Course Title: Four Tragedies by Shakespeare
Course Code: LIT 53
Instructor: Nicholas Jenkins

Course Summary:

Taken together, William Shakespeare’s 38 plays constitute one of the highest, most inspiring literary mountain ranges in the history of Western drama. And four tragedies - Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear and Othello - represent the jagged, loftiest pinnacles of this achievement. In this class, we will closely study and discuss these emotionally and intellectually unforgettable works. Hamlet explores the lust for and terror of revenge; Macbeth penetrates the psychology of insane ambition; Lear depicts the consequences of vanity and hideous pride; and Othello meditates on the horrors of paranoia, prejudice, and malice. These are dark subjects, but Shakespeare’s poetry strikes like lightning, illuminating some of the deepest recesses of the human psyche.
No previous experience with Shakespeare’s work is necessary, but the course will also aim to take readers familiar with these plays into new territory. We will begin with a brief overview of Shakespeare’s life and times and the theatrical conditions he worked within. However, our efforts will be focused primarily on direct engagement with Shakespeare’s plays themselves. Our sessions will include discussions of Shakespearean tragic language, reading aloud of specific scenes, and exploration of what unites and differentiates these plays. Finally, we will reflect on what makes tragedy such a strange, rich and necessary form, where (as one philosopher wrote) “in suffering failure, the loser conquers.”

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.

Grade Options and Requirements:

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - Score will be determined by student attendance and participation.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - Grade determined by an 8-10 page paper, on a topic agreed in advance with me.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

Required Texts:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Shakespeare, *Othello*

NB. The editions of these plays which we will use for our class is still being determined. I am considering options that are readable, informative and accessible. (And reasonably-priced.) For further details, please check back at
the course website on March 17, two weeks before our first session.

Process:

Our goal is to read these great plays closely, registering their strangeness, depth and intensity. I’ll gloss details and context wherever that is needed, but we won’t be learning a lot of historical background – rather, our focus is on the experience of the texts. Each time we meet I’ll give a brief overview about a relevant topic or issue that I’d like us to think about together. And, rotating around the class, each week I’ll ask several class members to come with prepared with a question/problem/enthusiasm they have about something in the reading we’ve just done. These comments will form the basis of our discussions. We’ll also spend some time each week reading a section of the play we’re studying aloud and discussing the details of the passage.

In order that the course be a meaningful one for you, it is vital that you do the reading before each session. Please bring your copy of the current play to class each time.

Weekly Outline:

Week 1: March 31
Reading: none
Class: Introduction and overview

Week 2: April 7
Reading: Hamlet 1

Week 3: April 14
Reading: Hamlet 2

Week 4: April 21
Reading: Macbeth 1

Week 5: April 28
Reading: Macbeth 2

Week 6: May 5
Reading: King Lear 1
Week 7: May 12  
**Reading:** King Lear 2

Week 8: May 19  
**Reading:** Othello 1

Week 9: May 26  
**Reading:** Othello 2

Week 10: June 2  
**Reading:** none  
**Class:** Conclusions, follow-ups and debate

**Bibliography - Some Useful Shakespeare Studies and Guides:**

[the literature on Shakespeare, his plays and his world, is gigantic - these works are ones I have found helpful and readable, but none are required for this class]


G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretation of Shakespearian Tragedy*
with Three New Essays, rev. edn. (New York, 1961)

Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago, 1996)