Important Preamble:

English 624, “Seminar in Modern Literature,” will be dedicated to exploring the life and work of one author only: Samuel Beckett. We will be spending 15 weeks focusing on Beckett’s novels, plays, poems, letters, and essays. The work will be rewarding but challenging. It demands concentration and commitment.

Course Introduction and Description:

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is one of the giants of twentieth century literature. His plays, Waiting for Godot (1948), Endgame (1955), Happy Days (1961), and Krapp’s Last Tape (1958), reinvented theatre by pushing the limits of the medium. His drama lacks precise setting, has a minimal plot, and is inhabited by broken characters. The dialogue is often monosyllabic and terse. His plays don’t tell a story as much as they are poetic and symbolic attempts to stage memory, time, life and death. His dramas are both disliked and worshipped, but they have entered the canon as modern masterpieces. And they are not without their humor, often slapstick and silly. Beckett’s prose, too, is both modernist and experimental, moving from the Joycean-inspired wordplay of Murphy (1935) to the internal, rambling, broken narrators of Molloy (1947) and the later short prose pieces, such as Stirring Still (1989) and First Love (begun 1946). Beckett wrote for radio, too. Embers (1957) and All That Fall (1956) are intricately detailed plays that use background sounds, silence, music, and taut, structured dialogue not only to examine the possibilities inherent in the form of radio (its immateriality, sound editing, voiceovers, etc.), but also to develop his recurring themes of loss, life’s purpose, hope and survival. He wrote and developed a film, entitled Film (1963), for Buster Keaton. Beckett’s range of medium, therefore, is part and parcel of what we now might call performance art, a lifelong ahead-of-the-curve effort to push art, both form and content, into new directions. While his experimentations are avant-garde and difficult, they are not indulgent works of art for art’s sake; Beckett, while not an activist, was political, and he saw literature and theatre as means to express, detail, and uphold human dignity, to get audiences to reflect on the needy and the outcast (Waiting for Godot found a willing audience at San Quentin prison), on human cruelty, on torture, on bureaucracies and the arrogance of those who claim to know answers and push solutions. His name, like Kafka’s, has entered everyday language as a term used to express a certain outlook of life. “Beckettian” refers to a world that appears to consist of pointless or misunderstood communication, that seems to lack purpose and direction, and yet, in the midst of despair, we survive, find inner strength, and continue to look for hope and salvation. A Beckettian world is dark, but not unforgiving. And we see evidence of his writings in many aspects of popular culture, from Seinfeld, a show, like Waiting for Godot, about nothing, to the often-cited last lines of The Unnameable (1949), “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” Part of the attraction of Beckett for readers lies in his use of minimalist language and forms. His works are symbolic, and because little action happens on stage or in text, everything becomes potentially significant. There is a great freedom of interpretation in Beckett. He never argues about why the
world is the way it is, and he himself never attempted to explain the meaning of his works, stating once that he “refuse[d] to be involved in exegesis of any kind.” Beckett did not, then, seek to provide definitive answers. Rather his works challenge our expectations: what do we do with a text that is open, free to us to read how we will, a work that is difficult both in its ‘obscurity,’ but also in its simplicity? This openness means, of course, that Beckett’s oeuvre has been interpreted through many lenses: political, psychoanalytic, religious, postcolonial, and existentialist. In reading Beckett we have an opportunity not just to explore an author whose life spans most of the twentieth century, but also the chance to negotiate different literary theories, to see how academia has treated an author who famously avoided the spotlight, and to consider what is at stake in interpretation. In short, reading Beckett allows us to consider basic questions in English Studies today: Why read? How should we read? What’s at stake, what matters about the conclusions we draw from a piece of literature?

For each class, we will read three pieces: an original text by Beckett; a chapter from a biography of Beckett; and a work of literary criticism or theory inspired by Beckett.

**Course Materials**

**Required Texts**