligibility Requirements

- Candidates should be accepted or currently enrolled at GVSU;
- Must be an undergraduate or graduate student in English Studies and have been accepted into one of the faculty-led study abroad programs offered by the English Department.
- Financial need may be considered, as evidenced by filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Application Requirements

Each student must:

- Complete the Shnian Wu Study Abroad Scholarship application

Arthur, Alexis — 9
Beal, Grace — 4
Droski, Miles — 5
Ermiger, Ava — 6
Hazen, Foster — 6
Hurst, Bran — 7
Kidder, Elijah — 11
Kuklewski, Chelsea — 9
Mason, Arlo — 8
Miller, Kendyll — 8
Moser, Jaden — 4
Smith, Riley — 10
Vantil, Alexandria — 11
Wolfer, Lilah — 12
Wolters, Keerstin — 12