

20th Century American Drama
Spring 2010, E Block Classroom: 210 Instructor: Eric de Lora
Office Hours: Friday Lunch E-mail: ericd@maybeckhs.org

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a survey of 20th-century American drama written by American playwrights. Using Aristotle's treatise on tragedy as a foundation, we will explore the development of realism in the American drama as well as its transformation throughout the century. A range of dramatic styles will be covered, with a balanced emphasis on analysis of the dramatic text and the historical, social and cultural context for the work. Plays by Eugene O'Neill, Lillian Hellman, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Wendy Wasserstein, David Henry Hwang, Tony Kushner, David Mamet and Suzan Lori-Parks among others will be read. Significant reading, discussion and writing are required.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Read carefully a substantial number of dramatic texts, including comedies, tragedies, and specimens of other types;
- Analyze dramatic texts through close reading, so that they can identify aspects, such as characterization, plot structure, and symbolism, which interact to produce the artistic effect and meaning of the work;
- Reason inductively about drama; for example, by examining specific instances in the play being analyzed, students will practice recognizing meaningful patterns in language and incident and identifying themes;
- Comprehend and use such elementary critical terms as exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, etc.;
- Relate individual plays to the conventions of genre and, to a lesser degree, to other contexts, such as the literature of a nation, movement or period, and the other works of a particular author or group of authors;
- Engage in focused discussion of drama;
- Write detailed and informed analyses of dramatic works that demonstrate increasing mastery of the above objectives.

COURSE TOPICS

Week 1: Aristotle, *Poetics*.

Week 2: Play Structures/Play Analysis. One-Acts.

Week 3: The American Drama: An Overview.

Week 4: Eugene O'Neill, *Beyond the Horizon*. 1920. (Pulitzer Prize, 1920).

Week 5: Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour*. 1935.

Paper I Due.

Week 6: Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*. 1938. (Pulitzer Prize, 1938).

Week 7: Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. 1949. (Pulitzer Prize, 1949).

Week 8: Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. 1955. (Pulitzer Prize, 1955).

Week 9: Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1962. (nom. for Pulitzer Prize*).

Week 10: Sam Shepard, *Buried Child*. 1978. (Pulitzer Prize, 1979).

Paper II Due.

Week 11: Wendy Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles*. 1988. (Pulitzer Prize, 1989).

Week 12: David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*. 1988. (nom. for Pulitzer Prize, 1989).

Week 13: Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*. 1993. (Pulitzer Prize, 1993).

Week 14: David Mamet, *The Cryptogram* 1995. (nom. for Pulitzer Prize, 1995).

Week 15: Suzan Lori-Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*. 2002. (Pulitzer Prize, 2002).

Final Exam/Paper III Due.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

Play Reader (compiled, E. de Lora) 2/2010.

MATERIALS & ASSIGNMENTS

1. Classroom discussion is a central element in this course (20% of grade). To share your astute insights and ask important questions are of vital importance in the class. Patience and listening skills are also vital to this course. Be sure to give yourself ample time to think about what you are reading and discussing. Reflection and recording of those thoughts are an important part of learning and growth.
2. You will need to keep a notebook specifically used for this course. It will be turned in at the mid-point and end of the course. First and foremost it should include one entry for every class meeting. Summaries of our discussion, thoughtful reflections, and questions answered are all appropriate entries. The notebook will also be used for collecting and organizing handouts play texts, note-taking and your research. It is important to bring this notebook to class every day. Our primary texts will be the plays.
Reactions (20% of grade): at some point in the coverage of most plays we study together, I will ask you to write a paragraph or two stating your own personal ideas or reactions to questions I will derive from particular scenes, themes, plot developments, dramatic devices, or characters. These "reactions" should be typed and handed in at the start of the next class. Each reaction will be graded and returned as soon as possible. At the end of the semester, the marks earned on these brief assignments will be averaged, and that average will be used as a grade equal to the grades earned on the two major papers. There will be about 2 per week (total of 30).
3. The writing assignment for this course is two short papers (5 to 6 pages) and one long research paper (10-12 pages). The guidelines are as follows:
First Paper (10% of grade): an analysis, developed according to the method we will learn in class, of two major characters encountered in a play or film you have seen on your own; it should include a discussion of the character's personality and the strategies which reveal that personality. Due: Beginning Week 6.
Second Paper (10% of grade): an analysis of the way in which a play we will NOT cover in class utilizes and varies the conventions of a particular dramatic type or genre. The focus of the play is its structures as well as how themes, symbols and motifs are developed in the play. Due: Beginning Week 11.
Third Paper (20% of grade): the comparison of a play NOT read in class (may be the same play as used in the Second Paper) to a play we will read together, and which employs the same conventions. Due: Day of the Final Exam for this class.
4. We will have a **Final Exam** (20% of grade) at the end of the course in June. It will be three hours in length and consist of 2-3 essay questions. Begin studying and organizing your notes now.

EVALUATION

Your final grade will come from:

- 20% In class participation and discussion
- 20% Notebook/Reactions
- 20% Papers I and II (5-6 pages each)
- 20% Paper III (10-12 pages)
- 20% Final Exam

All major assignments must be completed to pass the course.

You may e-mail papers/assignments to me at but make sure they are attached as a doc file.

PRACTICES (*Thanks to Dave Ramin for these thoughts.*)

- I hope you feel welcome in this class and help make others feel welcome too. It should be an intriguing study – we will be encountering some serious issues. I hope you have a positive, rewarding and even exciting time this semester in our class. If not, please let me know. Never hesitate to talk with me before or after class, during office hours or any other time we can arrange. My email is at the top of this syllabus for you to use.
- Always remember: understanding something is not necessarily agreeing with it. With this in mind, our primary rule in class is: *Everyone, everything treated with RESPECT*. Meaning: No personal put downs or purposefully hurtful comments; You can sit next to who you want to unless you get distracted; Do not disrupt the class; Comments on topic are cool – conversations off to the side and random comments are not; No one should have to raise their voice to be heard; Take care of the room and of each other; Please come to class prepared with your notebook, a blue or black pen, your Texts and thoughtful questions. Please go to the bathroom, eat snacks and get a drink before or after class as our time together is limited and leaving the class will be disruptive and will often mean missing something important.