Tragedy: Love and Death in the Creative Imagination

Bulletin Text:

How do you turn catastrophe into art – and why? This first-year seminar in the humanities addresses such elemental questions, especially those centering on love and death. How does literature catch hold of catastrophic experiences and make them intelligible or even beautiful? Should misery even be beautiful? By exploring the tragic tradition in literature across many eras, cultures, genres, and languages, this course looks for basic patterns.

Rationale

This course is to be team-taught under the auspices of the Mandel Center. It is technically a one-time offering, but this one time is also a trial run for a course that we hope to establish in its own right. We hope this seminar will become a defining feature of the Brandeis Humanities’ Fellows program, i.e. its foundational course. The question remains open as to whether it should keep this one topic or become a seminar in which the focus topic can change.

The seminar is planned for a 3-session per week block, with classes devoted to the primary text on Mondays and Wednesdays and a class focuses on classic literature about tragedy on Thursdays, including Aristotle’s Poetics, Hegel on Antigone, Plato’s Phaedo (and excerpts from Book X of The Republic), Kierkegaard, and the entirety of Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy. The idea is that students should learn the important primary texts and become acquainted at the same time with the secondary literature that has traditional standing.

Texts:

Hegel. Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion excerpt on LATTE.
---. Oedipus the King. Trans. Grene. Univ. of Chicago, isbn 978-0226768687.

Week 1: Oedipus
1. Sophocles, Oedipus
2. Aristotle: Poetics
3. Plato, Book X, Republic

Week 2: Sophocles, Antigone

1. Antigonick
2. Antigonick

Week 3: The Hebrew Bible

1. Book of Job
2. Book of Job
3. excerpts from Book X of *The Republic*

Week 4: Tragedy and Christianity

1. Luke
2. Luke
3. Nietzsche, sections 1-3

Week 5: The Sanskrit World and Modern South Asia

1. The Baghavad Gita
2. The Baghavad Gita
3. Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*:
   a. Vol. 1: §51
   c. Vol. 2, chapter 49 “On the Road to Salvation”

Week 6: Amrita Pritam: “The Skeleton”

1. “The Skeleton”
2. “The Skeleton”
3. Nietzsche, sections 4-6

Week 7: Shakespeare

1. King Lear
2. Kurosawa: Ran
3. Nietzsche, sections 7-

Week 8: Racine

1. Phèdre
2. Phèdre
PLEASE NOTE: This syllabus is not final, and may be subject to modification

3. Nietzsche:

Week 9: Büchner
   1. Büchner Woyzeck
   2. Herzog: Woyzeck (film)
   3. Nietzsche:

Week 10: Melville
   1. Billy Budd
   2. Billy Budd
   3. Nietzsche

Week 11: Chekhov
   1. The Seagull
   2. The Seagull

Week 12: Grand Opera
   1. Leskov, “The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk”
   2. Shostakovich's The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk
   3. Nietzsche

Week 13: Soyinka Death and the King’s Horseman
   1. Soyinka Death and the King’s Horseman
   2. Soyinka Death and the King’s Horseman

Guiding Themes of the Seminar

• Why did traditional forms of tragic drama suddenly seem inadequate to so many artists in the emerging twentieth century?

• What is the nature of modern experience? Is it different from earlier varieties of experience – in the ancient or medieval world, in distant places -- or more or less the same?

• What is the precise relation between art and experience? Above all, what does aesthetic form have to do with experience?

• Does the advent of scientific, technologically progressive modernity mean we have, with modernism, reached the “end of art” as some commentators have supposed?

• Is the role of art decorative? Is it the badge of middle-class education? Or does it have some deeper, essential mission in modern life?
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• What is a tragedy? Do they still exist or are they museum exhibits?
• Is the question of kitsch to be taken seriously, or is it just a matter of snobbery?
• What should we want from art? What do we want from art?

Learning Goals:

This humanities seminar offers students an integrated, liberal arts experience in a small classroom setting. It presents the opportunity for a guided tour of established landmarks of tragic literature, but the real goal of the course is to learn how to find your way around art without a map. No reliable map even exists for tragedy as a form of expression. This is because in tragedy traditional assumptions about art begin to falter. In our seminar the emphasis falls on discussion rather than lecturing because the goal of the course is to learn how to think critically, speak cogently, and produce good arguments 1) verbally in class presentations, and 2) in written papers. You will analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing knowledge on your feet, not taking notes and memorizing what the professor says is so. Our goals are to

1. Develop the habit of independent critique, intellectual self-reliance, and self-confidence from the perspective of attentive reading and collaborative discussion;
2. Become conversant with the major questions, concepts, theories, traditions, and techniques of humanistic enquiry vis-à-vis tragedy;
3. Grasp the difference between thinking without banisters or maps and the limitations of mere technique (relying on banisters and maps). Students will demonstrate critical reflection of context, audience comprehension and purpose in written and oral communication.
4. reflect on quality peer-to-peer interaction.
5. develop and sharpen writing skills through rigorous assignments.

Course Policies

• Attendance

Students will be allowed two unexcused absences. Any other absences will have an impact on a student's final grade.

• Grading

Your final grade will be broken down as follows: 35% for the final paper, 20% for the oral presentation; 20% for the first paper, and 25% for your protocol and participation.
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- **Student Participation Grades:**

  A: Students who receive an A for participation come to every class. They have not only read the assigned texts and watched the movies, but also thought about them and formulated questions to ask and issues to raise. They take risks in discussion by sharing thoughts or positions about which they are not 100% certain. Moreover, A students listen and respond thoughtfully to issues raised by other students.

  B: Students who receive a B for participation have completed all the reading and film assignments on time, but do not always come to class with questions in mind and do not put much independent thought into the readings. B students wait for someone else to take the lead. They participate, but only occasionally.

  C: C students attend class, complete the assignments, and listen attentively to the discussions, but rarely participate unless directly asked a question.

  D and E: Students who fail to complete the assignments, fail to participation in classroom discussion, who are unable to answer questions when called upon, fail to bring their readings and notes to class, or are frequently late, absent, asleep, or doing work for other classes during class periods will receive a D or lower for their participation grade.

- **Preparing a Protokoll:**

  Students are required to keep a record of the minutes for one seminar meeting. This assignment is a graded writing assignment. You must observe the same pieties as in any formal paper.

  1. Length: about one page, single spaced.

  2. Due: The day of the class meeting after the class on which you are reporting.

  3. Oral Reading: You will read your protocol aloud at the beginning of the next class meeting. At that time your classmates will have the opportunity to ask for corrections or revisions. Once the paper is complete to everyone’s satisfaction, your instructor will post it on the WebCT site for the course.

- **The Fine Print:**

  Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation of protocols, etc.).

  **Disabilities:** If you have documented disability on file at Brandeis University, please let us know so that the appropriate accommodations can be arranged.