

## *Introduction To This Course Guide*

**V**ery little attention is going to be paid in this course to critical terminology or literary jargon. The emphasis throughout will be upon the student's own *immediate* and *human* experience in the reading of each play as a separate entity. Formal criticism, it must be remembered, can only come *after* the literary artifact, and whatever useful terminology exists (that tries to help us in the classification and understanding of individual plays) is based on intelligent perception of the primary work itself. Nevertheless, previous to our study of some of the world's greatest plays, it still seems necessary to generalize briefly about the two key literary forms that constitute drama—that is, tragedy and comedy. For our purposes, the term “tragedy” is to be understood as broadly applied to dramatic representations of serious and important actions. The tragic hero suffers a reversal of his fortune from good to bad, a reversal that often brings about a realization (by the chief character and the audience) of some fundamental and universal truth about man and his universe.

The hero is generally a man of greater than ordinary stature and capacity, but he is not perfect; he usually has some weakness or flaw in his character that helps bring about his misfortune. (At the same time that the hero contributes to his calamity, there may also be unavoidable forces outside of him leading to the same end.) One of the common tragic errors the hero can make is to suffer from pride, or overbearing presumption and arrogance, which leads him to ignore moral, universal and divine laws. Tragedy often leaves an audience feeling, not sad, but ennobled, exhilarated, in touch, somehow, with a basic perception relevant to our ultimate destinies.

Now to turn briefly to comedy, which as much as tragedy has great significance for our understanding of human nature and human experience. But this is not to say that comedy and tragedy are the same thing. They see, as it were, the same coin, but look at it from different sides. Comedy tends to present us with the commonplace, the everyday, that very real and unexalted social reality we all inhabit and that tragedy transcends. People in a comedy are generally pictured as unheroic and ludicrous, caught up and sometimes controlled by the same things we ordinarily are: money, possessions, appearances, clothes, forms. Reading or seeing a comedy, we concentrate on the follies of these people, often feeling superior to them as they rush around unaware of certain truths of human behavior and violate certain accepted social codes. These mortals are foolish and make many mistakes, and yet we are able to see ourselves in them, to see even more than ourselves. For these people things customarily end happily; they get what they want. Rewards and

punishments are distributed here as we would wish them to be for us. Thus, comedy sometimes ends with a marriage, or series of marriages, emblematic of social integration and harmony, and of an affirmation of life and its possibilities as good.

More particularly, as concerns good methods of study for the course, consider the following: To enhance your appreciation of the universal relevance of literature, think of each play read, regardless of the time and place in which it was written, as being written by a human being passionately and intelligently occupied by the same fundamental issues every human being has had at one time or another to confront; and as being read by, or acted out on a stage in front of, fellow human beings who share, consciously or not, the same pressing concerns. Keep faith with the author by allowing him to set his own terms for his play and by paying close attention to what he has written. As you read give yourself to the author.

Use the literary text itself—all that was written by the creative author, starting with the title of the work and concluding with the closing words of the final scene—as the basis for all interpretations. Use no study guides or other material (biographical, historical, or what-have-you) extraneous to your own direct coming to terms with what is in front of you.

Before attempting to answer the questions in any lesson, read the appropriate play carefully, and read the discussion contained in that lesson. Return to the play itself as often as is necessary to clarify what may have been puzzling the first time through, or to check on any specific issues. Your answers to the questions should be your own conclusions, based on a close reading of the literary “evidence.” Remember that individual opinion is important, and that you will be evaluated on how well you make a case for what you believe. Be as concise as possible, and cover all points that are raised.

## *Textbooks*

- 1) Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, in *Oresteian Trilogy*, Vellacott, Philip, tr., New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books Inc.
- 2) Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, Sylvan Barnet, ed., New York: New American Library
- 3) Webster, John, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Millett, Fred B. ed., Northbrook, Ill.: AHM Publications, 1953
- 4) Wycherley, William, *The Country Wife*, Herrick, Marvin T. ed., New York, N.Y.: Barron’s Educational Series, 1970

- 5) Ibsen, Henrik, *The Wild Duck, in Three Plays by Ibsen*, New York, N.Y.: Dell Publishing Co.
- 6) Albee, Edward, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, New York, N.Y.: Pocket Books, Inc.
- 7) Stoppard, Tom, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, New York, N.Y.: Grove Press, 1967

## *Grading Policy*

The course grade will be based both on the grades for the individual lessons and on the test results. The marks on the tests will count somewhat more heavily than those on the lessons.

## *Examinations*

There are two examinations—Lesson Five (the midcourse) and Lesson Nine (the final). The midcourse will cover the first half of the course's contents, and the final will cover only the work done after the midcourse. The questions contained in the regular lessons should adequately prepare the student for the kind of questions to be asked on the examinations.