

## LT145 Tragedy

Instructor: David Hayes  
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Office Hours: Friday 13:30-15:30, and by appointment

### Course Description

While we ordinarily use the word “tragic” to refer to very sad events, in its full sense it refers to a specific kind of artwork and an entire way of looking at life. What makes an artwork or a worldview tragic? Is it possible to hold a tragic view of life today? Or is this view rooted in a kind of society (aristocratic), with its attendant values, or a kind of metaphysics (fatalistic)—neither of which are, presumably, ours? Beginning with readings from the flourishing of tragedy in ancient Greece, we will examine works of art from different time periods and cultures (including non-Western). Special attention will be paid to the surprising reemergence of tragic concerns in the American/Central-European *film noir* of the 1940s. Alongside the works of art, we will consider the significance of tragedy within Greek, Anglo-American, and Continental moral philosophy.

### Requirements

#### Preparation

In the seminar, you must always have in your possession a **hard copy** of the text(s) for the day. All the required texts for this course are together in the course reader. It is required that you purchase the course reader. It is expected that students will begin the seminar already having read and thought about the text(s), and already having mastered the basics, e.g., what the plot is, who the main characters are, etc. On some days, there is a screening and discussion in the lecture hall. Be sure to be aware of the class schedule. On most days on which there is a screening, no prior preparation is necessary for the class.

#### Participation

The first and most basic aim of a seminar is to understand the text by reading and thinking together. While the instructor typically takes the lead, this is a shared task. It demands good preparation, the ability to listen to others, and the courage to think aloud. What matters in these conversations is not the quantity of contributions but the quality. The best contributions are often *good questions*. For grading purposes, the most important thing will be the student’s contribution to the overall conversation, which stretches through the semester.

#### Use of Electronics

In the seminar, you must always have in your possession a **hard copy** of the assigned text(s) for the day. The use of electronic devices during class time is only allowed for disability accommodation. The research is unequivocal that the presence of laptops hurts the academic performance of the user – and also of whoever else can see the screen. Put away and do not use your smartphones during the seminar. These devices undermine the effort to forge and sustain a common conversation.

### Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section III Academic Misconduct. Anything is better than turning in work that is not your own, and that is the result of your own personal engagement with the texts and artworks. If you are having difficulties with any assignment, please contact me.

### Attendance

As the Student Handbook specifies, more than two absences (that is absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Please consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

Please note that the film screenings and discussions are mandatory sessions. When a screening occurs, the following class is cancelled. See the schedule below for details. This instructor has worked with the college registrar in order to ensure that all the students enrolled in this course are free of other course requirements during these screenings.

### Policy on Late Submission of Papers

The Bard College Berlin Student Handbook specifies that: *essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.* Concerning extensions for papers in this course, I freely give extensions as long as the student requests one **before** the essay deadline has passed. You may request an extension via email.

### **Grade Breakdown**

Paper #1 (minimum 1300 words): 25%  
Paper #2 (minimum 1700 words): 30%  
Paper #3 (minimum 2000 words): 35%  
Class participation 10%

### **Schedule**

Tuesday, September 3: selection from Herodotus, *The History* (1.34-1.45), and opening discussion

Thursday, September 5: *Agamemnon*, lines 1-502

Tuesday, September 10: *Agamemnon*, lines 503-974

Thursday, September 12: *Agamemnon*, lines 975-end

Tuesday, September 17: *Agamemnon*, general discussion; Nussbaum "Aeschylus and Practical Conflict"; Williams "Possibility, Freedom, and Power" from *Shame and Necessity*

Thursday, September 19, 17:30-21:00 (lecture hall): *Criss-Cross* (1949, dir. Robert Siodmak)

**First paper due by email: Sunday, September 22, before midnight**

Tuesday, September 24: *Oedipus the King*, lines 1-633

Thursday, September 26: *Oedipus the King*, lines 634-1072; Freud, selection from *The Interpretation of Dreams*

Tuesday, October 1: *Oedipus the King*, lines 1073-end

Thursday, October 3: Aristotle, *Poetics*

Monday, October 7, 19:30-22:00 (lecture hall): *Detour* (1945, dir. Edgar Ulmer)

Thursday, October 10: selections from Hegel *Aesthetics*; Murdoch *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*; Scheler "On the Tragic"

Tuesday, October 15: *Alcestis*, lines 1-476

Thursday, October 17: *Alcestis*, lines 477-end

Tuesday, October 22: *Alcestis*, general discussion

Thursday, October 24, 17:30-21:00 (lecture hall): *Phantom Lady* (1944, dir. Robert Siodmak) and Pippin, Introduction to *Fatalism in American Film Noir*

Tuesday and Thursday, October 29 and 31: Fall Break

Monday, November 4, 19:30-22:00 (lecture hall): *Adachigahara*. **It is required to read the text of the play before the screening.**

Thursday, November 7: *Adachigahara*

**Second paper due by email: Sunday, November 10, before midnight**

Monday, November 11, 19:30-22:00 (lecture hall): *Rite of Spring* (Stravinsky/Njinsky)

Thursday, November 14: Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, sections 1-14

Tuesday, November 19: *The Wild Duck*, Acts 1 & 2

Thursday, November 21: *The Wild Duck*, Act 3

Tuesday, November 26: *The Wild Duck*, Acts 4 & 5

Thursday, November 28: Kierkegaard, "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama," from *Either/Or*

Monday, December 2, 19:30-22:00 (lecture hall): *In a Lonely Place* (1950, dir. Nicholas Ray)

Thursday, December 5: Sebald "Paul Bereyter"; Steiner "Tragedy Pure and Simple"

Monday, December 9, 19:30-22:00 (lecture hall): *The Sopranos*, season 1, episode 1; Warshow "The Gangster as Tragic Hero"

Thursday, December 12, 17:30-21:00 (lecture hall): *City Lights* (1931, dir. Charlie Chaplin)

**Third (final) paper due by email, Monday, December 16, before midnight**

### **Note on the selection of texts and artworks**

This structure of this class is built upon four dramas, one by each of the three major Greek tragedians, and one by Ibsen, who is often credited with the rebirth of tragic drama in the modern world. In addition to the tragic dramas, there are two other kinds of "texts." The first is, broadly speaking, artistic: film, ballet, television, musical drama from medieval Japan, and contemporary prose fiction. Within this first category, *film noir* has the most significant presence. The second kind of text in this class comprises works of thought in which tragedy is a serious concern. These include analytic ethical philosophy, continental philosophy, and critical examinations of tragic art. No single course on tragedy could hope to be comprehensive, and this class is not designed to impart any specific definition of tragedy. The final artwork we will consider (*City Lights*) is a comedy that is engaged in a struggle with tragedy.