English 1220W – Drama: Forms and Techniques

[Close study of representative plays of the major periods and of the main formal categories (tragedy, comedy) and written explication of these forms. [3] (HCA)]

Engl. 1220W.01 – Drama: Forms and Techniques

“Performing Blackness”

Marianne VanDevere
TR – 9:35-10:50

How has popular culture influenced both social and personal understandings of blackness? We will examine the ways in which identities are created by reading texts from black playwrights. We will analyze texts in discussion and written work. We will wrestle with questions that have no simple answers and will produce difficult (and, at times, uncomfortable) questions of our own—questions that invite us to think in new ways about performance of gender, class, sexuality, and race. Assessments include participation, daily homework, three formal essays, and a presentation. This course will further develop your critical reading and writing skills.

Engl. 1220W.02 – Drama: Forms and Techniques

“Oh My Goth: Performance, Aesthetics, and (Counter) Culture”

Lauren Mitchell
TR – 1:10-2:25

Let’s talk about what’s creepy, and why. How do people “perform” counter-culture? This class will consider the persistent role of the goth aesthetic from bone-collecting, medical museums, to music videos, to the fashion celebrated by Hot Topic and “scream-o” by routing it through traditions of theatrical performance. In addition to reading plays such as Macbeth, Equus, and Dracula, we will incorporate music videos, cinematic performances, and some theories of acting into our conversation. Students are (very) welcome to incorporate interdisciplinary topics from their majors into their four essays.

Engl. 1220W.03 – Drama: Forms and Techniques

“The Fourth Wall Down and the Family Exposed”

Judy Klass
MWF – 3:10-4:00

In this course, we will look at how plays have changed over the last 2,500 years, and how theatrical conventions like the Green chorus and the Shakespearean soliloquy have given way to other techniques and approaches. We will look at Aristotle’s ideas about the unities, and about what constitutes true tragedy: ideas about katharsis and hamartia—or the “fatal flaw,” as it is sometimes translated. Aristotle argues that plays should either be tragedies or comedies, but not a mixture of the two forms. We’ll look at the plot arcs associated with both kinds of plays—and at plays that break his rules and mix forms—and discuss his ideas about suitable heroes and the time frame for plays. We will talk about how influential his ideas from the Poetics remains.

The theme running through the plays selected for this course might be described as: “the fourth wall down and the family exposed.” Theater, as opposed to film, is a form with obvious spatial limitations, and that can create a claustrophobic atmosphere on-stage—but such an atmosphere is ideal for an exploration of certain families in which characters feel trapped, stuck with the people they live with, doomed by blood ties, and perhaps by economic circumstances—or by a need to connect, to inflict harm, to be affirmed, forgiven, or vindicated. Audiences observing any group of characters are voyeurs, in a sense, but film audiences are more like peeping Toms, watching a parade of visual images go by, while theater audiences are more like eavesdroppers, listening as complicated arguments and conversations reveal things about the speakers. Moreover, there is far more room in a play than in a film to let a scene play out, over time, and to peel away the layers of the characters and of their relationships as one might peel an onion; the unlikely mix of love, hate, anger, guilt, resentment, admiration, playfulness, bafflement and certainly involved in some family relationships can be given full scope, as it cannot be on film. So, we will look at how plays about families have changed over time, and make connections between some very different works.

WARNING: Some of these plays can be hard to read if you are going through a rough patch in your own family. If that’s the case, this may not be the time to take this course.
English 1220W – Drama: Forms and Techniques

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Engl. 1220W.04 – Drama: Forms and Techniques

“Dark Shadows: Or, How to Haunt a Stage”

Amanda Lehr

MWF – 12:10-1:00

What happens when people refuse to let go of the past—or the past refuses to let go of them? Develop your skills in analytical writing and critical thought as you examine a series of plays (from Macbeth to No Exit to Rabbit Hole) and film adaptations which explore what it means to be “haunted.” Hone your writing by producing three formal essays (plus revisions) and your communication abilities by participating in class discussion and performance activities. End the semester with a more thorough understanding of drama and of analytical writing, with portable skills and habits that will continue to benefit you through your college career and beyond.