Jonah Johnson Fall Semester 2018

Class: Emerson 307 email: jmjohns@fas.harvard.edu

M/W 10:30 Office Hours: T 1:30-2:30

Office: 1 Bow St., Suite 250 (# 213) and by appt.

**Expository Writing 20:**

**Tragedy and Everyday Life**

**I. COURSE OVERVIEW**

The image of Oedipus blinding himself at the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is among the most violent in Western drama. Realizing that he has killed his father, married his mother, and brought a plague upon his people, Oedipus represents a human scenario too horrible to imagine. And yet Western culture *does* imagine it—it can't seem to stop imagining it—and the most horrible thing about the tragic fate of Oedipus is the suggestion that tragedy lurks within each of us as a fundamental risk of human existence. In this course we will examine tragedies both ancient and modern, asking why certain human scenarios are supposed to be tragic and whether those scenarios represent states of exception within the ordinary range of human experience—or exceptions that prove an unsettling rule.

In Unit 1 we will read Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429 BCE) and *Antigone* (442 BCE), examining the structure of tragic conflict and considering the manner in which this particular structure reflects the form of critical debate more generally. In Unit 2, we will compare Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603/4) with a recent adaptation of the play by Toni Morrison, *Desdemona* (2012), asking about the role of specific cultural features (such as race, class, and gender) in producing particular kinds of tragic effects. In Unit 3 we will view a selection of films, including *Vertigo* (1958), *Persona* (1966)*, Memento* (2000), and *Black Swan* (2010), asking whether the tragedy of contemporary culture can be understood as an everyday and insoluble conflict between individuals, themselves, and the societies in which they live.

Some of our writing goals in this course will change unit by unit, as you take on the distinct challenges of several important versions of the academic essay. Other goals will remain our focus throughout the whole of the course: developing your sense of what you do well and challenging yourself to grow as a writer; expanding your repertoire and practice of revision techniques; and increasing the complexity and originality of your analysis as well as the effectiveness and elegance of your prose. One of the most exciting things to learn in a writing course is that the learning process never stops; one doesn't "arrive" at being a good writer, but rather continually becomes one. With these goals in mind, we begin with three important premises:

* Good writing is a *recursive* process: you will develop and write preliminary response papers and essays, which we will discuss in conference and for which you will receive feedback from your fellow writers; you will then revise those essays, giving your analysis time to evolve and grow more complex.
* Your writing will improve most when you possess clear ideas about what *you* want to accomplish in each assignment: what aspects of the writer's craft matter to you, and how you want to grow and improve. This class asks you to be thoughtful and *self-reflective* about your writing process: to question and evaluate your own work in each assignment (in your Cover Letters with each essay) and in the course as a whole (in your introductory Writer's Letter).
* While inspiration is the moment we all hope for in our writing, it comes most readily when that inspiration is earned – in other words, when you have dedicated *sustained effort to the process* of reading, thinking, questioning, drafting and revising.

**II. HOW THE COURSE WORKS**

**Required Texts and Materials**

🡪 Please note: the texts you need to purchase for the class are few in number, but you will print a great deal for this class, so please plan accordingly.

* Toni Morrison, *Desdemona* (available at the Coop)
* Sophocles, *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* (available at the Coop). The edition we’re using is *Sophocles I: Oedipus The King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991. ISBN-10: 0226307921. [Because translations of Greek tragedy vary so widely, it’s important that we’re all using this translation and edition of Sophocles].
* Shakespeare, *Othello* (available at the Coop)
* Online course pack and materials, including "handouts" for writing exercises (handed out in class or available on the course website)

You should also have access to a writing handbook when questions of grammar, mechanics or style arise. I’m happy to recommend one if you don’t own one already.

**Communication**

The course works best when we treat it as a semester-long conversation about your writing. To make that conversation possible, there are a few important things to remember:

• **Conferences**: In each unit of the course, you will submit a response paper, a draft, and a revised essay. After you have submitted your draft, we will meet to discuss my feedback, which I will have sent to you beforehand. These conferences are our chance to work together closely on your writing and to focus your work toward revision, and they are most worthwhile when **you** are the one guiding them. My job during conferences is to talk through your ideas and clarify my feedback, and I’ll be in the best position to do this job when you come to our conference prepared. My job during conference is *not* to give you a to do list that will translate into an “A” on your revision. Not only would that approach undermine the holistic nature of persuasive writing, it would also undermine one of the most important goals of Expos: to help you go from writing as a student for “the expert” to writing as the expert for your colleagues, i.e., as a *teacher*.

Being prepared includes having reviewed your essay, considered your questions, and begun to think about revision possibilities and strategies before we meet. You should bring a copy of your draft (with my marginal feedback and feedback letter) with you to our conferences, and you should plan on taking notes. Experience has shown that the most effective conferences last about 20 minutes, so the slots for each conference will be a cozy 25 minutes long. Since the schedule during conference days is so tight, missed conferences may not be rescheduled.

In addition to our formal conferences, you are of course free to come see me during office hours about your developing ideas or to set up another time to meet if office hours aren’t convenient. Due to the jam-packed nature of the week between drafts and revisions, I will unfortunately *not* be able to provide feedback for "second drafts" leading up to your final revision; however, by the time you are revising your drafts you *will* have received a number of stages of feedback and can *by all means* make appointments with the Writing Center!

• **E-mail**: Rather than take up our class time with announcements and administrative arrangements (and there will be many of them), I will try to use e-mail to communicate much of that information. As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your e-mail daily. You are responsible for the information I send you, including the feedback to your drafts and revisions (which are easy enough to overlook on an iPhone). Likewise, I make sure to check my email once every weekday for questions from you. Please note, however, that unless prior arrangements have been made, you should not assume that I will check e-mail later than 9:00 p.m. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

**Class Participation**

One of the benefits of Expos is its small class size. That benefit is best realized when every student participates fully in the class; you learn much more from formulating, articulating, and questioning your own thoughts than from simply listening to what others have to say. Our time together is largely devoted to discussion and small-group work. Therefore you are responsible for being in class, prepared and on time, each time we meet. Being prepared for class means that you have given careful thought to the reading and writing assignments for our class, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussions about tragedy.

With that in mind, I hope that each of you is especially attuned over the next few months to the ways in which terms such as “tragedy” and “tragic” are used in the media, popular culture, daily discourse, etc. If you encounter a compelling or provocative use of these terms during the semester, please send me an email with a link and a few thoughts on how the terms are being used. We’ll incorporate these encounters into our ongoing attempt to develop and refine our sense of what tragedy means.

**Grades**

The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown: Essay #1 = 20%; Essay #2 = 35%; Essay #3 = 40%. The standard for each essay also becomes more demanding as we progress (since you are building on certain fundamental skills and techniques with each essay). The remaining 5% of your grade represents a serious measure of your completion of preliminary exercises, your constructive participation in class discussion and conferences, and the care with which you respond to fellow students' work.

**Attendance and Lateness**

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. It is an official program-wide policy that if you are absent without medical or religious excuse more than **twice**, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed. On your **second** unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your peril.

You are expected to let me know promptly if you have missed or will miss a class; you remain responsible for the work due that day and for any new work assigned. Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In those circumstances, you should contact me before class (or within 24 hours); you may need to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Freshman Dean. Absences because of special events, such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts **are not** excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences, letting me know in advance. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you must directly petition the Director of Expository Writing, who will grant such a petition only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Class begins promptly at ten minutes past the hour. Three latenesses of more than ten minutes will be counted as an absence.

**III. WRITTEN WORK**

**Submitting Essays**

Essay drafts and revisions will be submitted through our Canvas site. The submitted file must either be in Microsoft Word or be easily compatible. If you use word processing software such as Pages, for example, please be sure that you are saving your work in a Word-friendly format. This will help minimize potential compatibility issues when we are sharing our writing with one another. It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you send is not corrupted or damaged.  If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, e.g., if your work is submitted as a .pages file, the essay will be subject to a late penalty. *NB: Unless you have made prior arrangements to do so, please do not email me your essays—that unfortunately creates a whole series of potential glitches in the feedback loop. If your essay is late, please submit it to the dropbox and then send me an email letting me know that it's been posted.*

**Deadlines**

For many class meetings, you will have a response paper due or some other reading or writing exercise that is designed to help you develop the essay for that unit. Our work together in class will also often be based on those assignments. For those reasons, it is imperative that you turn your work in on time. Of course, even in the most carefully organized semesters, unexpected circumstances can arise – therefore each student in this section is allowed **ONE** 24-hour extension on a response paper, draft or revision during the semester. To use that 24-hour extension without penalty, you must: contact me before that deadline; submit the late work to our drop box; email me once you've submitted the essay; and be on time with the other work due on that day as well. Otherwise, the work will be counted as late. And beware: taking that one-day extension can mean that you’re crunched for time at the beginning of the next unit.

Other than that “wild card” extension, all deadlines in the course are firm. Except in the case of medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. Essay drafts or revisions turned in after the deadline will be penalized a third of a letter-grade on the final essay for each day they are late. If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you should contact me right away, and may be required to produce a note from UHS; in the event of a family emergency, you should contact me right away, and you may be required to ask your dean to contact me by e-mail or phone. In addition, please contact me as soon as possible so we can work out an alternative schedule.

**Revision**

Because of the emphasis this course places on revision, the schedule is designed to allow you as much revision time per essay as possible—at least a week after the draft is due, and usually at least five days after your draft conference. Since you’ll have a significant span of days in which to revise, the expectations for this aspect of your work in the course are high.

**Completion of Work: Official Expos Policy**

Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, it is an official program-wide policy that *you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course*, and you must write them within the schedule of the course (not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind). If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements. The letter will specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date (unless you have documented a medical problem), you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed.

**Academic Honesty**

Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite them and how to avoid plagiarism. In Expos we foster an approach to writing that focuses on the perspective of the reader, and as a result you will frequently incorporate the feedback of your classmates, your peers, myself, and perhaps others into your work. If this feedback has become a substantial part of your work and you need to acknowledge the impact someone has had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. In the end, all work you submit *must be your own*. Writing response papers, drafts, or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

**Policy on Collaboration**

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. More general sorts of discussions with peers about how to approach an assignment as well as proofreading suggestions do not need to be cited; however, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

**Writing Center**

At any stage of the writing process – brainstorming ideas, reviewing drafts, approaching revisions—you may want some extra attention on your essays. The Writing Center (located on the garden level of the Barker Center) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. I can't stress strongly enough the benefit of the service they provide; regardless of the "strength" or "weakness" of the essay, any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. Visit the Writing Center's Web site at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr> to make an appointment. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours at other campus locations; see the Writing Center website for details.

**The Environment of Our Classroom**

It is inevitable—and not undesirable—that you will disagree with your classmates at times, and sometimes these disagreements will center on issues that evoke—and *should* evoke—strong feelings. That being said, in order for our classroom to be a safe space where we can exchange ideas freely and critically, I ask that you engage your peers with politeness and respect at all times. I also ask that you ask the same of me. It’s perfectly acceptable to disagree with one another—that is, after all, what it means to have a debate—but disagreement should also entail a corresponding appreciation for the diversity and ideas presented in our classroom.

**Accessibility Accommodations**

Students with accessibility needs should definitely be in touch with the Accessibility Services office at <http://aeo.fas.harvard.edu/> or 617-496-8707, but they are also encouraged (by yours truly) to be in touch with me if I can be of any help in any way.