**WEEK 1 - O’NEILL**

The Immigrant Experience (Bradbury & Temperley)

Early American and Colonial period (VanSpanckeren)

The Old South (Bradbury & Temperley)

The Rise of Realism (VanSpanckeren / Crawford)

Susan Abbotson – Introduction (before the 20th century)

Susan Abbotson – O’Neill’s work

Thesis drama/Freud

Folktale pattern and O’Neill’s work

Nietzche – Birth of Tragedy (till chapter 2 only; focusing on Dionysian & Apollonian aspects)

**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

1. **DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS**

* Discuss “the sinister maternity of the elms” as a symbol in the play
* How does the depiction of the farm, the house, and the yard help establish the mood of the play?
* Explain the atmosphere as a presence and a character, as in Shakespeare’s great tragedies.
* The play is a symbolic wasteland. Discuss in terms of the lives of the characters.
* What is the main conflict in the play?
* What is the fight between Ephraim and Eben in essence?
* Discuss the power trip of each character.
* The play is a tragedy in the classical sense. Discuss how it traces the remorseless connection between the protagonist’s flaws and his dismal fate.
* How does the play invoke the myths of Oedipus, Phaedra, Medea, Apollo, and Dionysus?
* Discuss the Fiddler’s role as a kind of Greek chorus.
* Discuss O’Neill’s statement that “the tragedy of Man is perhaps the only significant thing about him.... the individual life is made significant just by the struggle”
* Analyse Ephraim’s long monologue at the beginning of Scene 2, beginning, “Listen, Abbie...”
* Discuss how O’Neill introduces man’s eternal struggle between himself and his God to a naturalistic story.
* Explain the term “hard God.”
* Why does Ephraim give up the idea of leaving the farm towards the end of the play?
* What is the significance of the word “desire” in the title? Discuss regarding the characters.
* What idea is emphasised in the Sheriff’s words at the end of the play, “It’s a jim-dandy farm, no denyin’. Wished I owned it.”
* Why has Ephraim been lonely in spite of his family around him? How does he find a consolation for this loneliness?
* What is the dual function of the baby? Why is he conceived? Why is he sacrificed?
* Why does Eben want to share Abbie’s sin?
* Discuss the themes of hatred, revenge, and greed in relation to the characters.
* Discuss the main obsession of each character.
* What makes the play universal despite its naturalistic place, time, and language?

1. **LONG DAY’S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT**

* Why do you think O’Neill wrote this play?
* What are the sources of tension between the family members in the play?
* The play is a quest for meaning, as any of the great tragedies asking the question “Why?.” Discuss.
* They recreate the past. Discuss.
* Explain Mary’s quotation, “None of us can help the things life has done us.”
* How objective are the characters’ reasons for their problems?
* Discuss the reasons behind drug and alcohol abuse
* What is the significance of the story Edmund relates at length in Act 1?
* Discuss the past as a burden
* How does each character project the blame for his/her lot to the others?
* The characters pass judgement on each other and on themselves. Discuss how they ruin each other’s lives
* O’Neill uses atmosphere as a presence in his plays. What kind of an atmosphere is created in this play and why?
* They search for the past to define the present. Discuss.
* Discuss past as a refuge/escape.
* Discuss the reasons for the family’s breakdown in communication
* Why cannot the arguments and fights bridge the gap in communication.
* Discuss the strategy of denial
* How is Freud’s *regression* mechanism displayed in the play?
* What is the function of repetitive discourse of the characters?
* What will the final confessions achieve?
* Edmund’s understanding and forgiveness of the family members is the climax of the play. What does it achieve?
* “Love borders on hate,” says Shakespeare. Relate this idea to the play.
* What is the significance of Jamie’s reciting the Swinbourne poem?
* Explain Mary’s quote towards the end; “Something I need terribly...I can’t have lost it forever, I would die if I thought that. Because then there would be no hope... What is it I am looking for? I know it’s something I lost.”
* Why does the play end with Mary’s speech?
* Is there a catharsis in the end?

**WEEK 2 – ARTHUR MILLER**

Poetics by Aristotle

Salem Witch Trials (H.Bloom)

Crucible: A Feminist Reading (H.Bloom)

Puritan Women (H.Bloom)

Historical Parallels (H.Bloom)

Poetry and Politics (H.Bloom)

Susan Abbotson – Chapter 3 (Miller)

“Tragedy and the Common Man” article (I have got a copy if need be) by Arthur Miller

A comparison of *An Enemy of the People* (Henrik Ibsen) and *The Crucible* regarding how the past shapes the present

Kafkaesque elements in Miller’s work

Mass Hysteria in Miller’s work

**Discussion Topics**

***Death of a Salesman***

* Discuss the brutality of the system towards the common man
* The first title of the play was “The Inside of His Mind”. Why do you think he changed it later on? What would have changed if he had kept it?
* Discuss “death” as a metaphor for the play
* Discuss man’s resistance to accept change within himself and the society
* Miller says “Great drama is great questions.” Apply this idea to the play
* The play is a montage of memories, dreams, confrontations and arguments. Give examples from the play for each.
* Discuss each character’s denial of reality
* Discuss Willy’s need and reasons for recreating the past
* Discuss each character’s failure
* Discuss each character’s dishonesty
* Discuss the image Willy has got of himself
* Discuss the images the boys have got of themselves
* Why is Biff so critical of himself whenever he returns to New York?
* Compare and contrast Willy’s conflicting images of Biff. Why does he defend and criticise Biff?
* Discuss Happy’s obsession with women. How do his affairs relate to Willy’s affair?
* Discuss Linda’s function in the play
* In what ways is Willy Loman a representative of all humanity?
* Did Willy have any alternatives to lead a satisfactory life?
* Miller’s concern in his plays is “how do we live our lives”. Discuss
* Miller agrees upon Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, hamartia, hubris, peripety, and anagnorisis. Discuss referring to the characters
* What does it mean to die ‘the death of a salesman’? did willy achieve it?
* Miller introduced Howard and Bernard as foils to the unsuccessful Lomans. Discuss
* Discuss the symbolism in the play: rubber piping, woods, diamonds, different-make cars, football, sneakers, building materials, fountain-pen, flutes, recorder, stockings, light, music.
* What ideas would the following quotes support: “Willy: They don’t need me in New York. I’m the New England man. I’m vital in New England..... Linda: We’re free and clear. We’re free.”

***The Crucible***

* Why does Miller use Salem witchcraft trials of the 17th century as a background to his play?
* Miller is an admirer of the ancient Greek tragedies and believed that to comprehend the present one must look to the past. Discuss
* Discuss the themes of deeply held beliefs, narrow-mindedness, fear of the other, and cultural repressions of the Puritan way of life.
* Discuss the crowd psychology in the play
* What ends does group hysteria serve?
* Discuss the power of the Church and its consequences in people’s lives.
* Discuss the power and the “for/against” mentality of the court.
* What do the Church and the Court exploit?
* How secure is the family unit in the case of a social turmoil?
* What do we infer as a democratic right in the play?
* What feelings is the witchcraft a vehicle for?
* Discuss the accused people’s defense mechanism of projection
* Why is a “Court scene” a favourite of dramatists, remembering Shakespeare’s *Othello, Richard II, A Winter’s Tale,* etc?
* Danford represents the “oppressor” and Proctor the “oppressed”. What does Hale represent?
* How does the setting contribute to the “tapped in” atmosphere of the play?
* Why does Miller change Hale towards the end?
* How is Mary’s confession thwarted by Danford?
* Is there any justification in Abigail’s behaviour?
* Is there any justification in Proctor’s affair?
* Discuss the idea of one’s self-accusation
* For today’s audiences is Proctor’s adultery a capital offense? What makes his death still acceptable?
* How does Elizabeth emerge as a loving and dignified wife at the end of the play?
* Miller followed the ancient Greek tragedies in that “character sprang from action.” Discuss
* What is the significance of the title?
* What is the moral centre of the play?

**WEEK 3 – TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**

**A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**

Susan Abbotson – Chapter 2 (Williams) -

American dream & Wars (Ame.Civil War)

“A streetcar named desire” as a “memory play” -

Realism in “A streetcar named desire” (absurd? Melodrama?well-made?) -

“A streetcar named desire” as a tragedy –

**Discussion topics;**

* Compare and contrast Blanche and Stella.
* Discuss the use of light, its use or absence, in the play.
* How does Williams use sound / music as a dramatic device? (For ex. Varsouviana Polka

"It's Only a Paper Moon" lyrics, etc.)

* Compare and contrast Mitch to the other men in the play.
* Discuss “the streetcar” in the play as a symbol
* How does Williams tend to end scenes? On a consistently dramatic note? A tragic one? With suspense?
* Are there any moral or ethical lessons to be found in A Streetcar Named Desire?
* Discuss colour symbolism in the play
* In what ways are Blanche and Stanley similar? How do these similarities affect the interpretation of the play?
* How important is the final scene (Eleven) of Streetcar? What does it add to the play? Why not just end with the rape in Scene Ten?
* Discuss the significance of (some of?) the following: “Meat, Belle Rêve, Drinking, Bathing, Flowers”

**THE GLASS MENAGERIE**

Discuss the use of irony and distance in the play (Irony and Distance in "The Glass Menagerie")

Discuss the use of time in the play (The Glass Menagerie: Three Visions of Time)

Is Williams the playwright of frustration? (Tennessee Williams: Dramatist of Frustration)

Discuss to what extent Williams achieves verse effect (metrical language) in prose (Tennessee Williams, Theatre Poet in Prose)

**Discussion topics;**

* Discuss the significance of “Fire escape” “Magic show – coffin trick”
* Discuss the function of the onstage screen and music
* Is Amanda an escapist character regarding her nostalgic yearnings?
* Who is the Protagonist? Antagonist do you think?
* What aspect / part of the play is realistic what aspect / part is not?
* Discuss Tom’s narratorship and reliability of the narrator
* What was the life in the south like? (planters, plantations etc)
* Discuss the central metaphors “Glass menagerie” and “Unicorn”

**THE ZOO STORY**

Theatre of the Absurd (Influence of Beckett and/or Adamov, or Ionesco)

Martin Esslin The Theatre of the Absurd (1961)

Homosexuality in the USA in the 1950s (cruising places)

Realistic /naturalistic drama

Masterpieces of 20th Cent. Ame. Dr. – Susan Abbotson ; Chapter 7, E Albee

* Albee has been described as “a leading figure of the new drama of the absurd that mingles the realistic with fantasy to present a savagely satirical attack on spiritual sterility, blandness, conformity, and hypocrisy, and to summon up with deep feeling the tragedy of alienation.” What aspects of this description apply to Zoo Story?
* How does the blend of realism and symbolism in this play compare with The Glass Menagerie? Look carefully for symbolic details throughout the play.
* What do Jerry’s comments about his family background, and his dead parents in particular, reveal about his character?
* What is the significance of the title of this play? Does the play suggest that human beings are like caged and isolated animals in any way? Can Peter be said to live in a metaphorical zoo?
* Why is Jerry associated with a dog and Peter with a cat? What similarities or overlapping is there in the animal images associated with both of them?
* What mythological and Biblical parallels are suggested by Jerry’s language as he describes his life (and by Peter’s name)? Several critics have viewed Jerry as a Christ figure, a Christ parody, and a Jeremiah who denounces false gods. What do you think of these interpretations?
* What differences between Jerry and Peter are emphasized by their living conditions, their language, and their methods of telling stories?
* What is the significance of the props associated with each character: Harry’s knife and Peter’s book?
* What are the parodies of sexuality associated with Jerry and how do they compare with the sexual and domestic realities of Peter’s life?
* Can Jerry and Peter be seen as two sides of the same coin, representing different manifestations of sterility in modern society?
* How does the play suggest that animalistic violence lies beneath a thin veneer of civilization in modern society?
* What is your reaction to the end of the play? Does Peter release Jerry from his hell at the end?

**WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**

* Why do you think Albee chose the title, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?
* Are George and Martha better off at the end of the play?
* What are the implications of George’s story about his childhood friend who accidentally killed both of his parents?
* What’s the function of religious –both pagan and Christian- imagery/allegory in the play?
* What is the significance of everyone drinking so much?
* Discuss the relation of history and biology as two different disciplines to George’s and Nick’s character?
* Why do you think Edward Albee set his play at a cocktail party (rather than at a family dinner or another gathering, etc.)?
* The play was written during the Cold War. Are there any references to the worldwide crisis?
* What significance does Honey's weakness and vomiting have? Why would Albee create her to be so often sick?
* How is the play related to American Dream? Is it possible to live without illusions?
* What is the significanece of the scene where George enters with flowers ? How does the scene relate to the major theme, American Dream?
* What would the play be like if it were set in a different country? How distinctly American is Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

**The Dutchman**

What are two sources that Baraka used in coming up with the title The Dutchman for this play, though there is no Dutcman in the play. Based on these sources, what messages or themes does Baraka seem to be highlighting though the play’s title?

Discuss the role and symbolism of the old black conductor at the end of the play. What message seems to be communicated through this character?

In this contemporary allegorical “myth” for the stage, Baraka sets up a clear parallel to the Adam and Eve story in Genesis, with Clay representing Adam and Lula representing Eve. How do Clay and Lula compare and contrast to Adam and Eve, and what does Baraka seem to be saying to a contemporary audience watching his play?

Clay’s fate is representational of the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955. Research the case of Emmett Till and then explain how Clay’s experience is similar to Till’s real-life experience. What stereotypes of black males and their relationship to white women exist then and now?

Baraka’s play is a revolutionary call to black audiences to “warn his audience [primarily black] of the danger and destructiveness of attempting to assimilate into the dominant white culture”. Based on the play, why does black assimilation pose such a threat to the advancement of colored people in America during the civil rights movement?

What happens to Clay at the end of the play? Does this action and the reactions of those around him surprise you? What seems to be the message communicated to the audience through these events?

Ironically, when Baraka moved *Dutchman*to a Harlem theater in order to reach a black audience, the play was quickly rejected by the audiences because they saw it as promoting hatred of whites. Is this a racist, white-hating play?

Clay's reaction to Lula is infuriating because he desperately tries to maintain his composure, his "mask" of bourgeois pretensions, in the face of her ever-more vitriolic racist jibes. Why doesn't he simply ignore her, move to another seat, or ask her to leave him alone? What is the significance of his "fatal attraction" to her?

When Clay finally reacts in outrage. his outburst proves cathartic to the audience as well as to himself. However, the play involves comic elements, too. Is this play a comedy or tragedy do you think? Or a tragicomedy?