

English 307-21800: Twentieth Century American Drama
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Office Hours: M: 1-4; F: 1-2; T/Th 10-12; and by appointment

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***TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMA:
FAMILY VALUES***

OR:

"Bringing up Baby"



Course Goals: If American dramatists are to be trusted, dysfunctionality and the American family go hand in hand. Indeed, the deteriorating family has been a thematic obsession for American playwrights almost since the birth of American drama as a distinct body of writing. In this course, we will read roughly sixty years' worth of American plays, beginning in the mid-20th century with Tennessee Williams' landmark 1944 work, *The Glass Menagerie* and concluding with *Eurydice*, by Sarah Ruhl, which was first produced in 2006 and which will be produced here at Ithaca College this December. All of the plays that we will read together focus upon familial relationships. In most, though not all of them, these families are suffering from a corrosive misery, one that seems to pass like a contagion from generation to generation as the sadness, self-loathing and (often) alcoholism of the parents is visited upon the children—unless they find a way, however compromised, to escape. Our interest will be to examine these portraits of familial distress in the context of the portraits of America that each one offers. What is the relationship between the family drama and the larger cultural drama that our authors are staging?

Throughout the term, we will ask ourselves what it is that defines this broad corpus of plays as “American,” apart from the common nationality of their authors. What stylistic and thematic preoccupations (in addition to their interest in diseased families) do they share? Further, we will consider our texts both as literature and as blueprints for theatrical events. That is, we will consider not just the text on the page but its performative aspects and its production history, wherever possible.

Preparation and Participation: This class will be primarily discussion. Hence, its success depends as much upon your investment as it does on mine. Please be sure to perform a **careful and close reading** of the assigned

material, and come prepared to probe it during our hour together. Underlining as you read, taking notes, and jotting down questions are **essential** strategies for ensuring that your reading is, indeed, careful and thorough. If you have

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not already acquired the habit of reading with a pen or pencil in hand, please take up that habit this semester: it will significantly increase the chances of your participating in discussion. **Please always bring your text to class! Without it, you are unprepared for discussion.**

Further Note on Class Discussion: **In this class, we will take for granted that our texts are open to multiple interpretations.** Our objective is not to bring everyone in the room around to one reading, but rather to allow each reader's perspective to be complicated by those of other readers. Disagreement in a literature class (as long as it is respectful) is a productive thing. At the same time, we should agree that not all interpretations are equally strong. ***The strength or weakness of an interpretation hinges upon the amount of textual evidence that can be marshaled to support it.*** Part of the point of class discussion is to listen to the readings your classmates offer and to allow your own sense of our texts to be troubled, enriched, and even altered by them. Part of the point also is to challenge one another to ***provide evidence*** for the readings we put forward. This is great practice for writing literary analyses, as you will need to do the same thing in your written work.

Attendance: To participate in this class, you must show up for it. You are allowed 3 **absences**, for any reason: a nasty cold, an out-of-town wedding, an irresistible desire to sleep till dusk. You will be penalized a third of a grade for any class that you miss in excess of the allowed three. The only exception to this rule is a certifiably serious illness or emergency. More than 7 absences will mean your removal from the class (again, with the exception of certifiable emergencies.) Please note: You are under no **obligation** to miss 3 classes. The more regularly you are here, the better!

Classroom Decorum and Miscellaneous Tips:

- 1) **PLEASE MAKE A POINT OF ARRIVING ON TIME.** A pattern of latenesses will adversely affect your class participation grade. Since I take attendance at the *start* of class, it is your responsibility to ensure that I have noted your presence if you do arrive late.
- 2) **DO NOT LEAVE THE ROOM DURING CLASS** unless you are compelled by dire physical necessity (which, in a 50-minute class, should be a rarity). Leaving in the midst of class is disruptive and rude, and it drives your professor completely out of her mind. In the interests of her sanity and the success of our class discussions, *please avoid doing it.* If you find yourself absolutely compelled to leave in the midst of class, I will expect you to provide me with an explanation at the end of the session.
- 3) **PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR CELLPHONE!** This is why they invented voice mail.
- 4) **DON'T NAP, AT LEAST NOT CONSPICUOUSLY:** If I notice that you have fallen asleep during class, I will wake you up and send you home, and I will consider you to have been absent for that entire class session.

Written Work and Presentation Requirements:

1) **Frequent informal "think" pieces:** These will be considered part of class participation and will not be graded, although I will read, comment on, and keep close track of them. Informal responses need only be a few paragraphs in length to satisfy my minimum expectations, but you always have the option of investing more in them if you want to improve your participation grade. ***I will not accept late informal response pieces. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to find out whether an informal assignment was given by checking Blackboard, where they will always be posted. If you miss class on a day that an informal assignment is due, you may send me your response via email on the day of the missed class.***

2) **Discussion questions**: Each Sunday throughout the term, I will post questions on Blackboard that I anticipate taking up in class during the upcoming week. Appended to each question will be the names of 1 or 2 students in
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the class. If you are one of those students, **you are responsible for initiating discussion of your question when I raise it in class. Hence, be sure to check Blackboard every Sunday evening.** (You can expect to find the questions posted by 5 p.m. Sunday, the very latest.) If you miss class on a day when you were expected to respond to a question, you can make up for that by posting some thoughts on Blackboard. **If you are in class, you don't have to write anything; just be prepared to respond to the question with some thought and care.**

3) **Two formal essays**, each focusing on one play, 4-6 pp. in length.

4) **An in-class midterm and a take-home final exam (the latter will be due during exam week).**

*** General Comments for all formal written work:

- You may revise your **1st** essay for a higher grade **provided that the original was turned in on time.** Your new grade will be an **AVERAGE** of the two grades.
- Please **keep a copy** of everything that you turn in to me.
- Please **do not allow a paper deadline to be an excuse for missing class on that day!!**
- Please **guard against plagiarism**, an increasingly serious problem on this campus thanks in part to the temptations offered by the Web. **Any paper found to be plagiarized will receive an F; no revision will be permitted; and I will follow the judicial procedure that is outlined in the Undergraduate Catalogue.**

Final Grade:

25% each for the two formal essays; 10% for the midterm; 20% for the take-home exam; 20% for class participation. Be aware that class participation doesn't simply mean talking a blue streak all the time. It means contributing constructively, thoughtfully and pertinently to our conversation. It also means showing up on time, behaving courteously and respectfully both to me and to your fellow students, and displaying an investment in the work of the class.

Texts (all texts are available in the Ithaca College bookstore):

Susan Glaspell, Trifles (Xerox)

Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, Signet.

Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Signet. (*Be sure to get this edition!!*)

Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, Viking Penguin.

Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night, Yale.

Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, NAL. (*Be sure to get this edition!!*)

John Guare, House of Blue Leaves, Samuel French.

Sam Shepard, Curse of the Starving Class, Dramatist Play.

Paula Vogel, How I Learned to Drive Dramatist Play.

Warren Leight, Sideman, Grove.

Suzan-Lori Parks, Top Dog/Underdog, TCG.

Sarah Ruhl, Eurydice, Samuel French.

SCHEDULE:

- Aug** 26 **Wed:** Introduction.
 28 **Fri:** American drama: background. Read Trifles, by Susan Glaspell (Xerox)
 31 **Mon:** Scenes 1-5, Glass Menagerie.
- Sept** 2 **Wed:** Read to end, Glass Menagerie.
 4 **Fri:** Glass Menagerie.
 7 **Mon:** **Labor Day: no class.**
 9 **Wed:** Death of a Salesman, Act I.
 11 **Fri:** Death of a Salesman, Act II and Requiem.
 14 **Mon:** Death of a Salesman.
 16 **Wed:** Death of a Salesman.
 18 **Fri:** Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Act I.
 21 **Mon:** Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Act II.
 23 **Wed:** Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: **original Act III.**
 25 **Fri:** Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: **revised (Broadway) Act III.**
 28 **Mon:** Long Day's Journey into Night: Act I.
 30 **Wed:** Long Day's Journey into Night: Act II.
- Oct** 2 **Fri:** Long Day's Journey into Night: Act III.
 5 **Mon:** Long Day's Journey into Night: Act IV.
 7 **Wed:** Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf: Act I.
 9 **Fri:** Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf: Act II.
 12 **Mon:** Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf: Act III.
 14 **Wed:** Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.
 *** **First Essay Due.**
 16 **Fri:** **October break: no class**
 19 **Mon:** **Midterm Exam.**
 21 **Wed:** House of Blue Leaves: Act I.
 23 **Fri:** House of Blue Leaves: Act II.
 26 **Mon:** House of Blue Leaves.
 28 **Wed:** Curse of the Starving Class: Act I.
 30 **Fri:** Curse of the Starving Class: Act II.
- Nov** 2 **Mon:** Curse of the Starving Class.
 4 **Wed:** How I Learned to Drive: read to end.
 6 **Fri:** How I Learned to Drive.
 9 **Mon:** How I Learned to Drive.
 11 **Wed:** How I Learned to Drive.
 13 **Fri:** Sideman: Act I.
 16 **Mon:** Sideman: Act II.
 18 **Wed:** Sideman.
 20 **Fri:** Sideman.
 23, 25, 27: **Thanksgiving break: No class.**
 30 **Mon:** Topdog/Underdog: scenes 1-3.
- Dec** 2 **Wed:** Topdog/Underdog: read to end.
 4 **Fri:** Topdog/Underdog. *** **Second Essay Due.**
 7 **Mon:** Eurydice.

9 Wed: Eurydice.

11 Fri: Eurydice. (**Take-Home Final Due Wed, Dec 16th, 4 p.m.!**)