**ENGL 4335**

**Senior Seminar**

**Fall Semester, 2015**

**CRN 16221**

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Of course, we are all familiar with the word “tragedy.” We all know that it means “goat song,” though we may not know what goat song means. We use the word pretty commonly, but we use it to mean anything from a frustrating disappointment to mass death. We know that it is a literary genre, but there are so many different kinds of tragedies and so many different ways of treating tragic themes that our problem remains. Just what is tragedy? Well, I don’t know. Some people think that tragedy results when a culture loses a sense of wholeness, the sense it has when it is producing epics, for example. Some think it is an expression of the irreconcilable conflicts and contradictions of human life (whatever they might be). Some think that belief in an afterlife makes tragedy impossible. Some think that a democratic society cannot produce tragedy. James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus thought that tragedy is the highest expression of true art and that the tragic emotion, equal parts pity and terror, is the perfect response to art. As you can see, there is a lot of disagreement, which only seems right, because one thing that just about everyone agrees on is that tragedy, whatever else it is, is about conflict of some kind. The tragic world is a world divided, a world where resolution is impossible, compromise is a ridiculous dream, and the truest truth comes to us as destruction. Clearly, tragedy gives us a lot to think about.

To make this vast subject more manageable, we will begin by looking at one of the two most famous theoretical statements about tragedy: Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. In this work, Nietzsche tries to explain tragedy in terms of the great conflict that exists in all human life between our experience of form and formlessness, dream and intoxication, as Nietzsche puts it. Attic tragedy, Nietzsche believes, achieved the greatest reconciliation of these two warring parts of life ever managed, and, therefore, for him, expresses the complete truth about human life better than any subsequent literature. Next, we will read Aeschylus’ *Oresteia.* Aeschylus is the oldest of the Greek tragedians and, in some respects, his plays are closer to the rituals that gave birth to theater. This particular trilogy considers the problem of how justice can be established when there is an unresolvable conflict of obligation. Next, we will read the other very famous treatise on tragedy: Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Aristotle, a near contemporary of the great Greek tragedians, was trying to explain what makes tragedy distinct from all other literary forms. He has sometimes been seen as a fussy critic dictating arbitrary rules to creative geniuses, but, in fact, Aristotle was simply trying to discern the qualities that make tragedy what it is. His so-called rules were simply the logical consequences that follow from the nature and purpose of tragedy. After Aristotle, we will return to the playwrights and will look at Sophocles’ famous Theban trilogy in which Oedipus goes from scandalous outcast to holy figure. Then, we will conclude our time with the Greeks with Euripides’ *The Bacchae* and see how this youngest of the Greek tragedians, and the one Nietzsche most blames for betraying the original inspiration of tragedy, examines the patron of tragedy, the god Dionysus.

Once we finish with the Greeks, we will look at the way Shakespeare treated tragedy in *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. As has been said so often, Shakespeare simply would not follow the rules the critics wanted to set down for tragedy, and yet he kept writing great ones. I have to admit that I am not an expert in Shakespeare and his time. I know that there are all kinds of important political, social, and cultural matters to consider when talking about Shakespeare, but I try to ignore them all. Instead, I see Shakespeare as a writer who helped to define the modern consciousness and, at the same time, diagnose some of its most persistent and worrisome problems. He was close enough to the great Medieval synthesis to recognize its value but was at the beginning of a new period of human life that was both exciting and terrifying. Perfect for tragedy.

Finally, we will read some works from the twentieth century, a century renowned for both technical progress and death. To set things up, we will first go back in time, even further back than the Greeks, to the Book of Job. Job’s innocence, at least his relative innocence, and his inexplicable suffering strike the keynote for a century that featured persecutions, death camps (or labor camps or re-education camps), and genocide. After Job, we will read Viktor Frankl’s narrative of his experiences in Auschwitz and his attempts to make sense of the cruelty he witnessed and experienced. Then, we will read Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, which is about the mysterious prosecution of a man, Joseph K., who insists that there must be some kind of mistake. To finish up, we will look at Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, two plays seemingly made up of the broken pieces of a society that may no longer be capable of the consolations of tragedy, though it is still capable of suffering.

There will be three essay exams: one on the Greeks, one on Shakespeare, and one on the twentieth century; and a paper. In the paper, you will try to write your own definition of tragedy based on the readings. You must also assemble a portfolio of papers you have written over the course of your time as an English major and comment on your progress. I will give you a hand-out with all the details.

**Reading List:**

Aristotle, *Poetics*

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Aeschylus, *The Oreteia*

Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*

Euripides, *The Bacchae*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*

Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

*The Book of Job*, trans. by Stephen Mitchell

Kafka, *The Trial*

Beckett, *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*

Since this is a senior-level capstone course, I will dispense with my usual rant. All you really need to do is to treat each other and me respectfully and kindly (why not?) and not cheat. It’s simple, right? Since this is a seminar, class discussion will be very important. Of course, you have to be there to talk, so attendance is also important. I don’t really believe in “trigger warnings,” but, if you need one, I will say that the material in this course is serious, though it is not, I would contend, “depressing.” The problem of suffering, how to explain it and what to do with it, is about as old as the question of what to have for supper. There are no tidy answers, but the problem remains an unavoidable and important one. Tragedy is one of the ways people have used to try to make peace with suffering, so we will be talking quite a bit about suffering. There, you’ve been warned.

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You should familiarize yourself with all the policies set forth in the *Student Handbook*, especially those concerning academic integrity and sexual harassment.

The University of Central Arkansas affirms its commitment to academic integrity and expects all members of the university community to accept shared responsibility for maintaining academic integrity. Students in this course are subject to the provisions of the university’s Academic Integrity Policy, as approved by the Board of Trustees as Board Policy No. 709 on February 10, 2010, and published in the Student Handbook. Penalties for academic misconduct in this course may include a failing grade on an assignment, a failing grade in the course, or any other course-related sanction the instructor determines to be appropriate. Continued enrollment in this course affirms a student’s acceptance of the university policy.

An Emergency Procedures Summary (EPS) for the building in which this class is held will be discussed during the first week of this course. EPS documents for most buildings on campus are available at <http://uca.edu/mysafety/bep/>. Every student should be familiar with emergency procedures for any campus building in which he/she spends time for classes or other purposes.

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Evaluations (Fall & Spring)
Student evaluations of a course and its professor are a crucial element in helping faculty achieve excellence in the classroom and the institution in demonstrating that students are gaining knowledge. Students may evaluate courses they are taking starting on the Monday of the twelfth week of instruction [insert date] through the end of finals week by logging in to myUCA and clicking on the Evals button on the top right.

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