



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Survey of One-Act Plays Assignments

Author: Brian Holmes

Course: Theater, Film and Dance 163

Course Title: Survey of One-Act Plays

Year: Spring 2005

Copyright Statement:

This material is copyrighted by the author and made available through the Cornell University eCommons Digital Repository under a Creative Commons Attribution, Non-Commercial License.

This document is part of the John S. Knight Writing in the Disciplines eCommons community.
<http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu>

Spring 2005 Assignment Sequence Prize

Instructor: Brian Holmes

Course Title: Theater 163 "Survey of One Act Plays"

Theatre 163
Spring 2005

John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize
Rationale

In this course, students read a wide sampling of American one-act plays from throughout the 20th century. To accommodate students' varied interest in plays – whether in their authors, their cultural or performance contexts, or their theatrical techniques – I endeavored to devise writing assignments to give students the widest possible latitude in choosing what to write about.

Each assignment contains its own rationale, so I won't reproduce those here. In planning for the course of the semester, I wanted to develop a series of assignments that built upon each other, so that students would practice different kinds of writing while approaching one-act plays through a range of considerations.

Short Essay Assignments

For the first half of the course, the students wrote short essays designed to make them consider both the dramatic (on the page) and theatrical (on the stage) elements of plays. The audition essay was diagnostic, letting them try out the main work of the course: reading and writing about one-act plays. This essay, completed in the first week, allowed me to give them quick feedback, so they could also see how I would respond to their work. The audition essay drew on plays we read and discussed in class the first week, as well as on a handout of basic dramatic terms that gave us a common vocabulary for talking about how plays are put together.

The other shorter assignments required the students to look at a one-act play much as a theater professional would. The second, the scenic designer essay, asked students to select a play from the course syllabus, pick a location on or near campus to produce the play, and draw a set

plan for this hypothetical production. Their essay was an explanation of the location, the design, and the choices they made as related to the content and structure of their play. This assignment encouraged students to think like a scenic designer – approaching the play as a theatrical text, not simply one to be read – and also unleashed their creativity. Many students suggested site-specific productions, such as staging Eugene O’Neill’s *Abortion* (which takes place in a college dorm room in the 1910s) in a dorm on North Campus, or putting on *Riders to the Sea* (an Irish tragedy that heavily influenced O’Neill) on a dock on the lake.

The third and last short assignment, the artistic director essay, had students picking a one-act play to be produced in a night of one-act plays at a regional theater (a professional, not-for-profit theater). For this essay, students became assistants to an artistic director (either in Santa Fe or Provincetown) and wrote a letter to their boss, explaining why he or she should include the play in the bill of one-acts. In writing these letters, students had to demonstrate the meaning and significance of their chosen play, as well as the merits of producing it in 2005.

Informal Writing

As we worked on these short essay assignments, students kept up with a full reading load. Because one-act plays are short, we read a number of them every week, usually two to three per class meeting. In class, we engaged with the plays by reading them (at least in part) out loud, with everyone taking turns – if we were reading a full play, we would break it in half and double cast each part (one set of readers for the first half, a different set for the second).

There was not time to discuss every single play in depth in class. Our extensive reading list did, however, give students exposure to a wider range of American one-acts, letting them pick and choose which plays to focus on in papers. As we proceeded through the syllabus, I

provided homework questions each week; students were required to complete a total of six homework questions in different weeks. Homework questions were circulated by e-mail; students turned in a one-page response on the day the play was to be discussed in class. As this writing was informal, homework could be handwritten or typed.

Homework questions zeroed in on key lines of dialogue, stage directions, symbols, elements of character, sometimes even the title of the play, giving students a chance to explore and explain the meaning of such things without the pressure of a formal essay. Homework often provided a foundation for class discussion – it's easy to get someone who hasn't spoken much to participate when you can pose a homework question to the class.

Homework worked very well in this course. It was only discontinued after spring break because we spent a few weeks on the ten-minute play unit, and then students were writing drafts, doing peer review, and rewriting the longer essays.

Longer Essays

The second half of the course involved a series of longer essays developed over multiple stages. Last semester, for the equivalent essays in a different course, I had the students do peer review for each essay. While I feel peer review can be helpful, I wanted to try some different approaches to see how alternate strategies for feedback in a multi-draft process might work.

The first and most involved of these longer essays is the ten-minute play essay – we called it a “unit” as it actually consists of multiple essays. For this assignment, students chose a ten-minute play from a pre-selected list and were matched with a partner based on their similar interests (Part 1). Then, following the theatrical approaches of the shorter essays, they did the

work of a dramaturg – a theater professional who analyzes the script for form and meaning – writing a brief on these in their ten-minute play (Part 2).

After sharing their briefs (individually written) with their partner and instructor (and getting feedback), the students then worked with their partners to “rehearse” their play, preparing to present it to the class. The rehearsals involved a carefully planned program of reading through the play out loud and discussing lines, stage directions, plot and character development, as well as themes and meanings of the play. While students did not memorize the play, this process was designed to mirror the approach actors take in preparing for a production, and students wrote a series of assignments including their initial reflections, some discussion questions, a character analysis, and reflections on acting in an actor’s notebook (Part 3). They turned in the notebook when they presented the play to the class; their discussion questions formed the basis for class analysis of the play. This interactive unit let students pick the plays to pursue, empowered them to follow a number of theatrical approaches to the plays, and gave the class the experience of discussing and trying to understand plays they had heard but not read (much like the experience of seeing a play that has not yet been published in the theater). Finally, they are using the materials created in the first three parts of the assignment to write a first-person essay recounting their approach to the play and how their thinking about the play developed (Part 4).

In addition to including theatrical approaches, the ten-minute play unit also encouraged students to develop their own voice in writing some elements in the first person. The next essay, the comparative essay, was meant to be more of a traditional literary essay, asking students to compare and contrast two plays that had some sort of connection. They could either choose two one-acts from the course syllabus, or else select one one-act and one full-length play (usually by the same author). In executing this essay, students first wrote a topic proposal and submitted it

for instructor feedback. First drafts were brought to class and exchange for peer review, which started in class and finished with written feedback e-mailed to the student and instructor. With feedback from their peers and instructor, the students then rewrote their essays for a final draft. This structured approach worked very well, and I certainly will repeat it in the future.

For the final essay, students were charged with making up an anthology of five to seven plays from the course syllabus and writing their essay as the introduction to this hypothetical anthology. This assignment grew out of a practical problem in planning the course, as most anthologies of one-act plays are highly specialized; those that are mass-published do not include a healthy representative sample of all eras, authors, and theater movements. In particular, students were encouraged to pick a common element among the plays – for instance, plays that focus on the family, or plays by African American women, or plays with open endings – and also to explain and define the one-act play as a form.

Originally I had planned to require peer review for this essay, but then I decided to try a different tack. I arranged for students to hand in their draft to me a day or two ahead of individually scheduled conferences, so I could mark up the draft and give them oral and written feedback. These conferences were hugely successful; students appreciated getting the feedback as much as not having to do peer review again at a stressful time in the semester.

In the future, I would try to plan a similar schedule for the three longer essays, so that each multi-step essay uses a different process of developing the steps and eliciting feedback. While only the comparative essay involved formal peer review, the ten-minute play unit included extensive interaction between the partners. The collaborative nature of this work gave the class a sense of the rewards of working together on a play, an experience essential to understanding the collaborative creative dynamics of the theater.

**Audition
Essay Assignment**

*due Friday, January 28
by 7 p.m. in my office
(420 Schwartz Center for Performing Arts)*

length: 2 pages

This assignment allows you to try out the two key components of this course: reading one-act plays and writing about them. This first formal writing also gives you a chance to think critically about a short play and your own responses to it. By completing this writing in the first week, you will be able to measure your expectations about one-acts and writing in the context of the course and get some quick feedback.

- First, read the short Morris Sweetkind essay about the history of the one-act play and the nature of the one-act as a dramatic form. Pay special attention to the first paragraph on the second-to-last page (starting "What the short story is to prose fiction . . .").
- Pick one of the one-act plays from this week:

*Misreadings
Donut Holes in Orbit
Riders to the Sea
The Stronger*

- For your essay, write a two-page letter to the playwright explaining what emotional impact the play had on you, and how exactly the play created this dramatic effect.

- Please don't write more than two pages. Here are some things to consider:

- How does the setting (location, walls, furniture, props) contribute to the dramatic effect?
- What does each character want? Do they get it in the end? How does that affect you?
- Is there conflict between characters? How does that develop and (if it does) resolve?
- What is the overall mood of the play? What in the text can you trace it back to?

- For this essay, you need not use the terminology of dramatic structure (climax, denouement, etc.) that Sweetkind mentions. If, however, you are familiar with such terms, and they are essential to your argument, then by all means go ahead and use them.

- Turn in the essay in my office, 420 Schwartz Center for Performing Arts, in Collegetown. If I am not there, slide the paper under a door (enclose it in a campus mail envelope).

- Remember, essays are not accepted by e-mail. You must turn in a hard copy.

**Scenic Designer
Essay Assignment**

*due Friday, February 11 by 7 p.m. in my office
(420 Schwartz Center for Performing Arts)*

length: 3-4 pages

This assignment is the first in a series in which you will think and write about the theatrical possibilities of one-act plays. In all these, we will keep it basic – you won't need to include any theatrical knowledge or experience beyond what we have covered in class and in the readings.

The scenic designer has an essential hand in determining the look and feel of a play on the stage. Generally speaking, her responsibilities can include all the "stuff" that appears on stage physically, other than the actors and what they have on their bodies.

The scenic designer determines whether the production will use walls (flats), scrims, or other curtains to set off the acting areas. She will choose the decoration of the scenery – are the walls wallpapered? Made to look old and dirty? Or are there no walls at all?

The domain of the scenic designer also covers all of the furniture and other objects on stage – from couches and tables to clocks and lamps – and sometimes also includes the props.

- Pick one of the following one-act plays:

Bound East for Cardiff
The Moon of the Caribbees
Abortion
Before Breakfast
Cocaine

Suppressed Desires
Trifles
The Clod
Eugenically Speaking
Overtones

- Pick a location on or near campus that would provide interesting possibilities for a production of the play. Your location could be a conventional theater (such as the proscenium stage in Cornell Cinema or the Black Box in the Schwartz Center) or a site-specific location (such as a dorm room on North Campus for *Abortion* or a dock on the lake for *Bound East for Cardiff*). In the latter case, you will need to think about the space for actors and for the audience.
- On a separate page, draw a diagram of your scenic design for the play. Note the limits of the playing area, as well as where the audience would sit.
- Then write a three to four page essay explaining your design for the play. When relevant, cite dialogue and stage directions from the play (though you do not have to follow them). Think also about how the actors will move around your set – where they will be for specific moments. Be sure as well to consider the following:
 - Why did you pick this location for the production of the play?
 - Why did you choose the particular elements of your scenic design?
 - How do the elements of your design reflect, or help bring out, the mood of the play? The themes? The qualities, emotions, or actions of the characters?
- Remember, essays are not accepted by e-mail. You must turn in a hard copy.

**Artistic Director
Essay Assignment**

*due Friday, February 25 by 7 p.m. in my office
(420 Schwartz Center for Performing Arts)*

length: 3-4 pages

This assignment is the second in a series in which you will think and write about the theatrical possibilities of one-act plays. Once again, we will keep it basic – you won't need to include any theatrical knowledge or experience beyond what we have covered in class and in the readings.

The artistic director has one of the most powerful jobs in a theater: he decides which plays to put on. Artistic directors are most common in nonprofit regional theaters, located in cities across the country; each year such theaters produce a season of plays for local audiences.

The artistic director of a regional theater must put together a season to fit the theater's budget, and also to provide some variation for audience interests. For instance, a season of six shows might include two large-cast, more expensive productions, such as a musical and a play by Shakespeare, with the rest requiring very small casts and minimal production elements. There would likely be a contemporary play that needs only two actors.

Additionally, an artistic director may direct one or more plays each season.

- Pick any play from the *Survey of One-Act Plays* course reader – up to and including *Franklin and the King* – that you haven't already analyzed in an essay.
- Decide which of these regional theater artistic directors you'd rather be an assistant to:

Jacinto Lopez
Artistic Director
Turquoise Sky Playhouse
Santa Fe, New Mexico
400 seats, proscenium stage

Mary Margaret O'Malley
Artistic Director
Land's End Theatre
Provincetown, Massachusetts
75-100 seats, flexible stage

- The artistic director of your theater has asked you to suggest a one-act play to be included in its upcoming bill of one-acts. If the play is chosen, you will have the opportunity to direct it.
- Write a three to four page essay as a letter to the artistic director of your theater, explaining why the theater should include your selected play in its upcoming bill of one-acts. There is no theme for the bill, and you should be less concerned about suggesting one than making clear the merits of the play you are recommending. You may choose a play because it has been neglected, but the reasons for producing it now should come from the content of the play itself.
- You should also give a sense of your directorial vision – the meaning you want to draw from the play on stage. When relevant, cite dialogue and stage directions from the play (though you do not have to follow them). You might want to reflect on the themes or plot of the play, or the qualities, emotions, or actions of the characters.
- Remember, essays are not accepted by e-mail. You must turn in a hard copy.

**Ten-Minute Play Essay Assignment
Part 1**

*due by e-mail by 5 p.m. on Tuesday, March 15
length: 1-2 pages*

This assignment consists of a multi-step project in which you will select a ten-minute play, approach it as an actor and a dramaturg would, and complete a series of writing assignments on the process, ending in a formal essay.

Part 1 empowers you to first select a ten-minute play, as well as one or two partners to work with. **Part 2** will allow you to approach the play as a dramaturg would. **Part 3** will let you to approach the play as an actor would. After presenting your play to the class, **Part 4** will give you the chance to write up your experiences and understanding of the play in a formal essay.

Here are the steps for **Part 1**:

- Skim through the ten-minute plays listed below, in the volumes on reserve at Uris Library.
- Identify **three** ten-minute plays that interest you, and look them over more closely.
- Rank your three choices in order of preferences and write a paragraph on each play, explaining why you are interested in examining it further.
- E-mail your paragraphs to SOAP-L@cornell.edu *in the body of the e-mail message* by 5 p.m. on Tuesday, March 15 (the Ides of March) so the class can see your choices and your thinking.
- Read everyone else's paragraphs before class on Wednesday.
- Note: If you send your paragraphs after 5 p.m. Tuesday but before midnight, you can make up for it by answering an extra homework question. If you send your paragraph after midnight and before class on Wednesday, you will also have to report orally on your choices in class.

Ten-Minute Play List

from *More Ten-Minute Plays from Actors
Theatre of Louisville*

Call number: PS627.O53 A18

Jane Anderson, *Lynette at 3 AM*

Steven Dietz, *After You*

Jason Katims, *The Man Who Couldn't
Dance*

Lanford Wilson, *Eukiah*

from *Take Ten: New 10-Minute Plays*

Call number: PS627.O53 T35x 1997

Cathy Celesia, *Anything for You*

Romulus Linney, *Stars*

Mary Miller, *Ferris Wheel*

Chiori Miyagawa, *Yesterday's Window*

Mary Sue Price, *That Midnight Rodeo*

from *The Best Ten-Minute Plays – 2 Actors
– 2004*

Call number: PN6110.7 B472

Will Eno, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Rain*

Jane Martin, *Connections*

Tanya Barfield, *Wanting North*

Richard Helleeson, *Dos Corazones*

Julia Jordan, *Nightswim*

Stephen McFeely, *Between Two Friends*

Anna Ziegler, *Memorial Day*

Ten-Minute Play Essay Assignment: Part 2

questions due by e-mail by the end of the day, Thursday, March 31
dramaturgical brief due Monday, April 4 at the start of class
(a copy for your partner and a copy for your instructor)
length: 2-3 pages

This assignment marks the second step in the multi-step ten-minute play project. In the first step, you reviewed a selection of ten-minute plays and selected a play and a partner to work with. In this step, you will approach your ten-minute play as a dramaturg would.

Dramaturgs usually fulfill two vital roles as a play is prepared for production. The first is research: often, the director will assign a dramaturg to become an expert on the background of the play, its author, and the time in which it was produced and/or takes place. This set of tasks is more common with plays from earlier eras; the dramaturg can help to ensure the production is as authentic – down to the last details of costumes and accents – as the directors wants it to be.

At other times, the dramaturg serves as an expert on the script itself, its dramatic structure, meaning, and significance. The considerations a dramaturg makes in her analysis are those we have taken up in much of our work this semester: plot, characters, action, motivation, subtext, and the like. The dramaturg may help with the analysis of an existing play, or advise the playwright on rewrites of a new play being produced for the first time.

Here are the steps for **Part 2**:

- Sit down with the play and read through it once, taking your time to read every word.
- As soon as you finish reading, write on a separate piece of paper your thoughts, impressions, questions. Make as many notes as you can. They don't have to be formal; just get them down.
- Read through the play again, noting any significant lines. Make a note of these as well.
- Take your notes and put them away for at least a day – preferably a couple of days.
- Come back to the play with fresh eyes and read it through again. Then look over your original notes. Feel free to add to them, or note anything that's changed.
- Write a series of **questions** about the play. Compose these in the style of the homework questions we have used this semester. Write at least three, and no more than five, questions. Only one question can be "Explain the significance or meaning of . . ."
- E-mail your questions to your partner and to me (bth8@cornell.edu) by the end of the day on Thursday, March 31. This is the only point when you should consult your partner on **Part 2**.
- Working from the questions, and your own thoughts about the play, write a two to three page **dramaturgical brief** on the structure, meaning, and/or significance of the play. Focus on the second approach of dramaturgs; I don't expect you to research the background of the play or the author. Focus on the plot, action, characters (remember the elements of character), as well as particularly significant lines of dialogue or monologues; these can be glossed in more detail.
- Turn in a copy of your brief to your partner and me at the start of class on Monday, April 4.

Ten-Minute Play Essay Assignment: Part 3

*questions due by e-mail by the end of the day the day before you present to the class
marked up script and actor's notebook due at the beginning of your presentation in class
length: 5-7 pages (total notebook)*

This assignment marks the third step in the multi-step ten-minute play project. In previous steps, you selected a ten-minute play and a partner to work with, then you approached your play as a dramaturg would. In this step, you will approach your play as an actor would.

Perhaps more than anyone else in theatrical collaboration, it is actors who bring plays to life. Actors approach plays through a rigorous process of examination, usually beginning with a cold reading of the script followed by an intensive period of rehearsals. In order to get everything right, actors usually spend all day and much of the night in tech and dress rehearsals in the days before a show opens.

Different actors have different methods for approaching plays and characters. Most actors engage in some sort of close study of their characters, as well as memorizing and running through their lines, their blocking (where they stand and move), and their costumes and props.

Here are the steps for **Part 3**:

- **Schedule** a pair of rehearsals with your partner, about an hour each, at least 72 hours apart.

At the first rehearsal:

- Do a **cold reading** of your play. Read your own part(s) out loud; read the stage directions silently. After you finish the cold reading, have a discussion with your partner in which you cover a) what you found difficult/revealing/interesting in reading your part out loud and b) your thoughts, impressions, and questions about the play.
- After your discussion, **read through the play** again. This time, pay close attention to how your partner speaks the line. Is your partner speaking too quickly, too slowly, blurring the words? Are there parts that should be stressed or delivered differently?
- After you **read through the play**, share your thoughts on your partner's reading job as well as your own. Discuss how you might handle your parts differently to better bring the play to life.
- Finally, **read through the play** one more time. Try and improve your delivery as discussed.
- Soon after you finish your rehearsal, write out your **initial reflections** about your delivery of your character's lines and the things you have to keep track of. This is 1-2 pages, informal.

Before the second rehearsal:

- Write up a **character analysis**, 2-3 pages, typed. If you like, you can write this as a letter to your partner. In your analysis, explore the different aspects of your character (general qualities/traits, emotions, actions, speech/behavior) and their significance to the play. E-mail this analysis to your partner at least 24 hours before rehearsal.
- Obtain an **extra copy** of your play's script to bring to the second rehearsal and write on there.

At the second rehearsal:

- **Mark up a script** with the stage directions you want read aloud when you read your play to the class. You might underline or highlight these. The two of you will have to agree on this.
- Before you read through the play, **discuss your notes** on your characters, as well as your thoughts since the last rehearsal. What generally or specifically do you want to work on?
- Read through the play again. I expect you to **read through your play three times** at this rehearsal. If you like, for one of the times, you may pick out particular monologues or bits of dialogue to work on in detail (i.e. practice one small section several times in a row). If you like, you may bring in a friend to read out the stage directions you've marked.
- In between each read through, you may want to **give each other notes** on delivery, etc.
- Come up with three to five **discussion questions** on the play. These may be taken in whole or part from the questions you came up with in **Part 2**.

After the second rehearsal:

- Write up your **reflections on acting** your part(s) in the play. These should be 2-3 pages, typed. Your reflections are a more personal account of approaching the play as an actor, what you learned about the play, what you had trouble with, what you found rewarding. You are required to use the first person for this portion of the assignment!

On the night before you present to class:

- **E-mail** your discussion questions to me (bth8@cornell.edu) by midnight, and I will include them in a handout for the class. Otherwise, you will have to bring your own handout to class.
- Get a good night's sleep!

On the day you present to class:

- You may want to bring a bottle of water or other soft drink to class.
- Right before you present your play to the class, turn in your **actor's notebook**, containing:
 - your initial reflections (1-2 pages, typed or handwritten)
 - your character analysis (2-3 pages, typed)
 - your reflections on acting (2-3 pages, typed)
- Hand your **marked up script** with stage directions to a volunteer who will read them out.
- If you or your partner has an excused absence on the day you are scheduled to present, you will go first on the next day you are both present in class. If you or your partner has an unexcused absence on the day you are scheduled to present, you will go first on the next day you are both present in class before any groups with an excused absence.

Additionally, anyone with an unexcused absence on the day they are scheduled to present will be penalized for turning in their actor's notebook late; if you are a partner of such a person and do not have an unexcused absence, you will not be penalized for your partner's behavior.

Ten-Minute Play Essay Assignment: Part 4

due no later than Monday, May 16 at 4 p.m.

length: 5-7 pages

This assignment marks the fourth and final step in the multi-step ten-minute play project. In previous steps, you selected a ten-minute play and a partner to work with, then approached your play as a dramaturg and an actor would. In this step, you will reflect on your process of approaching the play and what you have come to understand about it as a short piece of American theater.

For this step, you may draw on any of the materials you wrote in **Part 1**, **Part 2**, or **Part 3**. Keep in mind that the end result is to be a formal essay, so it should have its own coherent structure. You may find it convenient, for instance, to break that structure into sections covering different parts of your process. And, of course, you are expected to use the first person because you are writing about your personal experiences and perceptions.

Here are the steps for **Part 4**:

- **Do some free writing or brainstorming** to make quick, informal notes reflecting on what you think about your ten-minute play now – having presented it to the class – as well as the process you've undergone. What do you see or understand about the play that you did not see before? How has reading it out loud so many times affected your perceptions of the language? The characters? The structure? The theatrical effects?
- **Look over your writing** from **Parts 1, 2 and 3**. See if you can find moments where you didn't fully understand or explain something about the play or your process of approaching it. Add those to your notes for **Part 4**.
- Working from your writing from **Parts 1, 2 and 3**, as well as your notes for **Part 4**, **write an essay** of five to seven pages explaining your process of approaching the play and what you have come to understand about it as a short piece of American theater.
- Don't be afraid to use the **dramatic terms** we've used this semester. Also, don't be afraid to use the **first person** – this essay is a personal account so it should be in your own voice. Remember, this is a **formal essay** so it's not the voice you use for text messaging or socializing at a frat party. Speak for yourself, but write to impress!
- Be sure to **proofread** your essay for spelling, grammar, syntax and punctuation.
- **Turn in** your essay no later than 4 p.m. on Monday, May 16. I will be in touch to arrange times when I will be available to pick up your essays (at RPCC) or when you can drop them off to me (at my office, 420 Schwartz Center for Performing Arts). Details will follow by e-mail.

Comparative Essay Assignment

ideas discussed in class on March 28 and April 6
proposal due in class on April 13
first draft due Wednesday, April 27 at the start of class
final draft due Wednesday, May 4 at the start of class

length: 5-7 pages

This assignment invites you to apply your knowledge and understanding of American drama developed in our study of one-act plays to a comparison of one-act plays.

The concept is simple: You'll select two one-act plays from our course syllabus, then write a five to seven page essay drawing comparisons (and perhaps contrasts) between them.

You'll want to ground your comparison in terms of themes and meanings, and also in an examination of the dramatic terms we have discussed: plot, action, character, and so on. I don't expect you to cover all of these in your paper, but certain elements of similarity and difference between the plays should become fairly evident and prove fruitful for analysis.

Here are the steps to writing the comparative essay:

- Pick two one-act plays from the *Survey of One-Act Plays* syllabus – from Week 2 up to the plays by Sam Shepard – that have engaged you and caught your interest. These plays should be ones you want to examine in further detail; only one can be a play you have already written an essay about.
- In choosing your plays, consider what the plays have in common on the surface. For instance, are they by the same playwright? From the same period? Are the playwrights, say, both women, or both African American? You may find other worthwhile connections between the plays, such as notable similarities or differences in terms of dramatic form, theatrical effect, character development (including speech/behavior), theme and meaning.
- Be prepared to discuss your **preliminary idea** in class on April 6.
- Write up your topic **proposal**, in one to two pages. This proposal should include a brief account of why you picked the two plays and a rough outline of the points of comparison you plan to follow in the essay – a kind of informal outline.
- Turn in your **proposal** at the beginning of class on April 13.
- After you get feedback, go on and **write your first draft** of the essay.
- Bring **three copies** of your **first draft** to class on Wednesday, April 27. Drafts are due at the start of class. We'll start a **peer review** process in class that you will finish by e-mail.
- Using notes from peer review, rewrite your essay.
- The **final draft** of the essay is due at the start of class on Wednesday, May 4.

Comparative Essay Assignment (Full-Length Option)

topics discussed in class on March 28 and April 6
proposal due in class on April 13
first draft due Wednesday, April 27 at the start of class
final draft due Wednesday, May 4 at the start of class

length: 5-7 pages

This assignment invites you to apply your knowledge and understanding of American drama developed in our study of one-act plays to a full-length play.

The concept is simple: You'll select and read a full-length play, then write a five to seven page essay drawing comparisons between the full-length play and one of the one-acts on our syllabus. A list of potential full-length plays on reserve at Uris Library is included here.

You'll want to ground your comparison in terms of themes and meanings, and also in an examination of the dramatic terms we have discussed: plot, action, character, and so on. I don't expect you to cover all of these in your paper, but certain elements of similarity and difference between the plays should become fairly evident and prove fruitful for analysis.

Here are the steps to writing the comparative essay:

- Pick any one-act play from the *Survey of One-Act Plays* syllabus – from Week 2 up to the plays by Sam Shepard – that has engaged you and caught your interest. This play should be one you want to examine in further detail that you haven't already written an essay about. Then select a full-length play that complements your one-act play. I have included a list of the full-length plays on reserve; I would be happy to make suggestions based on your interests.
- In choosing your plays, consider what the plays have in common on the surface. For instance, are they by the same playwright? From the same period? Are the playwrights, say, both women, or both African American? You may find other worthwhile connections between the plays, such as notable similarities or differences in terms of dramatic form, theatrical effect, character development (including speech/behavior), theme and meaning.
- Be prepared to discuss your **preliminary idea** in class on April 6.
- Write up your topic **proposal**, in one to two pages. This proposal should include a brief account of why you picked the two plays and a rough outline of the points of comparison you plan to follow in the essay – a kind of informal outline.
- Turn in your **proposal** at the beginning of class on April 13.
- After you get feedback, go on and **write your first draft** of the essay.
- Bring **three copies** of your **first draft** to class on Wednesday, April 27. Drafts are due at the start of class. We'll start a **peer review** process in class that you will finish by e-mail.
- Using notes from peer review, rewrite your essay.
- The **final draft** of the essay is due at the start of class on Wednesday, May 4.

Comparative Essay

Full-length plays on reserve at Uris Library

- | | |
|--|--|
| Eugene O'Neill, <i>The Emperor Jones</i> (in <i>Nine Plays</i>) | PS3529.N41 A24 1993 |
| Eugene O'Neill, <i>Desire Under the Elms</i> (in <i>Nine Plays</i>) | PS3529.N41 A24 1993 |
| Eugene O'Neill, <i>Long Day's Journey Into Night</i> | PS3529.N5 L6x 2001 |
| Angelica Weld Grimke, <i>Rachel</i> | PS3513.R57 R2 1969 |
| Langston Hughes, <i>Mulatto</i> | |
| Lorraine Hansberry, <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> | |
| Susan Glaspell, <i>Inheritors</i> (in <i>Plays by Susan Glaspell</i>) | PS3513.L342 V4 1983 |
| Clifford Odets, <i>Awake and Sing!</i> (in <i>Awake and Singing</i>) | PS628.J47 A82w 1995 |
| William Saroyan, <i>The Time of Your Life</i> | PS3537.A77 T4 |
| Thornton Wilder, <i>Our Town</i> | PS3545.I345 O97 2003 |
| Tennessee Williams, <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> (in <i>Four Plays</i>) | PS3545.I5365 G5 1999 |
| Tennessee Williams, <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> (in <i>Four Plays</i>) | PS3545.I289 S9 1970 |
| Tennessee Williams, <i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i> | PS3545.I289 C3 1975 |
| Arthur Miller, <i>All My Sons</i> | PS3525.I29 A8 |
| Arthur Miller, <i>Death of a Salesman</i> | PS3525.I 5156 D4x 1999 |
| Arthur Miller, <i>The Crucible</i> | PS3525.I29 C9 1953 |
| Edward Albee, <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i>
(in <i>Collected Plays of Edward Albee, Vol. 1</i>) | PS3551.L25 A19 2004 |
| Edward Albee, <i>A Delicate Balance</i> | PS3501.L35 D3 1967 |
| Edward Albee, <i>The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?</i> | PS3551.L25 G63x 2003 |
| Adrienne Kennedy, <i>The Ohio State Murders</i> (in <i>Alexander Plays</i>) | PS3561.E56 A72 1992 |
| Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), <i>Dutchman</i> | |
| Alice Childress, <i>Wine in the Wilderness</i> | |
| Ntozake Shange, <i>for colored girls who have considered suicide
when the rainbow is enuf</i> | |
| Lanford Wilson, <i>The Rimers of Eldritch</i> | PS3573.I29 R5 1967 |
| Lanford Wilson, <i>The Hot L Baltimore</i>
(in <i>Collected Plays, 1970-1983</i>) | PS3573.I458 A6x 1998 |
| Lanford Wilson, <i>Talley's Folly</i> | PS3573.I29 T2 1980 |
| Maria Irene Fornes, <i>Fefu and Her Friends</i> | request through Borrow Direct |
| Sam Shepard, <i>Curse of the Starving Class</i> | PS3569.H52 S18 1981 |
| Sam Shepard, <i>Buried Child</i> | (<i>Seven Plays</i> – includes these three) |
| Sam Shepard, <i>True West</i> | |

Anthology Intro Essay Assignment

topics discussed in class Wednesday, May 4
first draft due Monday, May 9 to Wednesday, May 11 (see below)
final draft due no later than Friday, May 20 at 4 p.m.
length: 5-7 pages

This assignment encourages you to reflect on the plays from our course syllabus and then construct your own anthology of American one-act plays.

One of the challenges in planning this course is the lack of decent anthologies with a broad sampling of American one-acts. We've had to reach far and wide into a lot of specialized anthologies to get a fully representative sampling of plays. Most of these anthologies focus on a specific time period or theater, or else include works by the same playwright.

For this assignment, you will make up your own anthology consisting of five to seven plays from the course syllabus, and write an introduction to that anthology, explaining why you chose the plays as well as the nature of the one-act form.

Here are the steps to writing the anthology intro essay:

- Look over the *Survey of One-Act Plays* syllabus. You may include any of the plays on the syllabus, including the contemporary plays from Week 1 or those from the ten-minute play unit. Think about which plays you found most interesting, most compelling, most theatrical. Think about which plays you can also link to that play. You might want to try free writing, or else draw a diagram indicating different connections among the plays.
- In total, you should choose five, six, or seven plays; to give your anthology a broader scope, the plays must come from at least three different decades in the 20th century. You may pick plays that have a common theme, plays that use similar dramatic or theatrical techniques, or plays whose authors have something in common (e.g. plays by women, plays by African Americans, etc.) Be sure also to discuss the plays specifically as one-acts; you will likely want to include your definition or understanding of a one-act play.
- In class on May 4, we will **discuss possible topics**, including your potential organizing ideas or overarching themes, as well as your thoughts on the one-act as a form and which plays from the semester were your favorites and why.
- Drawing on your thoughts from that discussion, **write a final draft** of your essay.
- Decide when you want to turn in your draft – there will be times to do this on May 9, May 10, and May 11.
- Meet me for a **conference**. At our conference, I'll go over your draft with you, making suggestions for you to consider as you rewrite.
- After you get feedback from the conference, go on and **write your final draft** of the essay.
- **Turn in** your essay no later than 4 p.m. on Friday, May 20. I will be in touch to arrange times when I will be available to pick up your essays (at RPCC) or when you can drop them off to me (at my office, 420 Schwartz Center for Performing Arts). Details will follow by e-mail.

Homework questions for Week 2

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. So don't wait until Wednesday to answer a question for Monday.

E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Monday, January 31

1. What connections can you find between Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* and J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*? Pick one thing to focus on (such as character, language, mood, theme) and give specific examples from both plays.
2. Eugene O'Neill's playwriting professor at Harvard "dismissed" *Bound East for Cardiff* "as not really a play" (Intro to *The Provincetown Players*, p. 20). Do you think he was right? If so, how exactly is it not a play? If he's wrong, then how do you defend *Bound East for Cardiff*? You might use some of the terms and ideas from the Sweetkind handout ("Introduction: The One-Act Play") to help explain yourself.
3. Write out a plot chart for *The Moon of the Caribbees*. (We did this in class Wednesday for the first part of *Riders to the Sea*.) After you write out the plot chart, write a short explanation of anything interesting or unusual you noticed from the exercise (plot elements that seem to connect, sequences that are formed, etc.).

Questions for Groundhog Day (Wednesday, February 2)

1. What connections can you find between Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* and August Strindberg's *The Stronger*? Pick one thing to focus on (such as character, language, mood, theme) and give specific examples from both plays.
2. Write out a plot chart for *Abortion*. (We did this in class Wednesday for the first part of *Riders to the Sea*.) After you write out the plot chart, write a short explanation of anything interesting or unusual you noticed from the exercise (plot elements that seem to connect, sequences that are formed, etc.).
3. Write a character brief for one of the characters in *Cocaine*. Be sure to cover the four aspects of dramatic character: general qualities; emotions; speech/behavior (how the character talks and what he/she does onstage); and action (what the character wants in the play).

Homework questions for Week 3

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. So don't wait until Wednesday to answer a question for Monday.

E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Lundi Gras (Monday, February 7)

1. In *Suppressed Desires*, when asked if she knows anything about psychoanalysis, Mabel responds, "It's something about the war, isn't it?" (p. 37) What "war" does she mean? In what way is she right that psychoanalysis is "about" war (at least metaphorically)?
2. *Suppressed Desires* is written in two scenes. How does this contribute to its comic effect?
3. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *Trifles*:
 - the title
 - the bird
 - "Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be." (p. 76)

Questions for Ash Wednesday (Wednesday, February 9)

1. Edward Goodman writes that the Washington Square Players believed in "the satisfaction of all tastes" (Preface to the Plays, p. 5). Pick one of the three Washington Square plays (*The Clod*, *Eugenically Speaking*, or *Overtones*) and explain how its "taste" is different from that of the plays by the Provincetown Players we have been reading.
2. What is the turning point of *The Clod*?
3. Explain the meaning of this line in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *Eugenically Speaking*: "You must admit it's – rather unusual." (p. 7)
4. What is the effect of including the "primitive" and "cultured" selves in *Overtones*? What would be different if the play only included one level of selves?

Homework questions for Week 4

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. So don't wait until Wednesday to answer a question for Monday.

E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Valentine's Day (Monday, February 14)

1. Explain which one of the plays for today would be best described as a "play to be read" (Introduction, p. xxiv). Or explain which play least fits that category.
2. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *Plumes*:
 - plumes
 - coffee grounds
 - "Rip the hem out, sister Tildy." (p. 170)
3. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *Hot Stuff*:
 - the title
 - "Some bargain!" (p. 76)
4. In *Little Heads*, what is revealed in the letter that Bee and Joe read? How does this revelation change your understanding of what has happened to this point in the play?

Questions for Wednesday, February 16

1. Explain which one of the plays for today would be best described as a "play to be read" (Introduction, p. xxiv). Or explain which play least fits that category.
2. Jennifer Burton suggests that most of the plays by African American women we're reading this week "explore the range of forms" that includes '(1) protest, (2) genteel school, (3) folk, (4) historical (interchangeable with race pride and black nationalism), (5) religious, (6) fantasy, and (7) feminist,' with many containing a blend of these elements" (Introduction, p. xxiv-xxv). Pick one of the plays for today (*Color Struck*, *Aftermath*, *The Purple Flower*) and explain which of these elements it contains.

Homework questions for Week 5

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Presidents' Day (Monday, February 21)

1. The episodes of *Waiting for Lefty* make for a somewhat unusual dramatic structure. Why do you think Odets chose to structure the play in this way?
2. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *Waiting for Lefty*:
 - what happens to Lefty
 - "No one takes care of me." (p. 535)
 - "In a rich man's country your true self's buried deep." (p. 542)
 - "You don't believe theories until they happen to you." (p. 542)
3. What is the effect of having the strike committee on stage during *Waiting for Lefty*?
4. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *Hello Out There*:
 - the title
 - "working like a dog" (p. 553)
 - San Francisco (also known as "Frisco")

Questions for Wednesday, February 23

1. According to the editors of one anthology, "During World War II there were many plays written which were designed to help the war effort" (p. 115). With specific examples from **one** of the plays, explain how *God and Texas* **or** *Franklin and the King* (both written in 1943) might have "helped" Americans during World War II.
2. Both *God and Texas* and *Franklin and the King* are "historical" one-acts. Pick one and explain how the text of the play establishes its "historical" time and place.
3. Explain the meaning of one of the following lines in the context of the play and 1943:
 - "So many bad fellas, this world, us good fellas always got to be cut the throat."
(*God and Texas*, p. 130)
 - "Then it means war. There is no other way out." (*Franklin and the King*, p. 150)
4. In 1774, the real King George III was 36 years old and his mother had died two years earlier. How would Paul Green's play be different if it reflected these historical facts?

Homework questions for Week 6

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Monday, February 28

1. *The Long Christmas Dinner* features two very prominent and unusual portals. How do the portals contribute to the dramatic effect and theme(s) of the play?
2. Some of the characters in *The Long Christmas Dinner* come to have the same names (Lucia, Roderick, Mother Bayard). What is the significance of this repetition?
3. What is the effect of producing *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* with no scenery? What are the implications for the actors or the theme(s) of the play?
4. Thornton Wilder faults productions of *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* in which Ma Kirby is played "sentimentally," ending the play "drenched in tears, ostentatious piety and a kind of self-pity" (p. 84). Is he right or wrong? Why?

Questions for Wednesday, March 2

1. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *This Property Is Condemned*:
 - the title
 - "white as a clean piece of paper" (p. 250 and following)
 - the railroad
2. How would your perspective of *This Property Is Condemned* change if the role of Willie was played, as written, by a male actor?
3. What connections can you draw between *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen . . .* and *Cocaine*?
4. Explain the significance of the rain.
5. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens . . .*:
 - "Mediocrity is the passion among them." (p. 396)
 - "Infatuation is even blinder than love." (p. 397)
 - "You're as much like a woman as any real one I seen." (p. 401)
 - the poem
6. Michael Kahn writes that Candy has "his own stature" (p. 392). What does he mean?

Homework questions for Week 7

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Monday, March 7

1. Pick two of the Tennessee Williams plays from today. What thematic or stylistic connections can you draw between them?
2. How does the racism of Charlie Colton connect to the theme(s) of *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches*?
3. Why does Bertha want her letter only to say "Hello from Bertha to Charlie with all her love"?
4. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of the Tennessee Williams play in which it occurs :
 - "the last of my solid gold watches" (p. 102)
 - "I belong to -- tradition." (p. 104)
 - "It seemed as though the world were not very old but very, very young, almost as though the world had been newly created." (p. 161)
 - "When a life is completed, it ought to be put away. It's like a sonnet." (p. 165)
 - "I know the rules of this game!" (p. 237)
 - "I been robbed." (p. 239 and following)

Questions for Wednesday, March 9

1. Why is the play called *The Zoo Story*?
2. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *The Zoo Story*:
 - "That's the way the cookie crumbles." (p. 9)
 - "Sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly." (p. 11 and following)
 - "THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG" (p. 16)
 - "I am a *permanent transient*." (p. 21)
 - "You're a vegetable!" (p. 25)
3. *The Zoo Story* premiered in Berlin in 1959 on a double bill with *Krapp's Last Tape*. What connections between the two plays make such a double bill appropriate?

Homework questions for Week 8

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Monday, March 14

1. Explain the meaning of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *The Zoo Story*:
 - “When you’re older you use real experience as a substitute for fantasy.” (p. 14)
 - “I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill, and both had been unsuccessful by themselves.” (p. 20)
 - “People can have some of the things they want, but they can’t have everything” (p. 24)
2. A stage direction early in the story of Jerry and the dog (p. 17) indicates but does not specify “Action for the following, perhaps.” What might it be? Why?
3. Why does Jerry tickle Peter?
4. Why does Krapp listen again to the tape with the story of the woman with the scratch from picking gooseberries?
5. Why is it appropriate that the Young Man in *The Sandbox* is “an actor”?
6. Explain the meaning or significance of one of the following in the context (theme, plot, and/or characters) of *The Sandbox*:
 - “Whatever you say, Mommy.” “Of course, whatever I say.” (p. 35 and following)
 - “an offstage rumble” (p. 39)
 - the lighting cues
 - the musician
 - the sandbox

Homework questions for Week 10

Please answer one of these questions in about a page. Since this is informal work, your answer may be typed or handwritten. Responses will be collected at the start of class each day. E-mailed homework will not be accepted.

Questions for Wednesday, March 30

1. What is the significance of hair falling out in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*?
2. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* features a number of Sarah's "herselves." What is the dramatic effect (i.e. in the structure/writing) or theatrical effect (i.e. in performance) of presenting her as all these "herselves"?
3. Who was Patrice Lumumba? Why do you think he is "one of herselfs"?
4. Why is it significant to the play's theme(s) and/or politics that Raymond, Sarah's boyfriend, is white? That he is also the Funnyhouse Man?
5. Compare Sarah's speech on p. 5-6 with Patrice Lumumba's on p. 12-13. What is different in his version? How do these differences reflect on Sarah and her versions (or visions) of herself?
6. What is the dramatic action of Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*? *
7. Does *The Owl Answers* feature a number of actors playing multiple roles, or are they facets or personalities (or whatever term you prefer) of the same role? Pick one actor's role(s) and explain the dramatic effect of writing the role(s) that way or the theatrical effect of performing the role(s) that way.
8. What is the significance of the historical personages in *The Owl Answers*?
9. Explain the significance of birds in *The Owl Answers*.
10. What is the dramatic action of She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl in *The Owl Answers*? *

* Remember, this is from the handout of dramatic terms from earlier in the semester.

Dramatic Terms

Here are some of the terms to describe the basic elements of any play. These terms help to explain and understand how plays work. Analyzing how plays are put together is essential to unlocking their meaning and power in reading and on the stage.

story: a larger narrative that includes everything that happens to a character

plot: the structure of a play – the order of incidents represented on stage. A playwright selects a handful of details and incidents from a character's story to make up the plot.

cause and effect: usual relationship of incidents or scenes in a plot; one incident causes or leads to the next (e.g. the king dies; the queen dies of grief)

turning point (or climax or main event): the moment when a character either gets what she wants or definitively does not get it; if genuinely dramatic, results from action and conflict; may take many different forms, but is always some sort of change

action: what a character wants

motivation: the underlying reason for a character's action

subtext: when a character seems to have one action or motivation, but in fact has another

conflict: whatever prevents a character from getting what he wants

external conflict: conflict between two or more characters

-direct external conflict: between two characters who want the same thing (e.g. Adam and Bob both want to marry Carol)

-indirect external conflict: between two characters; the action of the first is directed toward the second; the action of the second directed elsewhere (e.g. Doug wants to marry Esther; Esther wants to become a nun)

internal conflict: two actions within one character that give rise to a conflict (e.g. Esther wants to become a nun, but she is also in love with Doug)

character: four components: general qualities/traits (e.g. hot-tempered; lovelorn; worrywart) shape emotions (e.g. angry; romantic and desperate; anxious); emotions lead to actions (e.g. to kill the king; to get a boyfriend; to survive the sea); actions are expressed through speech/behavior (what a character says and does on stage)

stakes: what a character has to gain or lose

hope: essential to maintaining audience interest in a play, whether in their actual experience of it or in that of the characters

Other Terms That Might Be Useful

point of attack: the point in the larger story at which the plot of the play begins

inciting incident: the moment or event that introduces the major conflict of the play

exposition: information about the story's past before the point of attack

foreshadowing: laying of hints or clues about what may happen in the story's future

obligatory scene: final confrontation between the two characters in the main conflict

resolution (or denouement): summing up of the consequences of events of the play