

Thornton Wilder's Novels and Plays

Time & Place: Thursday 5:00-7:30 Bliss 153 **Office Hours:** Tues/Fri 11:30-12:20 & by appointment
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TEXTS

The Cabala; and, The Woman of Andros: Two Novels. HarperCollins, 2007.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey. HarperCollins, 2003.

Heaven's My Destination. HarperCollins, 2003.

The Ides of March. HarperCollins, 2003.

The Eighth Day. HarperCollins, 2007.

Theophilus North. HarperCollins, 2003.

Thornton Wilder: *Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* (ed. J. D. McClatchy, Library of America, 2007)

readings in dramatic theory from books on reserve at the library

COURSE DESCRIPTION

ENGL 552 Seminar in Drama will focus on the novels and plays of Thornton Wilder (1897-1975). *Our Town*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, is one of the leading candidates for the title "The Great American Play," and it is for this dramatic work that Thornton Wilder is best known. But Wilder was one of the most versatile writers in American letters, having written plays, novels, screenplays, essays, librettos, and translations. His second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, also awarded the Pulitzer Prize (Wilder is still the only writer to win the prize in both drama and fiction), was an immediate national and international bestseller; it has never been out of print since it was first published in 1927, and it made the Modern Library's list of greatest novels of the twentieth century, ranking 37 out of 100. In recognition of their merit and persistent relevance, *Our Town* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* were selected for the NEA-sponsored community reading grants program "The Big Read," as well as for the similar earlier program, "One Book One Community." Then there is Wilder's other Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which is frequently produced at regional theatres and remains securely in the American repertory. The same is true of *The Matchmaker*, though many theatregoers are more familiar with its Broadway musical reincarnation, *Hello, Dolly!*, which was later filmed with Barbra Streisand and referenced in the Pixar-Disney animated film *Wall-E* in 2008 as an avatar of a pre-eco-apocalypse earth. Alfred Hitchcock fans old and new also know Wilder's name from one of the Master of Suspense's best films, *Shadow of a Doubt*, which lists him twice in its opening credits. Finally, Wilder was a great experimenter with form, both in the novel and drama. In this seminar we will study the literary production of Wilder in depth, first as a novelist, then as a playwright, and finish with his screenwriting. In addition, we will read excerpts of theories of tragedy and comedy that may help us to understand his novels and plays as examples of a genre. Wilder was a philosophical writer who in his creative work views life simultaneously from the perspective of the microcosm and the macrocosm. Some of his themes are the suffering of the human heart, the effects of the passage of time on individuals and families, and the progress of human civilization despite threats to its survival. While theoretical readings assigned pertain primarily to tragedy and comedy, students should be prepared to apply modern literary theory (e.g., psychoanalytical, various poststructuralist) to primary works. (You will be required to do so in your research paper.)

CLASSROOM/COURSE POLICIES

Come to class having read and thought about the assigned reading, underlining important passages (or taking notes), and be prepared to talk about them, and to take notes (but **not** on a laptop; bring a notebook). Bring with you to class the assigned play and the supplemental reading for that meeting so you can follow and contribute to class discussion. You will receive one of three grades for class participation if you attend at least 90% of the class meetings: "A" (spoke up a few times every class), "C" (never or rarely spoke up in class), or "B" (somewhere in between "A" and "C"). If you are texting during class, you are not fully engaged with the classroom learning and your participation grade will be lowered; keep your cell phone silenced and put away. If you do not attend class, you obviously are not participating. If you have a death in the family or are too ill to come to class, contact me before the class or as soon after as possible to see about making it up, if that is possible. Assignments completed late without prior consultation with me will be graded down. I will not accept a paper more than 3 weeks late; thus, it would be marked down as a zero. (If you are having problems with a particular assignment or have three tests that week or whatever, talk to me beforehand and we'll see what we can work out for an extension.) If you turn in a paper, part or all of which you didn't write (plagiarism), you will receive an F for the assignment and probably for the course. Don't risk cheating, no matter what! If you're having any problem with doing the assignment, come to my office hours or make an appointment or just call or e-mail me; we'll talk and I'll help.

ASSIGNMENTS & PERCENTAGE OF COURSE GRADE

- 20% -- two nonresearch papers (5 pp. each)
- 20% -- a presentation of scholarship on one work (15 to 20 minutes) & outline
- 40% -- a research paper (15-25 pp.) (topic proposal submitted in advance of the due date)
 - 5% -- a 5-minute presentation of your research paper argument to the class
 - 5% -- weekly SOCS postings on assigned readings (plays and theories on reserve in library)
- 10% -- class participation

GRADING

Each writing or speaking assignment will receive a letter grade (A, A-, B+, ...). The most important criterion in determining the grade on an individual assignment is the quality of thought. What I look for is if you are intellectually engaged with the subject and, for papers, if you support your interpretative argument with analysis of specific textual evidence. Other criteria for papers include organization (logical progression of points, arrangement of the content of each paragraph), style (sentence structure, diction), mechanics (punctuation, grammar, spelling), and editing (proofreading for errors missed by the computer, and MLA format). I reserve A's for those assignments and students that demonstrate not only outstanding effort, but also outstanding quality of work. If we all do our part, this should be an interesting course in which all of us learn a lot about the great American writer Thornton Wilder.

At the end of the semester when I calculate the course grades I will use the numerical equivalents in the left column below for each grade. To arrive at your course grade, I will multiply the numerical score on each assignment times the percentage it is worth. That total will be converted to a letter grade for the course according to the percentages in the right column below.

A = 95	93 % and above = A
A- = 91	90 % and above = A-
B+ = 88	87 % and above = B+
B = 85	83 % and above = B
B- = 81	80 % and above = B-
C+ = 78	77 % and above = C+
C = 75	73 % and above = C
C- = 71	70 % and above = C-
D+ = 68	67 % and above = D+
D = 65	63 % and above = D
D- = 61	60 % and above = D-
F+ = 58	below 60 % = F
F = 55 or below (e.g., not completing an assignment earns 0 points)	

SOCS POSTINGS

Due by 4:00 pm of the day of class, a paragraph-length (approximately 200 words) comment on the play and secondary readings posted to SOCS Discussion. Your comment isn't graded except for whether you posted it on time and said something substantive. (In other words, you don't have to worry about punctuation, format, etc.) The primary **purpose of this assignment is to get you to THINK about the plays and the thematic issues they raise (theological, philosophical, moral, political, social, psychological, aesthetic, other), and the critical issues in the secondary readings.** You may also comment on what another student has posted about the play; a secondary purpose of the assignment is to spark discussion of the issues outside of class. Thus, I WOULD LIKE YOU TO READ YOUR CLASSMATES' COMMENTS BEFORE CLASS IF AT ALL POSSIBLE. If you post a comment on all 13 days of assigned readings on time and with a legitimate effort, you get an A on the SOCS assignment. Anything less and the grade is lowered proportionately. .

SCHEDULE

Theory Readings are in one of the following books on reserve:

Barrett Clark *European Theories of the Drama*
Robert Corrigan *Tragedy: Vision and Form*
Robert Corrigan *Comedy: A Critical Anthology*
Robert Corrigan *Comedy: Meaning and Form (CMF)*

8-30 intro to course; *The Cabala*

9-6 *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* Aristotle "The Poetic" (Clark)

9-13 *The Woman of Andros* Kierkegaard Ancient vs. Modern Tragedy (Corrigan *Tragedy*)

9-20 *Heaven's My Destination* Bergson "The Comic Element" (Clark)

9-27 *The Ides of March* Hegel *Philosophy of Fine Art* (Corrigan *Tragedy*)

10-4 *The Eighth Day*

10-11 *The Eighth Day* **1st paper due**

10-18 *Theophilus North*

10-25 *Our Town* Nietzsche *The Birth of Tragedy* (Corrigan *Tragedy*)

11-1 *The Skin of Our Teeth* Eric Bentley "Farce" (Corrigan *CMF*)

11-8 *The Matchmaker* Northrop Frye "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy" (Corrigan *CMF*)

11-15 *The Long Christmas Dinner, The Happy Journey to Trenton & Camden, Pullman Car Hiawatha*
Christopher Fry "Comedy" (Corrigan *Comedy*); **2nd paper due**

11-22 **No class!!! Happy Thanksgiving Research Paper proposal due on SOCS**

11-29 *Shadow of a Doubt* Arthur Miller "Tragedy and the Common Man" (Corrigan *Tragedy*)

12-6 **Conferences**

12-13? **final exam (oral abstract of research paper); Research paper due**

SELECTED TCNJ POLICIES

TCNJ's **attendance** policy is available on the web:

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~recreg/policies/attendance.html>

TCNJ's academic integrity (**cheating**) policy is available on the web:

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~academic/policy/integrity.html>.

TCNJ's **final examination** policy is available on the web:

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~academic/policy/finalevaluations.htm>

TCNJ's **Americans with Disabilities Act** (ADA) policy is available on the web:

<http://www.tcnj.edu/~affirm/ada.html>