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

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:
* Available electronically through Acorn.
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 23rd 5:00 p.m.
2. Option two: Two 10-15 page papers. The first due Friday, Feb. 21st by 5:00 p.m., the second due Wednesday April 23rd 5:00 p.m.
3. Option Three: One 10-15 page paper due Feb. 21st, which you then expand into a longer seminar paper due on April 23rd.

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: Zizek, First as Tragedy, Then as Farce
Screening: Queen of Versailles (Greenfield, 2012)

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