

ENGL 4335

Senior Seminar

First Summer Term, 2013

CRN 32795

Richard T. Gaughan

As you may already know, the Senior Seminar is intended to be the capstone course for the English major. I have to confess that I am not sure that I know what a capstone course is supposed to be, but, as best as I can figure out, Senior Seminar is supposed to explore the larger implications, historical or theoretical, of some literary subject. Unlike most of our courses, Senior Seminar is not limited to a single historical period, national literature, or even genre. The idea is, I guess, that now that you have been rigorously instructed in all manner of specific literary matters, you are now better able to range more freely. In any case, the subject of our seminar will be a topic that is not only pretty broad, it is almost impossible to define: tragedy.

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 two of the most famous theoretical statements about tragedy: Aristotle's treatise *Poetics* and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Aristotle, a near contemporary of the great Greek tragedians, was trying to explain what makes tragedy distinct from all other literary forms. Nietzsche, late in the nineteenth century, was trying to rescue tragedy from those who would tame it. Then, we will look at the Greeks themselves to see what they were up to. First, we will read Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, a trilogy of plays that begins with murder, matricide, and the Furies and ends with the establishment of justice. Next, we will look of Sophocles' famous Theban trilogy in which Oedipus goes from scandalous outcast to holy figure. Then, we will read 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. Happily, this summer the Arkansas Shakespeare Theater is putting on *King Lear*, so we will be able to attend and witness a production of the play and can incorporate our theatrical experiences into our discussion of the works.

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 *Endgame*, a play 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 Oresteia*

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*

As you know, the summer pace is pretty relentless, but most of our works are pretty short. We will likely be talking about one work per class. The reading schedule should look like this:

Week 1: Introduction, Aristotle, Nietzsche, *Agamemnon*, and *The Libation Bearers*

Week 2: *The Eumenides*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*

Week 3: *The Bacchae*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*

Week 4: *King Lear*, *The Book of Job*, and *Man's Search for Meaning*

Week 5: *The Trial* and *Endgame*

My office hours will be from after class (11:10) until noon on all class days, and I will be in my office about a half hour before class as well. You can also make an appointment. __