

Modern Tragedy

Instructor: Charlie Tyson

ctyson@g.harvard.edu

Office Hours: TBD

Course Description:

Tragedy is one of our oldest and most prestigious art forms. Tragic drama has exhibited a remarkable endurance across time and space, exerting cultural influence in sites ranging from ancient Athens to Elizabethan England to the contemporary American stage. How has tragedy changed in response to new audiences, new problems, and new historical pressures? What new questions is modern tragedy asking—about boredom, race, labor, and other issues? And what elements of tragedy have remained constant?

This tutorial explores tragic drama from the late nineteenth century to the present. Moving from the psychological realism of Ibsen to the tragicomedy of Chekhov to Suzan Lori-Parks' avant-garde responses to historical trauma, we will chart the changing fortunes of tragedy on the modern stage. Readings in Greek and Shakespearean drama will enrich our understanding of the history and possibilities of tragic theater.

This course focuses on formal and aesthetic issues: We will study the structure of tragic drama and investigate how playwrights use language (as well as costumes, sets, props, gesture, etc.) to achieve emotional effects. But because we are dealing with an art form in which an embodied assembly is asked to face the spectacle of human life gone horribly wrong, it will soon become clear that in tragedy, aesthetic choices are closely entwined with philosophical and political issues. Readings in moral philosophy and literary theory will support our inquiry into the human problems that tragedy confronts. While our focus is on drama, we will also consider the handling of tragedy in related genres, including dance, film, opera, and music.

By the end of the course, students will produce a 20- to 25-page paper on a topic of their choice.

Course Goals:

- To achieve familiarity with key works of modern theater
- To gain an appreciation of drama as a distinctive literary form
- To gain an understanding of tragedy as concept and aesthetic mode
- To learn how to interpret dramatic art using literary theory and moral philosophy
- To learn how to write an upper-level and extended (20-25 page) work of literary criticism
- To learn how to identify and engage with criticism and secondary sources related to a literary work
- To improve clarity, vigor, and organization of writing and argument

Required Texts (other readings will be excerpted or posted on Canvas):

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

Edward Albee, *Three Tall Women*
 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*
 Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*
 Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*
 Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*
 Suzan Lori-Parks, *The America Play*
 Suzan Lori-Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*
 Lynn Nottage, *Sweat*
 William Shakespeare, *Othello*
 Sam Shepard, *Buried Child*
 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*
 Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*
 Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*
 August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

[N.B. Because of the number of texts assigned, this course may be more expensive than a typical English literature seminar. Readings will be placed on reserve at Lamont.]

Assignments:

1. **Two mini-writing assignments (~150 words each)**, emailed to me by 8pm the night before class.

“Definitions” is due in Week 2, and “Summary” is due in Week 3.

Definitions: Choose a key term from Aristotle's *Poetics* (e.g. mimesis, catharsis) and write a 100-word definition of the term, in your own words. Then rewrite your definition in ~50 words. Then rewrite it again, in 10 words or fewer (short sentence or phrase). Send me all three definitions.

Summary: Choose a chapter that interests you from *Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kristen Gjesdal (Oxford, 2018) and write a 150-word summary of the argument. Come to class prepared to describe the argument and explain how you might use the chapter's findings to build an argument of your own.

2. **Two “seminar starters.”**

Twice during the semester, each student will circulate a written reflection (~300 words) by 8pm the night before class; your reflection should consider the week's readings and raise questions for discussion. In class, you will open the conversation by presenting your findings / reflections for 3-5 minutes and invite your classmates to raise additional questions for discussion and share what they most wish to cover during the seminar time.

3. **Short paper (5 pages)** that makes an argument based on a close reading of one of our literary texts from the first five weeks. Due in Week 5.
4. **Junior Essay (20-25 pages)** on a topic of your choice. The final essay is due at the end of reading period and is preceded by several intermediate deadlines:

Week 7: 1-Hour Research Workshop at Widener Library (in class)

Week 8: 2-Page Prospectus outlining topic and provisional argument AND **Annotated Bibliography** of at least 8-10 sources, with a brief description of each work's argument and how the essay will engage with it

Week 10: 10-Page Partial Draft of the junior essay

Week 11: 20-25 Page Full Draft of the junior essay

Reading Week: Final Junior Essay due to the English Department (date and time TBD)

Reading Week: 5-Minute Presentation on your research, to be delivered aloud at the Junior Tutorial Conference (time and location TBD)

Grading Breakdown:

Attendance & Participation: 15%

Short writing exercises (seminar starters & mini-assignments): 10%

Short paper: 10%

Prospectus & annotated bibliography: 10%

Junior essay draft: 10%

Junior essay: 45%

Week 1: Tragic Conflict and the Moral Functions of Tragedy

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

Rita Felski, introduction to *Rethinking Tragedy*

T. J. Reiss, "Tragedy," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* (4th ed.)

Martha Nussbaum, "Aeschylus and practical conflict," in *The Fragility of Goodness*

Optional but recommended: Oliver Taplin, "Greek Theatre," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*

Week 2: The Structure of Tragedy

August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
 Aristotle, *Poetics* (selections)

Ma Rainey, "Prove it On Me Blues," "Runaway Blues," "Chain Gang Blues" (listening assignment)

Tony Bolden, "Elaborations: A Blues Theory of African American Poetics," in *Afro-Blue*
 Philip Fisher, "Grief," in *The Vehement Passions*

Definitions assignment due

Week 3: Domestic Tragedy

Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*
 Ingmar Bergman, *Cries and Whispers* (film)

Yopie Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, on translations of Greek tragedy by Victorian women, pp. 26-34
 Jean Marsden, *Fatal Desire*, on "she-tragedy", pp. 60-70
 Gay Gibson Cima, "Ibsen and the Critical Actor," in *Performing Women*

Summary assignment due (be prepared to present your summary orally in class)

Week 4: Tragedy and Ritual

Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*
 Richard Wagner, Brünnhilde's Immolation, from *Götterdämmerung* (opera)

Wole Soyinka, "Morality and Aesthetics and the Ritual of Archetype"
 Northrop Frye, "The Mythos of Autumn: Tragedy," in *Anatomy of Criticism*
 Antonin Artaud, "The Theater and the Plague" and "The Theater and Cruelty," in *The Theater and Its Double*

Week 5: Gender, Labor, Embodiment, Performance

Lynn Nottage, *Sweat*
 Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*
 Max Ophuls, *Lola Montes* (film)

Bert O. States, "The World on Stage," in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*
 Julia Walker, "Sophie Treadwell's 'pretty hands'," in *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre*

Week 6: Secrets and Blame

Sam Shepard, *Buried Child*
 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*
 Martha Graham, "Night Journey" (dance piece)

Sigmund Freud, remarks on *Oedipus*, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 278-281
 Reread sections from Aristotle's *Poetics* on recognition (*anagnorisis*)

WEEK 7: NO READING – WIDENER LIBRARY VISIT / RESEARCH WORKSHOP

This is a great week to read ahead if you think you want to write on a text from the second half of the course.

My goal is for you to come up with some concrete ideas before the prospectus is due. To that end, please email the tutorial a 2-3 sentence topic "pitch" and a starter list of 5 sources relevant to your topic by 8pm the night before class.

Week 8: Shakespearean Tragedy

William Shakespeare, *Othello*

AC Bradley, "The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy"
 Ayanna Thompson, "Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare and His Contemporaries?"
 Virginia Mason Vaughan, "Shakespeare's Moor of Venice," in *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500-1800*

Week 9: Tragicomedy: Chekhov and Beckett

Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*
 Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

Elizabeth Goodstein, "Ennui in Western Literature: Boredom as Existential Malaise," in *Experience Without Qualities*
 George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, pp. 3-10, 106-7, 194-8, 238-42, 300-4
 Andrew Sofer, "Killing Time," in *The Stage Life of Props*

Week 10: Aging

Edward Albee, *Three Tall Women*
 John Cassavetes, *Opening Night* (film)

Bernard Williams, "Bodily continuity and personal identity," in *Problems of the Self*
 Helen Small, "On Seeing the End," in *The Long Life*

Week 11: Anti-Tragedy: Brecht

Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre”

Lionel Abel, “Brecht and Metatheatre” and “Tragedy—or Metatheatre?” in *Metatheatre*

Raymond Williams, “A Rejection of Tragedy: Brecht,” in *Modern Tragedy*

Week 12: Tragic Histories

Suzan Lori-Parks, *The America Play*

Suzan Lori-Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, ch. 1

Ilka Saal, “Digging, Rep & Rev-ing, and Faking: Suzan-Lori Parks’ Historiopoetic Praxis,” in *Collusions of Fact & Fiction*

Week 13: Tragic Futures

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Caryl Churchill, *Far Away*

Frank Kermode, “The End,” in *The Sense of an Ending*