

Reading the Canon: Play Analysis Practice  
TD 387D, Unique #26110, Fall 2006  
Professor Stacy Wolf  
Tues and Thurs 12:30-1:45, WIN 1.164

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Office hours: T and TH 2-3 p.m. [sign up sheet on door] and by appointment

### **Course Description:**

“Reading the Canon: Play Analysis Practice” is a graduate level course in playscript analysis and dramaturgy. Our “canon” will begin with Realism and Modernism(s) in the late-nineteenth century, move through the twentieth century and Postmodernism, and end with contemporary plays.

We will discuss each play in terms of dramatic literature (structure and form, action, characters, language, themes, genre, etc.); the playwright’s biography and influences; socio-historical, cultural, and theatrical context and reception; theatrical and artistic legacy; and contemporary challenges for production. Also, while the purpose of the course is not explicitly to focus on questions of cultural value and canonization, no doubt such issues will productively haunt our discussions.

### **Questions include:**

- How is this play made? How does the playwright create a performance experience through words? What are the key issues and themes? Who are the characters and what do they do? How is the play structured? How does the play create mood, tone and style? How does the playwright use visual, aural, and kinesthetic images, and other theatrical elements of light, sound, design, bodies, architecture, and so on? How is the audience scripted in the play? What ideological work does the play do?
- Who was/is the playwright? What else has s/he written? Why is the work important in theatre history? How was this work created?
- What is the production history of this play? What were the circumstances of its first production? Who worked on the artistic team for this play?
- Who was the audience for this play? Why did they attend? What did they do? Why did it matter? How did they interpret and use this play? How was it initially received by critics? To what extent and in what ways has it been revived? Again, how were those productions received?
- How and why did this play become a part of the theatrical canon? How has this play been historicized and categorized and why? What has this play come to mean in theatre history? How does it function culturally? (that is, Is it high art? Is it avant-

garde? Does it represent a certain identity position? Has its status shifted since its original production? How has it influenced other artists?)

- How have scholars engaged with this play? Who has written about it and what have they argued? What kinds of theories have usefully illuminated this play?
- How does this play converse with its time? How does it converse with other plays and performances? With books, music, philosophy, politics? With social and political and artistic issues of its time? Of our time?
- How might one produce this play today? What does it say to us now? What are the likely challenges and rewards of this play? Should this play be revived now? Why or why not? If so, how? Where? For what audience?
- How do you as a reader and playgoer respond to this play? What other artforms (painting, drawing, food, music, dance) might express your response to the play (or to an aspect of the play)?

\*\*A note on course organization: Readings are scheduled weekly, rather than daily. On Tuesday, several students will lead the class, using the reading as a basis for presentation and discussion. On Thursday, we will all build on the work of Tuesday and continue the discussion.

### **Course Requirements**

#### **1. Attendance and participation and short writing assignments** (1/3 final grade)

100% attendance and participation are expected.

1) **First assignments** for *Angels in America* [see specific assignment below], Sept 5 [play analysis techniques] and Sept 7 [research techniques]. Post to BB and bring to class.

2) **Four mid-week Blackboard “check-in” posts**: Every other week (beginning in Week #3 [September 13]), each student will post a brief comment (less than 250 words) to Blackboard between Tuesday and Thursday’s classes, either extending the conversation, raising new questions, making observations about the material, pointing to issues that we have not discussed. Specific dates TBA. Due by 5 p.m. each Wednesday.

3) **Short writing or assignments** as designated by students

#### **2. One day of presentation/discussion facilitation** (1/3 final grade)

Student-led classes should emerge from the group’s interests, curiosities, and passions. Class activities might include brief lecture or presentation, discussion of passages via close reading, broader discussion, small groups, performance activities, etc. The group might imagine the class as a pre-show audience, or as an historical audience, or as a

production team for a revival. Students may choose to emphasize play analysis or the plays' social, political, and cultural milieux, or to put the three (or four) plays of the week in conversation.

Also, the course's assigned reading consists entirely of plays, but student groups may want to supplement the plays with readings in social, cultural, or theatre history, critical theory, manifestos, visual materials, music, or other useful, related texts, including the supplementary reading in the textbook.

Student facilitators should design a brief assignment for the class, either written, performance, or some other activity, or provide some questions for consideration. This assignment should be posted to Blackboard no later than the preceding Sunday at 10 p.m. Student presenters should also post bibliographies as per your research. Please do see me to discuss your ideas and plans for the class, and plan to meet with me afterwards to evaluate the class.

For your class day, please make an effort to deal with all of the plays assigned.

3. **Final project**, due in the following stages: (1/3 final grade)

- 1) **Proposal** (due Oct 5<sup>th</sup>)
- 2) **Draft** to workshop group (optional to me) (due three weeks before your presentation. Groups and dates TBA.)
- 3) **In-class presentation** (10 minutes plus Q & A)
- 4) **Final project** (due Fri Dec 8, 5 p.m.)

Your final project should allow you to extend the work of the class into your own area of interest and research. A conference-length paper is a fine option, but you should also feel free to consider other forms of work—creating a website; making a performance; devising an annotated bibliography, to name a few. I'll expect about 3000 words (12 pages) of written work for the final project.

### **Required Text**

*The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. W.B. Worthen [ISBN: 0838407501]  
[all assigned plays are in the textbook]

### **Course Outline**

#### Week #1, Thurs Aug 31

Intro to course, you, me, goals and expectations.  
Discussion of next week's assignments.

#### Week #2: Practicing Play Analysis and Dramaturgy:

##### The Example of *Angels in America, Part I: Millennium Approaches*

Tues, Sept 5: Bring to class one example of play analysis practice for *Angels in America*, such as a textbook, article, other source, outline, technique, idea, or method.  
Please also post to BB before class.

Thurs, Sept 7: Bring to class one example of dramaturgical research for *Angels in America*, such as a book, an article, a website, a review, an interview, images, and so on. Also document your research trail. Please post to BB, including bibliographic information, before class.

Week #3, Sept 12 and 14

Ibsen, *A Doll House*

Strindberg, *The Father*

Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Student facilitators begin this week.

\*Mid-week Blackboard posts begin this week

Week #4, Sept 19 and 21

Robins, *Votes for Women!*

Shaw, *Major Barbara*

Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

Week #5, Sept 26 and 28

Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Beckett, *Endgame*

Pinter, *The Homecoming*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

Week #6, Oct 3 and 5

O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*

Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*

Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*Final project proposals due on Thursday Oct 5

Week #7, Oct 10 and 12

Glaspell, *Trifles*

Grimké, *Rachel*

Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends*

Thompson, *Lion in the Streets*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*Working groups assigned

Week #8, Oct 17 and 19

Duras, *India Song*

Müller, *Hamletmachine*

Churchill, *Cloud Nine*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

Week #9, Oct 24 and 26

Edgar, *Pentecost*

Friel, *Translations*

Shepard, *True West*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

Week #10, Oct 31 and Nov 2

Baraka, *Dutchman*

Wilson, *Fences*

Smith, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*

Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

Week #11, Nov 7 and 9

Hwang, *M. Butterfly*

Iizuka, *36 Views*

Makoto, *My Beatles*

\*\*Facilitators: \_\_\_\_\_

Week #12, Nov 14 and 16

Open week as needed: read more plays or other readings; workshop final projects; etc.

Week #13, Nov 21 and 23

Tues, Nov. 21: No class

Thurs, Nov. 23: Thanksgiving holiday, no class

Week #14, Nov 25 and 27

Tues, Nov 28: Presentations

Thurs, Nov 30: Presentations

Week #15, Dec 2 and 4

Tues, Dec 5: Presentations

Thurs, Dec 7: Presentations/Summary

Friday December 8, 5 p.m.: Final projects due.

The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact the Office of the Dean of Student at 471-6259, 471-4641 TTY.

I encourage you to come to see me or to communicate via email with questions, ideas, suggestions, and comments.