

## American Tragedy (in Theory)

American Studies: 300

Wednesdays, 12:30- 3:00, Buttrick 310.

Professor Jennifer Fay

134 Buttrick

Office Hours: Tues: 2:00- 4:00.

[jennifer.m.fay@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:jennifer.m.fay@vanderbilt.edu)

### Course Description:

This course concerns the unlikely intersection of American Studies, a resolutely modern and geographically located field of study, and tragedy, an ancient dramatic genre often viewed as incompatible with the modern world. By some accounts, tragedy is the ethical violence that befalls kings, queens, and their progeny in trials of sovereign power, and thus the United States' "exceptional" democratic status may render a distinctly "American" tragedy both temporally and temperamentally impossible. With these challenges in mind, this seminar will trace the status of American exceptionalism within the institutional lifespan of American Studies, especially as Cold War liberalism (and the often virulent strains of anti-communism) gives rise to globalized neo-liberalism. We will also explore the efficacy of a theoretical and affective vocabulary rooted in the history of tragedy. Is America the exception to European tragedy? Is America the tragic exception to the promises of democracy?

Tragedy raises interesting questions about feeling and identity, especially in the context of our neo-liberal age. Is the tragic affect available to the common person, and can it be ordinary? What narratives are available when tragedy is not a catastrophic event but an ongoing state of affairs? How does the tragic narrative—of Oedipus and Antigone, for example—reflect gendered experience, and of what use are these narratives for us today? How might tragedy offer a useful paradigm as distinct from melodrama and trauma (and is it distinct)? Alongside literary and cinematic works that begin to address these questions, we will read from a range of philosophically-inflected meditations on tragedy including Aristotle, Benjamin, Williams, Freud, Honig, Butler, Berlant and Žižek. As we may discover, "tragedy" and "American Studies" are sufficiently hard to define that they may exist, in the most prosaic sense, only "in theory."

### Assigned Texts:

Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne. Verso 2003/6.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. Columbia UP, 2000.\*

DeLillo, Don. *Libra*. Penguin, 2006, with new intro by DeLillo.

Honig, Bonnie. *Antigone Interrupted*. Cambridge UP, 2013.\*

Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*, Penguin Classics, 2003.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011 (excerpts)\*

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Duke UP, 2011.

Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. Simon & Schuster, 2007.

Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*, ed. Pamela McCallum. Broadview, 2006.

Williams, William Appleman *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. With foreword by Lloyd Gardner, Norton, 2009. [Also available on Google books]

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Perennial Classics, 2005.

Zizek, Slavoj. *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. Verso, 2009.

\* Available electronically

**Assignments:**

**Discussion Prompts:** At least twice in the semester, you are asked to post a substantial (minimum 500-word) response to the texts for the week in *advance* of our Wednesday discussion. You may focus on one particular detail of an argument or narrative turn, or work out some of the ways texts may be connected, or query a problem or underlying assumption in a text. Ideally, this reflection will be formulated as a substantial question or set of questions followed by your own tentative answer. You might also briefly explain how you arrived at this question. These writings will be the prompts for our in-class discussions and may inspire ideas for your seminar paper. These will also give me an opportunity to respond to your ideas and writing. You are welcome to use the Oak discussion board more than twice! But I will circulate a sign up sheet to ensure that everyone makes use of it *at least* twice.

**Seminar Paper:** You have three options. All seminar papers should engage texts from this class. You are welcome, indeed encouraged, to introduce other materials, and you may read the seminar materials within the context of your interests and areas of specialization.

1. Option one: A 20-25 page seminar paper due on Wednesday April 23<sup>rd</sup> 5:00 p.m.
2. Option two: Two 10-15 page papers. The first due Friday, Feb. 21<sup>st</sup> by 5:00 p.m., the second due Wednesday April 23<sup>rd</sup> 5:00 p.m.
3. Option Three: One 10-15 page paper due Feb. 21<sup>st</sup>, which you then expand into a longer seminar paper due on April 23<sup>rd</sup>.

**Robust class participation:** I take class participation seriously as measure of your engagement with the material. Come to every class prepared to ask questions, make claims, and connections.

**Screenings:** I will arrange for screenings of assigned films. You are encouraged to watch the film on a large screen, but they will also be on reserve at the Main Library.

## Reading Schedule

### I: Democratic and Liberal Tragedy

#### Week 1 (Jan 6): What was Tragedy?

Read: Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* (Oak)  
Aristotle, *Poetics* (Oak)

#### Week 2 (Jan 15): Modern Tragedy and Revolutionary Optimism

Read: R. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*  
Steiner, Excerpts from *The Death of Tragedy* (3-10, on Oak)  
“Tragedy Reconsidered” (Oak)

#### Week 3 (Jan 22): Modern Tragedy, Allegory, and the Ruins of History

Read: Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*  
Read all, but with emphasis on Steiner’s Intro (p. 7-24)  
“Trauerspiel and Tragedy” (57-120)  
“Allegory and Trauerspiel” (159-235)  
Miller, “Tragedy and the Common Man” (Oak),  
*The Crucible*.

### II. The Tragedy of America’s Liberal Democracy

#### Week 4 (Jan 29): The Genre of US Imperialism

Read: W. A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*  
1-16, 202-312 (skim the whole book, focus on these pages)  
Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*  
1-39, 153-213. (Oak)

#### Week 5 (Feb 5): American Tragedy, American Naturalism

Read: Wright, *Native Son*  
JanMohamed, “Introduction: The Culture of Social-Death” and “*Native Son*:  
Symbolic Death.” (Oak)

#### Week 6 (Feb 12): Conspiracy Theory as Tragic Theory

Read: DeLillo, *Libra*  
Screening: *Manchurian Candidate* (Frankenheimer, 1962)

### III: Late Liberal / Neoliberal Tragedy

#### Week 7 (Feb 19): The Part That Has No Part

Read: Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*  
Armond White on *Killer of Sheep* (Oak)  
Screening: *Killer of Sheep* (Burnett, 1979)

Week 8 (Feb 26): Situation Tragedy

Read: Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*  
Screening: *Wendy and Lucy* (Reichardt, 2008)

Week 9 (March 5): Spring Break

Week 10 (March 12): Global Capital and the Tragic Picaresque

Read: Sinha, *Animal's People*  
Nixon, from *Slow Violence*:  
    "Introduction"  
    Ch. 1 "Slow Violence, Neoliberalism, and the Environmental  
    Picaresque."  
    Ch 8, "Environmentalism, Postcolonialism, and American Studies."

**IV Queer Lamentation and Feminist Interruptions**

Week 11 (March 19): Tragic Lament

Read: Butler, *Antigone's Claim*  
Lacan on Antigone (Oak)  
Freud, on Oedipus from "Interpretation of Dreams" (Oak)

Week 12 (March 26): Against Mortalist Humanism

Read: Honig, *Antigone Interrupted*, "Introduction" and "Part I: Interruption"  
Love, "Spectacular Failure: The Figure of the Lesbian in *Mulholland Drive*."  
Screening: *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001)

Week 13 (April 2): Antigone's Democratic Lessons.

Read: Honig, *Antigone Interrupted*, "Part II Conspiracy"  
**Skype talk with Bonnie Honig!**

**V. Tragedy, The End**

Week 14 (April 9): The Communist's Last Laugh

Read: Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*  
Screening: *Queen of Versailles* (Greenfield, 2012)

Week 15 (April 16): No Class. Reading/Writing Week.