This course studies the concepts, performance and experiences of "tragedy" and "the tragic." It traces them initially in the West - ancient Greece and Rome - where they seem to have come uniquely into being, not excluding their apparent appearance in such Old Testament texts as Job and in stories like Isaac's putative sacrifice or Jephthah and, more centrally to later western tradition, in those of John the Baptist and Christ's Passion. We then follow them into early and modern Europe and their later re-use and re-experience especially in contemporary Africa and the African diaspora. The course will trace forms and conditions of early creation of the experience of tragedy, the social and political contexts in which it occurred and the language, poetry and sometimes music of its earliest texts. We consider the situation of 5th-4th century Athens, the Peloponnesian Wars, and the development of Greek political philosophy. Aeschylus's Oresteia and Sophocles's Oedipus the King and Antigone will be early prime examples. Here, we look especially at Plato's thoughts on the (especially tragic) poet's place in or exclusion from civic life - through his comments in The Republic and Symposium - and at Aristotle's theory of tragedy, as a response to Plato and establishment, for the West, of the poet's civic importance. So we shall also look at Ola Rotimi's response to Sophocles in his The Gods Are Not to Blame, at Silvain Bemba's use of Antigone in his Noces posthumes de Santigone, and at Euripides Bacchae with Wole Soyinka's response to it in The Bacchia of Euripides. It is here that Matthew's version of the Passion (maybe even using Bach?) will come in, since Soyinka's play ends with what is effectively a commentary on it, but also Job, because much African diasporic tragedy makes much of the missionary role in colonization, and the Book of Job is almost canonical in such usage. But these later uses can also much help us understand the Biblical stories. Too, the tragic idea was questioned in Euripides's Alcestis, and quite changed in Sutherland's riff on the same theme in Edysa. So we shall here also mention Cicero's great legal defense of the importance of the poet to the well-being of ordered society (Pro Archia), picking up in its ways on both Plato and Aristotle. We then look at the next great flourishing, in the European 16th and 17th centuries, of what we continue to think of as tragedy, in the tradition made by the Greeks. Then, too, social and political upheavals preceded the establishment of a powerful political philosophy (Hobbes and Locke). The "redemption" of tragedy helped provoke deeply fraught debates about the very concept and experience of tragedy in civic life and, more generally, human being. Now, especially, the development of a new tragic drama was accompanied by an efflorescence of aesthetic theories and political thought. The same was true in the German lands just before and during the Romantic era, and elsewhere in Europe later. This political-historical background will not overwhelm course time, but will be observed by the instructor and teaching assistants in order to give our study of the selected texts points of departure and constant reference.

During and since the European Renaissance, tragedy has usually been explained as a performance of some universal constraining reality in which humanity is caught, or of some eternal and ubiquitous limitations by which the human spirit is wholly bound. The course suggests that such claims have served to make western tragedy a "cultural instrument" for particular kinds of aesthetic and political relation to different cultures. Over the last four decades African and Caribbean writers in particular have turned this "instrument" "back" writing major works that are political and aesthetic commentaries on that western tradition and its impositions, as well as on their own cultures. The course will take constant account of this phenomenon and such writings, and will indeed place extra emphasis on this contemporary transcultural phenomenon. Caribbean and African writings will be set constantly against European writings, as part of an ongoing "conversation." Later writings will be set in a context of aspects of Hegel's
writings on tragedy (as presented by the instructor), Nietzsche’s germinal *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, and Walcott’s “What the Twilight Says.”

Bookstore orders:

Aeschylus, Oresteia. Tr. Fagles. Penguin: 0-14-044338-9


Sophocles, Three Theban Plays. Tr. Fagles. Penguin: 0-14-044425-4

Aristotle. Poetics [etc.]. Penguin: 0-14-0444155-7

Rotimi, O. The Gods Are Not to Blame. [xerox]

Nietzsche, F. The Birth of Tragedy Dover Thrift: 0-486-28515-4

Walcott, Derek. “What the Twilight Says” [xerox]


Soyinka, W. The Bacchae of Euripides. Norton: 0-393-00789-8

Sutherland, E. T. Marriage of Anansewa & Edufa [xerox]

Shakespeare, W. King Lear. Ed. R. Fraser. NAL: 0-451-52410-1


Carlin, M. Not Now, Sweet Desdemona. [xerox]


Brecht, Mother Courage. Ed. Bentley Grove: 0-8021-3082-8

Césaire, A. A Season in the Congo [xerox]

Clark, J.P. Song of a Goat. [xerox]

Hussein, Ebrahim. Kinjeketile [xerox]

Bemba, Sylvain. Noces posthumes de Santigone (English) [xerox]

Sofola, 'Zulu. Wedlock of the Gods [xerox]

Aidoo, Ama Ata. Dilemma of a Ghost & Anowa. Longman: 0-582-27602-0
Syllabus:

Tu. Sept. 6th: Tragedy and its history (Discussion)


Tu. Sept. 13th: Wages of sin: The Book of Job

Th. Sept. 15th: The Book of Job

Tu. Sept. 20th: History and politics: Aeschylus, Eumenides

Th. Sept. 22nd: Sophocles, Oedipus tyrannus

Tu. Sept. 27th: understanding tragedy: Aristotle, Poetics

Th. Sept. 29th: Rotimi, The Gods Are Not to Blame

SUBMIT 1st ESSAY

Tu. Oct. 4th: Sophocles, Antigone

Th. Oct. 6th: Bemba, Noces posthumes de Santigone (Eng.)

Tu. Oct. 11th: Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy; Walcott, “What the Twilight Says”

Th. Oct. 13th: Euripides, The Bacchae

Tu. Oct. 18th: Euripides, The Bacchae; Soyinka, The Bacchae of Euripides


Tu. Oct. 25th: MIDTERM

Th. Oct. 27th: Euripides, Alcestis; Sutherland, Edufu

Tu. Nov. 1st: Euripides, Alcestis; Sutherland, Edufu

Th. Nov. 3rd: Shakespeare, King Lear

Tu. Nov. 8th: Shakespeare, King Lear; Othello

Understanding modern tragedy

Th. Nov. 10th: Shakespeare, Othello; Carlin, Not Now, Sweet Desdemona

Tu. Nov. 15th: Tragedy, myth and history: Lorca, Blood Wedding

Th. Nov. 17th: Tragedy and history: Brecht, Mother Courage

Tu. Nov. 22nd: A Conversation with the West: Clark, Song of a Goat

SUBMIT SECOND ESSAY
Th. Nov. 24th: The tragedy of the West: Aidoo, *Anowa*

Tu. Nov. 29th: Tragedy against the West: Hussein, *Kinjeketile*


Tu. Dec. 6th: A politics of tragedy? Césaire, *Season in the Congo*

Th. Dec. 8th: Césaire, *Season in the Congo*

Tu. Dec. 13th: The uses of tragedy

*SUBMIT FINAL EXAM*