What Can Tragedy Do for Us?

Tragedy is a literary form that asks us to endure suffering, and in exchange, promises us insight into the human condition. As a literary genre, it is somewhat at odds with contemporary tastes: we tend toward optimistic futurism on the one hand, and apocalyptic fiction on the other. This course will return to a series of foundational tragedians—from Aeschylus, to Sophocles, to Shakespeare—to examine what insights the tragic literary form can offer to us. Each of us will have the opportunity to analyze our experiences of a series of tragic dramas to develop a more comprehensive view of how tragedies move our minds and psyches to gain traction on our place in the world. Once we have begun to develop a working understanding of the literary architecture and psychological power of tragedies, we will then examine tragedies in contemporary life. The course will culminate in a discussion of tragedy in the modern context. We will investigate how tragedy is distinct from other literary forms, and we will examine whether our experience of tragedy is transformed by our democratic and technological landscape.

Students can expect to prepare regular short written exercises, quizzes, a mid-term and a final exam, interpretive papers and presentations, and a term paper.