

Matt Usner
Harold Washington College
musner@ccc.edu

Introduction to Drama: Truth

This course introduces students to the rich history of Western dramatic literature, beginning with its origins in classical Greece and ending with its diverse contemporary forms.

Table of Contents

The contents of this module are as follows:

- Theme
- Potential teaching problems
- Learning objectives
- Texts
- Syllabus
- Activities and assignments
- Teaching techniques for selected texts
- Suggested discussion and essay questions
- Links to selected secondary materials
- Supplemental reading sources
- Expanded reading list

Theme

The theme of this course is: “What is truth?” Because the definition of truth is as complex and open to exploration and debate as it is timeless, it is a valuable topic for academic inquiry, one that naturally invites students’ varying interpretations. This theme is particularly relevant and rewarding because it engages students’ critical thinking skills. Analyzing literary characters and their deeply held belief systems provides students with a natural springboard for examining and evaluating their own beliefs. For many students, this may be their first encounter with introspective analysis, questioning things that they naturally believe to be true. Part of their enlightenment process is to realize that being entitled to their own beliefs necessitates challenges to those beliefs, from others and from themselves.

Truth, as many of the characters in these plays illustrate, is shaped by individual perception. We often believe a truth to be an objective reality, when in fact it may only be partially true. Biased,

inaccurate perceptions may very well color any sense of absolute truth. It is vital for our students to realize that their own belief systems, which they may think to be stable and objective, are the results of a multifaceted cultural context that shapes their knowledge and assumptions—family, education, religion, geography, socioeconomic status, and so on. Again, students’ critical thinking skills are called upon to examine not only the beliefs of others—whether it be a literary character, a politician, or a media pundit—but their own personal truths as well.

Often the protagonists in these plays search for a truth that is framed within opposite forces, such as material wealth vs. spiritual integrity, entrenched beliefs vs. new knowledge, common good vs. self-interest, and individual choice vs. social or spiritual conformity. *Oedipus*, for example, in his search for the truth of his personal history, tests the boundaries between man’s free will and the Greek gods’ prophesies. The allegorical Everyman, in the medieval play of the same name, searches for truth, in the form of a righteous, morally admirable life, on his journey toward the grave. Shakespeare’s enchanted forest in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* features two pairs of lovers whose sense of truth and identity is magically altered, giving way to questions about the fickleness of “true” love. *The Misanthrope*, another comedy, introduces readers to Alceste, who loathes the human tendency not to tell others the truth but to speak what they hope to hear, thus losing our “true” selves to social graces. O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms*, as a final example, combines love and tragedy for a bitter New England family whose members lack any semblance of honest, genuine relationships. In each of the plays for this course, just as in our own lives, any notion of truth encompasses a personal journey we each take during our lives. It is the journey of interpreting and making meaning of the world we inhabit, one of humanity’s enduring universal themes.

Potential Teaching Problems

1. *Potential problem:* Because many students will have little prior knowledge of dramatic literature and, more generally, of world history, they may feel intimidated by the challenge of studying 2,500 years of theater.

Potential solutions: It is important to emphasize to students that the course can only scratch the surface of drama’s rich history. The goal isn’t a comprehensive study of 2,500 years of drama; it’s a representative overview of the genre. The hope is that students will leave with an appreciation of drama’s history and a curiosity about related avenues to explore, such as their school’s theater group or further readings from a playwright they enjoyed.

Early in the semester, a useful instructional tool is a PowerPoint presentation (most likely with a timeline and appropriate maps) that highlights a few significant aspects of each historical period. This type of overview will help students begin to view drama’s history as individual manageable chunks.

Be honest with students; they will have moments of confusion about past cultures, archaic language, and ever-changing stage techniques—that confusion is part of the learning process. They need to know that what’s most important in an introductory course is absorbing the major thrust of each dramatic age and seeing how each play read in class illustrates some of those significant aspects.

2. *Potential problem:* Students may feel that they can’t relate to non-contemporary works, especially those from antiquity.

Potential solutions: This is a great opportunity to emphasize the universality of the course theme: what is truth? Though the settings and character names may be unfamiliar to students, the larger, more abstract issues that confront the characters are very similar to the ones faced by us in the twenty-first

century: How do I know that the truths I believe are indeed true? What aspects of my cultural context influence my belief system? How do I deal with others whose belief systems clash with my own?

It may also be helpful to dispel students' possible complaints about the plays being boring. The fact is that many students identify things created before their lifetimes as stuffy, unrealistic, and incomprehensible. Plays can be "advertised" to students before they read them, and they'll see that many have elements that are as unique or shocking as anything in our own popular culture: incest, self-inflicted blindness, a mother drunk with passion tearing apart her own son, a crafty aristocratic man who keeps lovers in both the city and the country, family members named after genitalia, and so on.

3. *Potential problem*: Since many students are steeped in our society's visual culture, they may have trouble reading plays, which provide exposition through character dialogue and stage directions instead of straightforward narrative description.

Potential solutions: An obvious complement to reading any play is to view videos of theatrical productions. I find it particularly helpful to intersperse the reading of any play with video selections. This way, while reading, students can consider their own imagery of the play in relation to a stage director's rendering of it.

It may be also be helpful to have students view multiple stage versions of the same play, perhaps from different decades. This allows students a glimpse of how widely any drama can be interpreted and brought to life on the stage. You can also choose to focus on one specific scene and view multiple staged versions of it. For example, students can compare and contrast multiple versions of Puck's final speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The textbook used for this course has a very useful directory of film and stage versions of each play it contains.

Viewing live theater is perhaps the best solution to this potential problem. Students should attend at least one live theater performance during the course, as an entire group if possible.

Learning Objectives

The central goals of this course are for students:

- to read actively, discuss thoughtfully, and write critically about a wide range of drama that spans from classical Greece to the present
- to compare and contrast major theatrical movements in drama and their historical and cultural contexts
- to identify and analyze the major elements of drama, including plot, character, setting, dialogue, symbolism, theme, and spectacle
- to identify and analyze major genres of drama, including tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy
- to define and utilize key theatrical terms, including historical periods, genres, structural elements, and staging devices and techniques, that will enable articulate discussion about drama
- to understand literature as a cultural construct that produces competing interpretations
- to design and perform a short collaborative staging of a selected dramatic scene
- to appreciate drama as a lively art that has reflected and engaged humanity for thousands of years

Texts

Selections from Jacobus, *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Drama*
Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*
Euripides, *The Bacchae*
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
Excerpts from Aristotle, *Poetics*
Plautus, *Menaechmi*
Anonymous, *Everyman*
Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
Jonson, *The Masque of Blackness*
Molière, *The Misanthrope*
Ibsen, *A Doll's House*
Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*
O'Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*
Beckett, *Endgame*

These selections are described in greater detail below.

Selections from Lee A. Jacobus. *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Drama*. 5th edition. Boston: Bedford, 2005.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*—One man’s choice to challenge the power of fate. This classical work provides students with a useful cultural context for ancient Greece and its citizenry’s relationship with their gods. It also introduces students to the foundations of tragedy, with which they can compare later forms of the genre.

Euripides, *The Bacchae* (full text at <http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/bacchan.html>)—The passionate and possibly misguided frenzy of those who follow the god Dionysus. Along with *Oedipus*, this work helps students construct drama’s origins in Greece. This play, in particular, introduces students to Dionysus and the important role he played in the intermingling between theater and theology in Greece.

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*—A bawdy example of the Greek Old Comedy that combines buffoonery with underlying themes of war, gender, and social and political power. Students may be slightly shocked at the play’s coarse nature, including its numerous sexual references. This play examines how firmly held rational and moral beliefs can be easily swayed by physical impulses.

Aristotle, excerpts from *Poetics*—The foundation of literary criticism that offers students theoretical approaches to Greek tragedy and comedy, including conventions of plot and structure.

Plautus, *Menaechmi* (full text at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Pl.+Men.+1>)—A Roman comedy that is an early example of the mistaken identity theme found in numerous subsequent comedies, including Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* and Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Anonymous, *Everyman*—An allegorical examination of our inevitable journey toward death. Probably more than any other play, *Everyman* fosters connections with our own lives, since it reminds us that each day is a step toward death, and this realization brings natural reflection on the quality and worth of our existence. On a literary level, this work introduces students to the medieval morality play, with which they can contrast Greek views of both religion and drama.

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—A fanciful tale that challenges notions of physical appearance and questions the whimsies of love. This is one of Shakespeare's most popular and accessible comedies. What's most useful for students is the underlying serious theme that emerges in the play—that illusions, like the dramas we read, can teach us many things about reality.

Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Blackness*—A Jacobean masque that examines “dark” and “fair” faces and their implications for one’s “true” identity. Most likely the concept of the *masque* will be a new one to students, one that tends to get little coverage in Renaissance drama. Because masques were basically multimedia events held for royalty, students are introduced to a very distinct relationship between drama and the larger society in which it is produced.

Molière, *The Misanthrope*—A French comedy that asks a difficult question: If you tell someone what they want to hear, have you adopted a fake persona that is not the “true you”? This comedy often evokes real-world connections with students, given its emphasis on appearances and pretenses.

Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*—A seemingly “conventional” marriage is the focus of this realist drama, whose purpose was to assert, in the words of Ibsen's biographer Michael Meyer, “that the primary duty of anyone was to find out who he or she really was and to become that person.” Although Ibsen's work is generally cited as the rise of modern drama, this play, most likely will not be as shocking to modern students as it was to late nineteenth-century viewers, but it still offers them an examination of how marginalized voices can challenge and ultimately alter prevailing social ideologies.

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*—A comedy that satirizes the mores of the English aristocracy. Underlying the play's wit is an examination of how superficial desires can alter, or compromise, one's sense of reality. This play invites natural comparisons with *The Misanthrope*.

Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*—A drama about the theatrical arts that suggests that the only fixed truth anyone knows is that objective truth is nonexistent and shared reality is impossible to know. Students can view this as a later companion piece to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its emphasis on the play within the play and its blurring of illusion and reality.

Eugene O'Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*—The members of a modern family and their tragic relationships with each other and with the land of which they are a part. Students should notice some very obvious similarities between this play and Greek tragedies, such as

Oedipus Rex, but the differences, such as the American setting and the common farmer, Ephraim Cabot, as protagonist, are equally as illuminating.

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*—A Cold War-era absurdist drama that questions conventional notions of truth, reality, and meaning, suggesting that none of the three is knowable in the modern world. This play challenges many students because of its seemingly unstable and unresolved nature, but it serves as a useful example of how drama can elevate philosophy over spectacle.

More than anything, these diverse selections should offer students thought-provoking links from drama's past to its present.

Syllabus

Weeks 1, 2, and 3: Greek and Roman drama (*Oedipus Rex*, *The Bacchae*, *Lysistrata*, excerpts from *Poetics*, and *Menaechmi*)

- The Greeks and their gods
- Dionysian rituals
- The Greek stage
- Roman drama

Week 4: Medieval drama (*Everyman*)

- The role of the church
- Miracle plays, mystery plays, and morality plays
- The medieval stage

Weeks 5, 6, 7, and 8: Renaissance drama (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Masque of Blackness*)

- Rediscovery of Roman design
- Elizabethan stage and professional actors
- Shakespeare and the question of authorship
- Masques

Weeks 9 and 10: Restoration drama (*The Misanthrope*)

- The rebirth of drama
- French comedy
- The comedy of manners

Weeks 11 and 12: Nineteenth-century drama (*A Doll's House* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*)

- Technical innovations for the stage
- Melodrama
- The rise of realism

Weeks 13, 14, 15, and 16: Modern drama (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Endgame*)

- Changing forms of realism
- Social realism

- Naturalism
- Expressionism
- Surrealism
- Changing stage design

Activities and Assignments

Analysis Essays

You will have the opportunity to write four analysis essays, each 3–5 typed pages. Generally, essay assignments will ask you to compare and contrast elements of at least two different plays. Specific assignment sheets that detail each essay and its grading criteria will be distributed at least two weeks in advance of due dates.

Mini-Analyses

You will have the opportunity to complete ten mini-analyses, each no longer than one typed page. Your five best scores will count toward your final grade. You may do all ten mini-analyses, but you are not required to. The goal of each mini-analysis is for you to interpret and to explain the significance of a particular quoted passage as it relates to a play's plot, characters, and themes. Specific assignment sheets that detail each mini-analysis and its grading criteria will be distributed when we begin each play.

Small-Group Staging and Accompanying Essay

You will work collaboratively with your peers to perform a short staging of a scene from one of the plays we read. Groups can consist of two to four members. You're free to form your own group, although I won't hesitate to assign a group if need be. I will work with you to assign a short (5–10 minute) scene. Once scenes are assigned, your group must plan to meet with me at least a week before your scheduled performance date to discuss your ideas for the scene, including basic props and informal costumes. Then you will need to meet several times with your group to rehearse your scene. This is not a performance class, so I am not looking for acting ability. I am, though, looking for engagement, effort, and an understanding of the character and the scene as they relate to the play as a whole. It should be obvious that your group has thought carefully about the scene and made specific choices about the scene and the characters in it. Strive to memorize your lines completely, although it is fine to have note cards with your lines on them in case you have a moment of forgetfulness. An accompanying essay of at least two typed pages is also required for this assignment and will be due one week after your performance. In it, you should analyze the scene in relation to the play as a whole and describe how your voice, movement, and costume helped convey your character's persona.

Reading Quizzes

You will have twelve short *unannounced* reading quizzes during the semester. Each quiz will cover that day's assigned reading, so it is essential that you come to each class having thoroughly read the required pages. Quizzes will be short-answer questions about characters and significant events in the plays and vocabulary terms defined and discussed in our reading. If you read the required material thoroughly, you will do well on the quizzes. Quizzes will be given at the beginning of the class period, and if you arrive after the quiz is completed you will not be able to take it.

Attending Live Theater

You will have the opportunity to earn extra credit points by attending a live theater performance during the semester and then writing a synopsis and reaction to it. There is a multitude of theater events in the city, many of them very low-cost or even free, and I will be happy to help you select an event if you would like my assistance.

Teaching Techniques for Selected Texts

Oedipus Rex* and *The Bacchae

Beginning an introductory drama course with ancient Greece may cause some students to feel “drama culture shock.” A typical student may think of drama in the twenty-first century as something relevant only to “artsy” people or highbrows. Beginning then with Greece, it must be emphasized to students that drama held a strong connection to spirituality across class divisions. One possible solution to this “drama culture shock” is to begin any discussion of Greek drama with Greek mythology, since many students will have at least a cursory background of popular myths and the major characters in the Greek pantheon. I frequently read passages from Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, a very accessible work that gives students a basic foundation from which to work. Within this discussion one topic merits special emphasis: Dionysus. He functions well as the nexus between Greek spirituality and the origins of drama. Once students know that Greek drama originated with religious celebrations in honor of Dionysus, they gain some sense of the interconnectedness between drama and Greek spirituality.

Everyman

This morality play is fairly straightforward on a comprehension level, although students should have some familiarity with its allegorical structure before delving into it. This is a good opportunity to provide students with a concise literary definition of *allegory* and to examine its usage in *Everyman*. Students should understand that the characters (Good Deeds, Knowledge, Discretion, etc.) are not specific individuals but the actual qualities themselves. *The Bedford Introduction to Drama* makes a good point about the connection between allegory and morality in this play: “The allegorical way of thinking derived from the medieval faith that everything in the world had a moral meaning.”

A Midsummer Night's Dream

This play is one of Shakespeare’s more accessible works, and students tend to enjoy its fanciful movements. Some students may take Puck’s final “No more yielding but a dream” passage as a cue that the play has no real meaning outside of humorous whimsy. This allows for discussion of the play’s true theme—that illusion can teach us a great deal about reality.

Although most students have had at least some contact with Shakespeare during high school, comprehending his Elizabethan language remains a challenge. Teachers have developed a multitude of techniques to overcome this obstacle, and many great resources can be found online. Lisa Handzus has written a very useful article about the array of teaching techniques, using *Macbeth* as her example. The article can be accessed at: <http://www.gardner-webb.edu/english/Best/Handzus.html>.

A Doll's House

Today's students may have some difficulty appreciating how shocking and challenging this play was in its first production in 1879. Students will most likely sense the confinement Nora suffers, but they may also have some trouble realizing how defiant her act of leaving Torvald was, given the play's cultural context. If this is the case, it's a question worth pondering as a class: why aren't we shocked by Nora's actions at the end of the play? This can provide an opportunity for a lesson on late nineteenth-century gender roles and the significant events that changed those roles, as well as prevailing ideologies about those roles throughout the twentieth century.

Desire Under the Elms

Students will probably be most intrigued by this play's similarities to Greek tragedies, although to get to that level of analysis they must first work their way through the characters' mid-nineteenth-century New England accent. This local tongue adds a level of authenticity to the play, but it does prove challenging for students to read, especially non-native speakers of English. Most likely students will benefit from longer times for allotted readings, or perhaps shorter sections of the play to be read for a class session. In-class oral interpretation can also be particularly helpful in making this play more accessible. Like Shakespeare's works, a reading of *Desire* can be complemented by a video version. Theatrical productions on video are scarce, but the 1958 film version is readily available. As with Shakespeare, students must be reminded not to feel frustrated if they can't decipher every single word. In fact, students can be encouraged to bring troublesome passages for full-class explication.

Sample Discussion and Essay Questions

Note: The questions listed below that are followed by an asterisk can be found on the companion website to *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Drama*, <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/jacobus/>. Other questions listed below may have numbered notes, which can be found at the end of this section.

Oedipus Rex

1. Discuss Oedipus's journey toward the truth of his biography. What human instincts prevent him from "seeing" the truth?*
2. Why does Tiresias initially refrain from divulging the truth to Oedipus and assembled others? What is Oedipus's response to Tiresias's refusal, and then later, to his accusations?¹
3. Tiresias replies that he is beholden to no one but Apollo—the "higher authority" that the Greeks thought was God. This allows him to speak the painful truth to Oedipus. What caused Tiresias to change his mind and speak the truth?
4. Oedipus calls himself an "abomination" for killing his father and marrying his mother. If he was aware of neither, why does he call himself evil? Is a man responsible for the evil of his actions if he is truly unaware that they are evil? Explain Oedipus's ancient Greek thinking and your own.

5. What does it say about Oedipus and his feelings of guilt (or lack) that he clings to the illusion that Polybus was really his biological father?

The Bacchae

1. Compare the portrayal of Tiresias in this play to that in *Oedipus the King*. How does he act differently in this play and in the other? On what does he base his claims of truth in this play versus the other? How is the difference in Tiresias's portrayal emblematic of bigger differences between *Oedipus* and this play?
2. What is the ultimate tragic vision of this play regarding man's relationship with the gods? The place of religion in human life? The importance of the irrational in the human psyche and in nature?
3. Is Pentheus truly insane? What makes you think he is or isn't?
4. Pentheus views emotion as "effeminate" and therefore "weak." What lines show this? Such a view results in his denying his own emotional nature. What does Dionysus say or do that plays on Pentheus's denial of his own emotional nature and leads, ultimately, to his destruction?
5. What is implied about the concept of the "self" by *The Bacchae*? What characters exhibit "alter egos," and what are they?

Lysistrata

1. Discuss the stereotypes of men and women that Aristophanes relies on for much of his comedy.*
2. Discuss the more serious themes in *Lysistrata*. What does the play communicate about Aristophanes' view of war?*
3. Discuss the homosexual allusions in *Lysistrata*.*
4. How do the male warriors' physical needs distort their sense of truth and reality?
5. Does the sexual content of this play stand for something larger than itself, or is it simply gratuitous, pure comic relief?

Menaechmi

1. Discuss why Peniculus might be considered a stock character.
2. Discuss the parallels between Menaechmus's search for a twin and his search for truth and identity.
3. Read Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and compare and contrast it with *Menaechmi*.

Everyman

1. What universal themes does this play address? Are these themes as relevant today as they might have been to a medieval audience?^{2*}
2. Discuss your ideas for symbols, clothing, and gestures that might further the allegorical meaning ascribed to each character in a modern interpretation of *Everyman*.^{*}
3. Describe the notion of death and its allegorical representation in *Everyman*. What role does truth play as Everyman prepares for his death?^{2*}
4. Can you come up with a hierarchy of Everyman's attributes (as embodied in several of the allegorical characters) after his main help, "Good Deeds"?
5. Do you feel the allegorical structure is an effective technique for conveying this morality play's message? Why or why not?

A Midsummer Night's Dream

1. To what extent are truth vs. fiction and order vs. disorder major themes in the play? How are these themes developed and/or resolved in each of the four plot lines?
2. Consider the significance of the play's title, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What dreams occur within the play? Why is dreaming such an appropriate metaphor for describing what happens to many of the characters in the play? What recurring imagery patterns in the play tie in with this theme of dreaming and with the whole idea of perceiving things both accurately and inaccurately?²
3. This play contains a play within it. How is the rude mechanicals' little play related to the larger play in which it appears? Is the little play a comedy or a tragedy? To what degree does this play raise the question, in artistic terms, of how one distinguishes between illusion and reality?
4. Bottom's "translation" into an ass is a kind of emblem for all of the transformations that occur in the play. What are these transformations? In the play, how are love and art similar in their power to transform people's perceptions of things?³
5. Compare and contrast the two worlds of the play: Athens and a wood near it. Explore the illusion and reality inherent in both worlds.

The Masque of Blackness

1. In what aspects of the masque are notions of truth most central? As part of your answer, consider the social occasions for which most masques were written and performed.
2. In what ways does *The Masque of Blackness* reinforce the English notion that fair, light-skinned women embody ideal beauty? In what ways does it challenge that notion? Which predominates: the reinforcement or the challenge?

3. In your own words, attempt to describe Jonson's setting. Since this court masque was intended for performance, determine which elements of the setting might be suggested or imagined rather than fully realized.*
4. Describe the plot of *The Masque of Blackness*. Include the significance of song and dance. What didactic message lies behind the courtly splendor of Jonson's masque?*
5. Write an essay on the notion of beauty in *The Masque of Blackness*. How is beauty defined and obtained in this play?

The Misanthrope

1. What is Molière attempting to say about honesty and the individual's relationship to it?*
2. With its emphasis on truth vs. social grace, is *The Misanthrope* still a relevant social commentary? What elements make the play accessible today?
3. Discuss the notion of superficiality in *The Misanthrope*. How do the characters use the superficial to help them cope with the personal strains society places upon them?
4. According to Molière, what exactly is a "misanthrope"? Is this too broad a term to use as a description of Alceste?
5. Do a character analysis in which you compare and contrast Célimène and Alceste. Does your character analysis alter your response to the ending, in which Alceste and Célimène part ways, to discover how much the pair seem to have in common? Likewise, does it alter your response to their relationship to discover that in the play's first production Molière played Alceste and his wife played Célimène?*

A Doll's House

1. Discuss Helmer, Nora, Krogstadt, and Mrs. Linde's understanding of morality. Who believes in morality at all costs, and who weighs the circumstances? Explore aspects of heredity and environment that inform the moral viewpoints of each individual.*
2. *A Doll's House* is deeply rooted in nineteenth-century social criticism. Is the play more concerned with women's rights or human rights? What contemporary parallels might resonate with audiences today?*
3. What is the relationship between truth and morality in this play?
4. In what ways does Ibsen convey his characters' internal qualities by means of external symbols?⁴
5. How do different characters use the words "free" and "freedom" throughout the play, and how does the use of these words change during the play?

- Are the lies and misrepresentations of the truth in this play helpful or destructive? Why? At the end of the play, where is Nora in her journey toward self-truth and personal identity?

The Importance of Being Earnest

- Discuss the notions of marriage that are presented in this play. What is Wilde satirizing about the aristocracy's treatment of courtship and marriage?*
- Discuss the notions of propriety and pedigree that Wilde satirizes in turn-of-the-century England.*
- How does the theme of "truth" relate to the word "being" in the play's title?
- Discuss Wilde's use of disguise and revelation as a key to identity.*
- Discuss how Algernon's many witticisms advance the plot of the play.

Six Characters in Search of an Author

- The line between fiction and reality is blurred in this play. Do you see connections between the way Pirandello intersperses drama with "real life" and the format and players on American talk shows? How often do we refer to an actor by the name of the character he or she plays on stage, television, or film? Do we expect the actor to resemble the character? What does this blurring of the real and the dramatic imply about our understanding of "reality"?*
- Instead of ending the play with the death of The Boy, Pirandello brings the audience back out of the Characters' story/life and into the play rehearsal with The Manager's line: "Pretense? Reality? To hell with it all! Never in my life has such a thing happened to me. I've lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!" Discuss the implications of these final moments of the play.*
- Take a look at Pirandello's complete character list. Both the "Characters of the Comedy in the Making" and the "Actors in the Company" are noted by their "types" rather than by individual character names. Why do you think Pirandello chose to use character types? What does this suggest about each character's "true" identity?*
- Explore the author's role in the creation of the characters and their story. How is the play within the play completed? Who takes on the role of author?*
- Discuss the implications of the blurring line between fiction and reality in our contemporary culture. Do you see connections between contemporary issues of identity and those explored in the play?*

Desire Under the Elms

- How do the motifs of soil and stones function symbolically in the play?

2. What is the relationship between truth and identity in this play?
3. Discuss O'Neill's use of local dialect, examining how the language develops characters and how language helps to define the situations and relationships in the play.
4. Critics have compared *Desire Under the Elms* to a Greek tragedy. What similarities and differences do you see between O'Neill's play and *Oedipus Rex*?*
5. On the surface the title obviously refers to the affair between Eben and Abbie. On closer examination, however, the title reveals multiple meanings. What forms does desire take in the play, and how is truth related to desire?*

Endgame

1. "We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?" Hamm asks Clov. "Mean something!" replies Clov. "You and I, mean something! [Brief laugh.] Ah that's a good one!" Does this play mean something? If so, what? If it doesn't, then does that lack of meaning have meaning? Is life then simply, as the characters repeatedly say, a "farce," full of "the same inanities" day after day?
2. In a review of a stage adaptation of one of Beckett's novels, David Richards of the *New York Times* wrote: "Beckett's characters live in a fragile, uncertain world. They try to hold things together with language, by talking, and talking incessantly, about themselves and the world. But since language is itself fragile and uncertain, they can never be sure that their efforts will succeed. Just in case, though, they keep on talking." Is this an apt description of *Endgame*?⁵
3. Critics have called this both Beckett's most optimistic play and another example of the meaninglessness of life. Overall, did you find the text optimistic or pessimistic? Did your opinion of it change at any point? Where and why?
4. What is the relationship between truth and meaninglessness, hopelessness, and impermanence?
5. Explore the ideas of change and stasis in the play. What changes in Winnie's life as the play progresses? What stays the same? What does Beckett suggest about the way man views change and stasis in life?

Notes:

1. Questions 2–5 for *Oedipus* were taken from Richard Bloom's lesson plan for Prince George's County Public Schools, Capital Heights, Md.: <http://teachers.net/lessons/posts/2779.html>.
2. Taken from the University of South Carolina's Department of Theatre and Dance, *A Teacher Guide to Shakespeare's Comedy*, "Midsummer Night's Dream" <http://www.cas.sc.edu/thea/2005/Midsummer/Midsummers%20Guide.pdf>.
3. Ibid.
4. Taken from Stan Galloway's *A Doll's House* page for Bridgewater College: <http://www.bridgewater.edu/~sgallowa/203/dolls.htm>.

5. Taken from the University of Michigan-Dearborn's English 236 page:
<http://www.umd.umich.edu/casl/hum/eng/classes/236/beckett.html>.

Links to Selected Secondary Materials

Greek and Roman Drama

- <http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110Tech/graphics/thdionysus2.JPG>. An aerial image of the theater of Dionysus in Athens.
- <http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110Tech/Theater.html#Theaters>. Comprehensive web site for Greek drama, including timelines, images, and full-text plays.
- <http://www.theaterhistory.com/ancient/greek.html>. Critical and biographical essays on Greek plays and playwrights.
- http://www.greeklandscapes.com/greece/ancient_theaters.html. Collection of images of ancient Greek theaters.
- <http://www.lucadibartolo.it/graftea/t-greco.jpg>. Image of typical Greek theater.
- http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_time_romandramagoldenage.htm. Timeline of Roman drama.

Medieval Drama

- <http://collectorspost.com/Catalogue/medramalinks3.htm#MEDIEVAL%20COSTUMES>. Overview of medieval costumes.
- <http://www.theatrehistory.com/medieval/medieval001.html>. Comprehensive overview of medieval drama.
- <http://www.theatrehistory.com/medieval/mysteries001.html>. Overview of medieval church plays.
- <http://dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Drama/Medieval/>. A collection of links to other medieval drama pages.
- <http://www.readprint.com/article-4>. An overview of morality plays that includes many useful definitions.
- <http://department.monm.edu/cata/Rankin/Classes/CATA173/Lectures/Photos/theatre%20history/platform.JPG>. Image of a medieval platform stage.
- <http://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/bracewel/stgcraft/Archive/medth.jpg>. Image of medieval wagon stage.

Renaissance Drama

- <http://athena.english.vt.edu/~jmooney/renmats/drama.htm>. Survey of the major figures and movements of Renaissance drama.
- <http://www.bardweb.net/>. A large collection of links to everything Shakespeare.
- <http://ben-jonson.biography.ms/>. Biography of Ben Jonson.
- http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/j/msnbc/Components/Photos/040824/040824_ashland_hmed_1p.hmedium.jpg. Image of restored Elizabethan stage.
- <http://www.craigr.com/images/London%20Globe%20Stage.jpg>. Image of the restored Globe stage.

- <http://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/bracewel/stgcraft/Archive/globe.jpg>. Image of typical Elizabethan stage.
- <http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/educators/>. A very helpful link to Shakespeare-in-the-classroom resources, for both students and teachers.

Restoration Drama

- http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/restoration_drama_001.html. Overview of theater during the Restoration period.
- http://www.english.uiuc.edu/lit_resources/English%20102/Miscellaneous/Terms/restoration_drama_terms.htm. Useful list of Restoration terms and their definitions.
- <http://www.ciudadseva.com/textos/estudios/moliere/molie02.htm>. Biography of Molière.
- http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~www_se/murray/Restoration/Pictures/ThRoyal.gif. Image of the Royal Theatre at Drury Lane in London.

Nineteenth-Century Drama

- <http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc90w1.html>. Overview of nineteenth-century drama.
- <http://www.mnc.net/norway/Ibsen.htm>. Biography of Henrik Ibsen.
- http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/Balcony/7634/origins_of_theatre_19th_century_theatre.htm. Another overview of nineteenth-century drama.
- <http://www.wayneturney.20m.com/mackaye-elevator-stage.jpg>. Image of Madison Square Theater.
- http://www.alma-mahler.at/images/theatre/auditorium_hi.jpg. Image of Chicago's Auditorium Theater.

Modern Theater

- http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/luigi_pirandello_001.html. Brief biography of Luigi Pirandello.
- <http://www.eoneill.com/biography.htm>. Biography of Eugene O'Neill.
- http://www.themodernword.com/beckett/beckett_biography.html. Biography of Samuel Beckett.
- <http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Absurd.htm>. Overview of the Theater of the Absurd.

General Theater References

- <http://www.stageplays.com/writers.htm>. Information on playwrights from Greece to the present day.
- <http://theatrehistory.com/>. Comprehensive site for theatrical history.
- <http://www.win.net/~kudzu/history.html>. Another comprehensive site for theatrical history.
- <http://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/bracewel/stgcraft/Archive/thtrform.htm>. Images of different stage structures throughout history.

Expanded Reading List

Instructors may wish to use some of these additional works to complement the required reading list of the course.

Greek and Roman Drama

- Sophocles, *Antigone*
- Euripides, *Medea*
- Aeschylus, *Oresteia*
- Terence, *The Brothers*
- Seneca, *Thyestes*
- Plautus, *The Braggart Warrior*

Medieval Drama

- Anonymous, *The Second Shepherd's Pageant*
- Anonymous, *The Pride of Life*
- Hrosvitha, *Dulcitius*

Renaissance Drama

- Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*
- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
- Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*
- Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*
- Pedro Calderon de la Barca, *Life Is a Dream*
- John Ford, *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*

Restoration Drama

- Aphra Behn, *The Rover*
- William Congreve, *The Way of the World*
- Richard Sheridan, *School for Scandal*
- John Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel*
- Oliver Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer*
- Sir Richard Steele, *The Conscious Lovers*

Nineteenth-Century Drama

- Victor Hugo, *Hernani*
- J. W. von Goethe, *Faust*
- Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*
- August Strindberg, *Miss Julie*
- Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*

Modern Drama

- John Millington Synge, *Riders to the Sea*
- George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*

- Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*
- Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*
- Eugene Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano*
- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*