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ENG 5006-001: The Death of Character in Modern English and Irish Drama

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ENGLISH 5006 – The Death of Character in Modern English and Irish Drama

Fall 2006 / Section 001
Monday 7-9:30 PM
Coleman Hall 3159

Dr. Chris Wixson
Coleman Hall 3871
Office Hours: MW 1-2:30
(Or by appointment)

Required Textbooks:  *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*, ed. Lee Jacobus  
*Three Plays*, Noel Coward  
*Heartbreak House*, George Bernard Shaw  
*Plays*, George Bernard Shaw  
*The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, Oscar Wilde  
*Peter Pan and Other Plays*, J.M Barrie  
*Complete Plays*, Sarah Kane  
*Closer*, Patrick Marber  
*Ashes to Ashes*, Harold Pinter  
*Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett

On Reserve:  *The Marrying of Ann Leete*, Harley Granville Barker

Xeroxed Selections:  “The Death of Character”, Elinor Fuchs  
“The Alarmed Vision”, Lawrence Langer  
“Breath” and “Come and Go”, Samuel Beckett

*Etymology*: Middle English *caracter*, from Middle French *caractère*, from Latin *character* denoting a mark, distinctive quality, from Greek *charakter*, a stamping tool, from *charassein* to scratch, engrave.

One of Aristotle’s six necessary elements for tragedy, Character is a central organizing principle in drama and the primary conduit for the audience in terms of emotional investment and critical analysis. Nonetheless, while it was once understood as providing the motion of classical dramatic structure, many twentieth-century avant-garde theater artists perceived Character as essentially out of gas. As such, one prominent scholar has characterized the modern in drama and theater as the age of "the death of Character". Far from being a semester-long autopsy, this course will interrogate this obituary, tracing how the haunting figure of the character persists as a locus for anxieties about identity, politics, existence, and even representation itself.

The purpose of the course is twofold. One, it will offer a sampling of modern and contemporary English and Irish drama. Obviously, this is not in any sense an exhaustive survey course, but a discussion-based seminar that will ideally provide those new to the field with places to get acquainted and those who have some background in it opportunities to move deeper. We will concentrate the bulk of the course on the first half of the period, roughly from the 1890s to the second world war. The last third of the course will focus on major plays in the contemporary canon that gesture back to this early period in myriad ways. (Potential participants should be advised that some of the more recent plays will contain language and subject material that can be graphic and shocking.) Second, the course will explore the construction (and deconstruction) of Character through the century as we trace key aesthetic shifts in British theater and explore some engaging dramatic works.
Course Policies

Attendance

Mandatory.

If you become suddenly ill (think Bubonic plague) or the victim of emergency circumstances, please email me or a member of the seminar as soon as possible and stay in touch. Excused absences are accompanied by appropriate legal or medical documentation. Any unexcused absence will seriously undermine your success in this course.

Class Participation

Mandatory.

Think of our meetings as potluck conversations; everyone simply must contribute. Participation in a graduate seminar means careful preparation of the reading, frequent contributions to discussions, and engaged critical thought. You should come to each session armed with observations, opinions, questions, and insights, ready to take an active part in the ongoing dialogue about the course materials and your projects. What you bring to share need not be written out but should refer to specific passages in the reading as the basis for formulating a broader discussion topic or questions. In addition, for the most part, we will not be spending time in class going over the biographies of the playwrights so part of each week’s preparation should include a glance at them from reliable sources, including the introductions in some of our textbook editions.

Besides preparation, class participation also means responding constructively, respectfully, and energetically to what other seminarians share, that you work actively to stretch yourself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. In short, you are expected to work actively to contribute to the class's overall movement and to strive to promote dialogue between yourself and other seminarians. I TAKE THIS GRADE VERY SERIOUSLY.

If you plan on doing any of the following things, you should probably drop this class:
1. Remaining in your comfort zone and not talking in class and justifying the silence by saying you are 'just the type of person who likes to sit back and listen to what everyone else has to say.' Certainly, listening is a premium in this class and is a crucial human skill. But real listening only happens in an exchange. Letting everyone else do the talking means that you're not really listening because you are busy keeping yourself safe. Of course, this 'safety' is an illusion.

2. Remaining in your comfort zone and not talking in class and justifying the silence because you assume that you don't know enough to participate in class and other people (especially those who talk) do. To approach the class and the work in a way that suggests that one can speak only about what is already known is not only dangerous, but it's also intellectually lazy.
3. Complaining when everyone does talk that it's a waste of time and inefficient. Or remaining so married to ways you have been taught in other courses and disciplines that you see as a 'tangent' any meaningful, principled discussion that doesn't necessarily mention the word "theme" or "symbolism." Just because the normative educational culture of a nation afraid more than anything else that its students will learn to think divides classroom activity into binaries of 'on-task' and 'off-task' doesn't mean that that is a useful or even humane way of doing things.

I will serve as a resource and guide and occasionally cranky curmudgeon, but it's your class to shape and energize. Generally, I will not speak for the first half hour or so of each session. Individually and collectively, this course carries with it a responsibility to drive the inquiry and conversation.

**Other Sundry Matters**

*If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.*

*The grade breakdown is as follows:

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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Research Project</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pearls</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance Piece</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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*I am assuming each of you will pop by my office at least a few times during the semester to discuss the progress of your thinking and research. I am regularly available to meet with you during my scheduled office hours or by appointment. To make an appointment, speak to me after class or contact me via email. You should get into the habit of checking your email daily. There will be a class list on which I will post changes in assignments (if they arise), course-related announcements, and talking points.*

*Any paper with your name on it signifies that you are the author--that the wording and major ideas are yours, with exceptions indicated by either quotation marks and/or citations. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use (appropriation and/or imitation) of others' materials (words and ideas). Evidence of plagiarism will result in one or more of the following: a failing grade for the assignment, an F in the course, and a report filed with the Judicial Affairs Office.*

**Performances** -- Since this is a course in dramatic literature, it is essential to incorporate the experience of performance whenever possible. While we may also engage in impromptu in-class readings, we are lucky enough to have two local productions relevant to our concerns. The EIU Theater Department is doing a production of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming.* I hope that any of you who wish to join me on either November 4th or 12th will head to the Krannert Center at the University of Illinois for the theater department’s production of Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa.* In lieu of either trip, you may choose to “review”, in consultation with me, a cinematic version of one of two revolutionary mid-century English plays, Peter Shaffer’s *Equus* or John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger,* both held by Booth Library. Following the performance, you will be asked to submit to our class list a 1-2 page single-spaced writeup, discussing how our discussion of the play’s thematic points and dramatic strategies are furthered and/or complicated by what you experience at the theater.
“Pearls” – In order to insure quality discussions, you will be scheduled twice during the semester to prepare short (as in no longer than five minutes or so) informal contributions on a specific area of inquiry resonant in relation to the week’s readings. During our first class meeting, I will ask you to select two topics, one from the “Criticism/Theory” group and one from the “History” group. The “Pearls” should be telescopic in structure, that is, begin widely and gradually narrowing in focus until we arrive at some insight and some specific questions so that others can continue the discussion. As you can see, these topics are very broad, giving you a high degree of flexibility in terms of what you feel is relevant and resonant with the play(s) under discussion. These should not be conceptualized as exhaustive reports or formal presentations. There should be no handouts – guide us with some background towards productive ways of interpreting the play(s) for that day. My advice would be to read the play(s) first and then do some research on the topic, looking for “pearls” to share. When you are working on a critical article or theoretical term, concisely summarize the argument of the article as a whole or define the term. Then discuss and encourage the rest of us to discuss the ways in which the play(s) under discussion that day speak to or against the argument, speak to and problematize the theoretical concept. Overall, they should be useful, engaging, and ultimately dialogic in nature; yet they need not perform interpretive alchemy and should not reach any definitive conclusions. Be stimulating and provocative in BOTH content and style as you direct our inquiry into these plays.

Research Project Components: Option A: One article-length paper

Develop an article-length (at least 18-20 pages) paper dealing with some primary text or set of primary texts from the period under discussion. The primary text(s) may include but are not limited to texts read in class, and I can offer suggestions for primary texts that might interest you. This should be a well-argued analysis that could conceivably be submitted for publication to a scholarly journal. The essay must cite and situate itself in relationship to relevant scholarly work, using correct MLA format, but what’s most important is that the essay develop a clear and persuasive argument of your own. If you select this option, you will need to turn in a written proposal and bibliography (including both primary and secondary texts) by March 8. It will consist of two parts, a three-to four page narrative in which you outline your proposed project and explain your preliminary research results, and an annotated bibliography listing eight or more sources (outside the course readings) relevant to your project. The final paper will be due on May 3. I will be happy to read and comment on drafts, outlines etc. but the latest I will accept a draft for review is April 26.

Option B: Two Conference Length Papers

Develop two conference-length papers (at least 10 pages each) dealing with some primary text or set of primary texts from the course. These should each be a well-argued analysis that could conceivably be submitted for presentation at a national conference. The essays must cite and situate themselves in relation to relevant scholarly work, using correct MLA format, but what’s most important is that the essays each develop a clear and persuasive argument of your own. If you select this option, your first paper will be due on March 8; the second paper will be due on May 3. I will be happy to read and comment on drafts, outlines etc. but the latest I will accept a draft for review with the first paper is March 1 and for the second is April 26. The essays should each put forth a sophisticated argument, giving consideration to recent criticism and showing an understanding of the literary and cultural contexts in which the text was produced. Six sources are required.
**Final Presentation:** In the last couple weeks of the term, each seminarian will present a précis of either one of their conference-length papers or their article-length paper. Essentially, you will explain and support the main line of argument and field questions. The presentation should last approximately ten minutes.

*I expect you to touch base with me frequently (either via email or in person) on the progress of your project.* (Starting early is always the smart way to go.)

**Some Reliable Historical Sources:**

Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas*
Jean Chothia, *English Drama of the Early Modern Period, 1890-1940*
P.F. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000*
Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama*
Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale eds., *British Theatre between the Wars 1918-39*
Dan Reballato, *1956 and All That*
Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*
Michelene Wandor, *Post-War British Drama*
Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room* (on contemporary English playwrights)

**Two Reliable Online Resources:**

Richard Dietrich’s modern survey: [http://chuma.cas.usf.edu/~dietrich/britishdrama.htm](http://chuma.cas.usf.edu/~dietrich/britishdrama.htm)

**In addition, film versions of many of our plays are available through Booth.**

**Schedule of Assignments**

THIS SCHEDULE MAY CHANGE AT ANY TIME ACCORDING TO THE NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF THE CLASS. MAKE SURE YOU ALWAYS BRING IT WITH YOU FOR MODIFICATION.

**August**

21 Introductory Comments
   Beckett’s “Breath”, “Come and Go”
   “Feet” / “Detonation Synthesis of Modern Drama”

**September**

4 NO CLASS -- HAPPY LABOR DAY!
11 The Logocentric Self and its Discontents
   Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*
   *A Woman of No Importance*

**Suggestions for further reading:**
- Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*
- Dion Boucicault’s *London Assurance*
- Wilde’s *The Ideal Husband, Lady Windermere’s Fan*
- Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

18 Shaw’s *Man and Superman* (skip Act Three and Shaw’s Preface)
   Barker’s *The Marrying of Ann Leete* (handout)

**Suggestions for further reading:**
- Shaw’s *Candida, You Never Can Tell, Mrs. Warren’s Profession*
- Elizabeth Robins’ *Votes for Women*
- Cicely Hamilton’s *Diana of Dobson’s*
- St. John Hankin’s *The Return of the Prodigal*
- Section on the “New Woman” in the Jacobus Anthology

25 “Depth Charges” – Verticality of Character
   Coward’s *Private Lives*
   Barrie’s *Peter Pan*
   Ann Wilson, “Hauntings: Anxiety, Technology, and Gender in *Peter Pan*”
   **Found at:** http://www.utpjournals.com/product/md/434/gender6.html

**Suggestions for further reading:**
- Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, Coward’s *Design for Living*

October 2 Shaw’s *Heartbreak House*

Valerie Murrenus, “Hostages of Heartbreak: The Women of *Heartbreak House*”,

**Suggestions for further reading:**
- Noel Coward’s *Hay Fever, Cavalcade*
- Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard, Three Sisters*

9 “Hauntology” – The Spectral Character
   Barrie’s *Mary Rose*
   Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*
   Barker, “The Ghosts of War” (Reserve, *British Theatre Between the Wars*)

**Suggestions for further reading:**
- Coward’s *Post-Mortem*, Lingley’s *Outward Bound*

16 Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, reread “Breath” and “Come and Go”

In an interview, Nobel prizewinning Irish playwright Samuel Beckett once said “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”
**Suggestions for further reading: Beckett’s *Endgame*, *Catastrophe*, *Happy Days*
Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*, John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*
(GOOD film versions available of both at Booth)

23 Harold Pinter’s *Ashes to Ashes*
Lawrence Langer, “The Alarmed Vision” (Handout)
**Essay #1 or Proposal Due**

**Suggestions for further reading: Anything by Harold Pinter, Michael Frayn’s *Copenhagen***

30 The National Character
Churchill’s *Cloud 9*

**For those not doing presentations tonight, choose a figure from Act I of *Cloud Nine* and compare this to the same character in Act II. What has changed? What has remained the same? How does this relate to what you consider to be the overall theme of the play? OR Choose one character from act one and another from act two Churchill designates to be played by the same actor. What connection(s) does this make? How does it relate to the larger thematic point of the play?**

**Suggestions for further reading: Stoppard’s *Arcadia***

**BRIAN FRIEL’S *DANCING AT LUGHNASA* – Krannert Center November 2-4<sup>th</sup>; 8-12<sup>th</sup>**

November 6 Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*

**Suggestions for further reading: Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island*, John Millington Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, Plays by Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats, Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars, Juno and the Paycock*, Friel’s *Translations*, Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, Frank McGuinness’ *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme***

**HAROLD PINTER’S *THE HOMECOMING* – Village Theater November 10-14<sup>th</sup>**

13 Marber’s *Closer*

**Suggestions for further reading: Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*, Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and F**king, *Some Explicit Polaroids*, recent film version of *Closer* (Marber’s screenplay and the acting are both uneven)**

HAPPY THANKSGIVING!!!

27 Kane’s *Blasted, Cleansed*

December 4 Presentations / **Essay #2 or Long Paper** Due
First Week’s Assignment:

In his Preface to the 1723 edition of "The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare", Alexander Pope wrote that "Every single character in Shakespear is as much an Individual, as those in Life itself; it is impossible to find any two alike; ... had all the Speeches been printed without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have apply'd them with certainty to every speaker."

Here, Pope implies the distinct in-dividuality (hence the distinct unity) of each one of the Bard's characters yet also suggests a definition of character itself. One of the tasks facing editors of Shakespeare's works is a lack of consistent speech tags. As such, an editor must look closely at dramatic text in order to distinguish it and assign it to various speakers. In doing so, assumptions are made about what constitutes a "character". In order to surface some of our own assumptions about character, this assignment asks you to assume the role of a director of Sarah Kane's play "4:48 Psychosis". As auditions approach, you need to answer the following questions: how many actors will you need? What are the roles that need to be cast and how are the lines to be divided and assigned? In other words, what are the different voices and bodies needed to produce this play?

Keep in mind that this is a not a “puzzle” with a definitive answer that, in Sherlock Holmesian fashion, can be deduced from the text. Rather, every decision you make in this assignment is an interpretive one. Make your choices and be prepared to justify them. One caveat: since the diffuse subject is one characteristic of English drama post-Beckett, your choices cannot be either “one” or “two". (More about this in class.)

Please have a single-spaced one to two page abstract of your choices and your experience of the process of the assignment to turn in next Monday. I would ask you to avoid "researching" the play to find out what choices other productions have made. (In fact, the "official" Royal Court production was, in my humble opinion, botched.)

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“Detonation Synthesis of All Modern Theater” (1915)
By Francesco Cangiullo

Character

A Bullet

Road at night, cold, deserted.

A minute of silence – A gunshot.

Curtain

---------------------------------------------
Opening stage direction from “Feet” (1915)
By Filippo Marinetti

A curtain edged in black should be raised to about the height of a man’s stomach. The public sees only legs in action. The actors must try to give the greatest expression to the attitudes and movements of their lower extremities.