

Syllabus
Summer 2011

Three Epic Plays: O’Neill, Stoppard, and Kushner

Nicholas Birns

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In this online course, we study three plays, by arguably the three most ambitious English-language playwrights of the past century, that go well beyond the normal expectations of drama, not only longer in sheer duration but with a larger scope that accommodates and catalyzes multiple discourses of psychology, history, and culture. Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* surveys, from all angles, a huge canvas of American hope and despair, and provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of the dreams and nightmares of “The American Century”. Tom Stoppard’s *The Coast of Utopia*, although set in a very specific milieu of nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries and dissidents, canvasses the inner landscape of political idealism which continues to reverberate a century and a half later. Tony Kushner’s *Angels In America* echoes both O’Neill and Stoppard in its evocation of both transformative possibility and dispiriting quiescence, making of the AIDS pandemic and its rippling effects in the New York in late twentieth century a vehicle for a phantasmagoric fantasia of memory and desire. These works all show how drama can be as capacious a literary form as any other, and can open up new possibilities of expression and meaning. We should be aware that “epic theater”, as originally coined by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, was not just comfortably large and expansive—as a Wagner opera might be—but deeply interrogatory of social givens and clichés, and thus should be on alert for how these plays are subversive as well as ambitious, disturbing as well as soaring.

RESOURCES:

The plays will be read in the background of contemporary reviews available online as well as, in the case of O'Neill, the trajectory of modern drama and the emergence of drama in English as a form that, after lying considerably fallow for the balance of the nineteenth century, emerged to matter to twentieth-century culture. We will also examine O'Neill's intellectual debt to the thought of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the case of Stoppard, we will examine the dramatist's own Czech origins and his lifelong opposition to Soviet totalitarianism, as well as looking at the history of Russian utopian and protest movements in the nineteenth century, including earlier literary treatments of them such as Turgenev's in *Fathers and Sons*, to evaluate Stoppard's implied position against the testimony of others. In the case of Kushner, we will examine the gay liberation movement, the emergence of GLBT issues as salient in American life, the AIDS pandemic, and the conflicted response of Eastern intellectuals to the Reagan administration's policies, as well as examining influence on Kushner's thought such as Walter Benjamin and Harold Bloom.

We will also mention other innovative dramatic movements of the past 100 years such as T. S. Eliot's verse drama, Bertolt Brecht's epic drama, and the historical drama of Karl Kraus and Thomas Hardy, other writers working in extended forms such as Alan Ayckbourn, as well as referring to playwrights such as Wendy Wasserstein and August Wilson who, though not writing in extended forms, did use their plays to mold a sustained vision of their times and the influences upon them.

SCHEDULE

Week 1 *Introduction*

Week 2 *The Iceman Cometh*

Week 3 *The Iceman Cometh*

Week 4 *The Coast of Utopia, Voyage*

Week 5 *The Coast of Utopia, Shipwreck*

Week 6 *The Coast of Utopia, Salvage*

Week 7 *Angels in America, Millennium Approaches*

Week 8 *Angels in America, Millennium Approaches*

Week 9 *Angels in America, Perestroika*

PAPERS AND EVALUATION

Class discussion will count for 10%; I will not even accept papers unless the student has participated in online discussion to some extent.

There will be three assignments, one each on O'Neill, Stoppard, and Kushner, which each will receive 30% of the grade. Details and due dates are given in the Assignments tab. The assignments on Stoppard and Kushner will be interactive, involving the use of the Blog and Wiki tools on Blackboard. Students might also potentially be asked to respond to video performances of the plays and to write in non-traditional, shorter formats. The first paper on O'Neill, though, will be a more traditional five-page paper.

NLIT 3120 Shakespeare fall 2011 Shakespeare, *Richard III*. Arden. 978-1904271093

Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Arden, ISBN-13 978-1904271222

Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*. Arden, 9781903436912

Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*. Arden. 978-1903436349

Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* Signet Classic, 045152715

Shakespeare, *Hamlet* penguin, **978-0-14-101307-7**

Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*. Anchor.

Frank Kermode, *The Age of Shakespeare*. Modern Library. 978-067964244A

Sumemr 2011 Three Ep ic Plays, NLIT 3509

Stoppard, *The Coast of Utopia Grove* **ISBN-13:** 9780802143402

O'Neill *The Oceman Cometh Vintage* 978-0375709173;

Kushner *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* 9781559360616;

Kushner *Angels in America: perestroika. ISBN-13:* 978-1559360739