

ENGLISH 200: INTRODUCTION TO POETRY WRITING

Fall Semester 2013

Tu/Th 9:30–10:45 PM, Clough Hall 300

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Office hours: Tu/W/Th 11:00 AM – noon, and by appt.

TEXTS

Harmon, William, ed. *The Poetry Toolkit*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

McClatchy, J.D., ed. *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. 2nd edition. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

“As a rule, the sign that a beginner has a genuine original talent is that he is more interested in playing with words than in saying something original; his attitude is that of the old lady, quoted by E.M. Forster—‘How can I know what I think until I see what I say?’”

– W.H. Auden

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed to help participants broaden their understanding and appreciation of the craft of poetry. Bearing in mind that the English word poetry derives from the Greek *poēsis* (an act of “making”) we will approach writing as a means of producing ideas rather than simply expressing them. Throughout the semester we will be, as Auden put it, “playing with words,” and our work will focus on elements of poetry such as diction, rhythm, imagery, and arrangement. We will read a large sampling of contemporary poetry; we will do a lot of writing, from weekly exercises to polished poems; we will discuss this writing in workshop format and learn how to make it better.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Nine writing exercises
- Six poems and a final portfolio
- A poetic catalog consisting of ten reading lists
- Memorization of fourteen lines of poetry
- Active participation in workshop and written responses to poems

Writing exercises. You will complete nine writing exercises, many of which will begin with an activity in class. These exercises will push you to experiment with different registers and forms, and they will serve as a springboard for later poems.

Poems and final portfolio. Over the course of the semester you will craft six poems, and a good chunk of our time will be spent discussing them in workshop. At the end of the semester you will

submit a portfolio that includes these six poems in their original form (with my comments) and four substantial revisions. For each of your revisions you will include a brief description (2-3 paragraphs) of your writing process; for example, you might consider the changes you made to the poem's original draft and the specific techniques you used, or you might explain your choices about line lengths, verb tense, voice, and so forth.

Poetic catalog. Reading like a poet means paying close (microscopic!) attention to the inner workings of poems—and, more specifically, to the ways other poets use language. With this in mind, you will construct ten separate lists made up of poetic elements you find surprising or appealing in the poems you read. Detailed guidelines for these lists are provided on page 4.

Memorization. You will memorize at least fourteen lines of poetry (a sonnet or a few stanzas of a longer poem). Recitations are scheduled for Tuesday, November 19.

Workshop

I have divided the class into three groups, and we will workshop one group nearly every week. The formats for these workshops will change as the semester progresses, but for the first three workshops this is how it will work: The week that your group is up for workshop, you will email your poem to the class (pasted in the body of the email *and* attached as a Word document or PDF). Prior to workshop, everyone will read the poems in that week's group and write a critique of each poem in the form of a letter addressed to the author. You are required to email me all of your workshop letters, copied and pasted in the body of the email, by midnight of the day before workshop. Additionally, you will print out copies of these letters and distribute them to their respective authors at the end of the workshop. Each letter should be typed and roughly half of a double-spaced page in length. The focus of your critiques will vary depending on the week's assignment, and we will talk more about these procedures in class.

Participation

Active participation is an essential component of this course. A workshop cannot succeed unless everyone in the class attends and participates. Even if you are the quiet type, you will be expected to contribute to class discussions and to critique the work of your peers with diligence and respect. If you come to class without the required materials (poems for workshop, handouts, both books, and so forth), you will be marked as absent for the day.

Additionally, I may give quizzes. We will read a lot of poems each week, and we may not be able to discuss them all in class. Quizzes will help me keep track of your progress. These will be short (3-4 questions), and if you have done the reading you should not have trouble passing them.

Please note that the poet Dana Levin will be giving a reading on campus the evening of Thursday, November 7. Your attendance at the reading is mandatory.

POLICIES

Assignments

All work must be typed, and assignments must be submitted at the beginning of class on the scheduled due date. Late work will receive a 0 unless you have made arrangements with me beforehand. With the exception of poems submitted for workshop, I will not accept work via email.

Attendance

You are allowed three excused absences but no unexcused absences. An absence is only excused if you have contacted me before class to explain the circumstances. For each unexcused absence, your final grade will be deducted by 1/3 of a letter grade. After three excused absences, your final grade will be deducted by 1/3 of a letter grade as well. If you miss more than six workshops, you will fail the course.

Grading

Poems and final portfolio	50%
Writing exercises	20%
Poetic catalog and memorization	15%
Participation (includes attendance, quizzes and workshop letters)	15%

When evaluating writing exercises and poems, I will ask the following questions:

- 1) Does the writing fulfill the guidelines of the assignment?
- 2) Does the writing reflect sustained effort and careful presentation?
- 3) Does the writing make use of ideas and techniques we have discussed in class?
- 4) Has the writer taken risks, investing his or her imagination and intellect?

When grading your final portfolios, I will consider all of the above as well as the quality and scope of your revisions. We will talk about specific strategies for revision in class.

Because this course is workshop-based with an emphasis on revision, you will not receive letter grades for individual poems. However, I will hold conferences with you twice during the semester, and I will assign midterm grades to give you a sense of where you stand. You are always welcome—and encouraged—to discuss your progress with me.

Academic Honesty

All work in this course should be original and individual, unless I have made a group assignment. Evidence of collusion (someone helped you write the assignment), plagiarism (using someone else's published or unpublished words without acknowledgement), or multiple submissions (handing in the same work to different classes) will not be tolerated. All students are expected to honor their commitment to the Honor Code.

POETIC CATALOG

Reading like a poet means paying close (microscopic!) attention to the inner workings of poems—and, more specifically, to the ways other poets use language. With this in mind, you will construct ten separate lists made up of poetic elements you find surprising or appealing in the poems you read. Your lists will include the following categories:

- 1) Significant details (10)
- 2) Effective line breaks (5)
- 3) Descriptive verbs (10)
- 4) Useful adjectives (10)
- 5) Rhetoric: plain statement, overstatement, and understatement; label accordingly (5)
- 6) Figurative language, esp. similes and metaphors; label accordingly (10)
- 7) First lines (10)
- 8) Sound effects, esp. assonance, consonance, and alliteration; label accordingly (10)
- 9) Evocative images (10)
- 10) Last lines (10)

You may reference a single poem only once in each list—and no more than twice overall. With respect to format, your entries should provide the line(s), the author of the poem, and the poem's title. Here's a sample entry for List 6:

- “my brothers huddled like stones” – simile
Yusef Komunyakaa, “April Fools’ Day”

For Lists 2 and 4, each entry should include a sentence or two justifying your choice. Here's a sample entry for List 2:

- “For they live / only in the kingdom / of suspended wishes . . .”
Kay Ryan, “Mirage Oases”

– Here, Ryan stretches a longer sentence over short lines, changing the sense of the sentence with each new break. Much like a mirage, the poem tricks the eye and the mind.

For Lists 7 and 10, each entry should include a sentence or two describing the author's strategy for opening or closing the poem. Here's a sample entry for List 7:

- “Wait Mister. Which was is home?”
Anne Sexton, “Music Swims Back to Me”

– Sexton begins this poem in media res. As we can see from poem's first word (“wait”), the scene is already in motion, and the speaker's question propels the poem forward.

Due dates for lists are included in the assignment schedule.

SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS

Reading and writing assignments are listed on the day they are due. Unless otherwise noted, all poems referenced are from *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. “PT” refers to *The Poetry Toolkit*.

Thursday, 8/22

Introductions / syllabus review

Tuesday, 8/27

Read: PT, “The Arts of Story-Telling” (1-15)
 Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Waiting Room” (34-7)
 James Wright, “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio” (289)
 Write: Exercise 1

Thursday, 8/29

Read: Ed Hirsh, “My Father’s Back” (547-8)
 Rita Dove, “Adolescence—II” (557)
 Write: Exercise 2

Tuesday, 9/3

Read: PT, “The Arts of Story-Telling” (16-39)
 Richard Hugo, “Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg” (186-7)
 Philip Levine, “The Horse” (311-12)
 Write: Poem 1; Group A is up for workshop

Thursday, 9/5

Read: Workshop Group A
 Write: Workshop letters

Tuesday, 9/10

Read: May Swenson, “Unconscious Came a Beauty” and “Stone Gullets” (98-9)
 David Wagoner, “The Best Slow Dancer” (212-13)
 A.R. Ammons, “He Held Radical Light” (265-6)
 Galway Kinnell, “The Vow” (302)
 Write: Exercise 3

Thursday, 9/12

Read: Handout: Mark Doty, “A Tremendous Fish” (Moodle)
 James Schuyler, “Korean Mums” (176-7)
 A.R. Ammons, “Corson’s Inlet” (267-70)

Tuesday, 9/17

Read: PT, “The Arts of Character” (40-58)
 Randall Jarrell, “The Woman at the Washington Zoo” (58-9)
 Donald Justice, “The Tourist from Syracuse” (200-1)

Galway Kinnell, "The Man on the Hotel Room Bed" (302-3)
Charles Simic, "Prodigy" (437-8)

Write: Poem 2; Group B is up for workshop

Thursday, 9/19

Read: Jorie Graham, "Orpheus and Eurydice" (552-3)
Rita Dove, "Canary" (560)
Workshop Group B

Write: Workshop letters

Tuesday, 9/24

Read: William Meredith, "Country Stars" (115)
Mona Van Duyn, "The Twins" (138-9)
John Hollander, "The Mad Potter" (334-7)

Write: Poetic Lists 1 and 2

Thursday, 9/26

Read: Handout: Gary Jackson and Carol Duffy (Moodle)
Randall Jarrell, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" (58-9) and "Cinderella" (59-60)
Howard Moss, "Einstein's Bathrobe" (153-4)
Jay Wright, "Benjamin Banneker Sends his *Almanac* to Thomas Jefferson" (419-21)

Tuesday, 10/1

Read: PT, "The Arts of Sentiment" (65-81)
W.S. Merwin, "The Night of the Shirts" (261)
Anne Sexton, "Her Kind" (304-5)
Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song" (370)
Yusef Komunyakaa, "Ode to the Maggot" (538-9)

Write: Exercise 4

Thursday, 10/3

CONFERENCES

Tuesday, 10/8

Read: Denise Levertov, "Intrusion" (180)
Sylvia Plath, "The Colossus" (369-70)
Audre Lorde, "Coal" (402-3)
Li-Young Lee, "One Heart" (584)

Write: Poem 3; Group C is up for workshop

Thursday, 10/10

Read: Workshop Group C

Write: Workshop letters
Poetic Lists 3, 4, and 5

Tuesday, 10/15

FALL BREAK

Thursday, 10/17

Read: PT, "The Arts of Diction" (82-98)
Frank O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died" (208-9)
Allen Ginsberg, from "Howl" (225-9)

Write: Exercise 5
Poetic List 6

Tuesday, 10/22

Read: Robert Hayden, "Night, Death, Mississippi" (83-4)
Anne Sexton, "Music Swims Back to Me" (305-6)
Kay Ryan, "A Cat/A Future" and "The Old Cosmologists" (521-2)

Write: Exercise 6
Poetic List 7

Thursday, 10/24

Read: Handout: sonnets (on Moodle)

Tuesday, 10/29

Read: Robert Lowell, "Fishnet" (20)
William Meredith, "The Illiterate" (111)
Anthony Hecht, "The Feast of Stephen" (168-9)

Write: Exercise 7

Thursday, 10/31

Read: PT, "The Arts of Sound" (110-15; 120-9, last full paragraph on 129)
Howard Nemerov, "Storm Windows" (117-8)
Richard Wilbur, "Mind" (129)
Anthony Hecht, "Third Avenue in Sunlight" (163-4)
W.D. Snodgrass, from "Heart's Needle" (239-41)
James Merrill, "Voices from the Other World" (245-6)
Gjertrud Schnackenberg, "Signs" (572)

Tuesday, 11/5

Read: Robert Lowell, "Epilogue" (21)
Elizabeth Bishop, "The Shampoo" (28)
Theodore Roethke, "In a Dark Time" (46)
Howard Nemerov, "Learning the Trees" (121-2)
Richard Wilbur, "Hamlen Brook" (135)

Write: Write: Poem 4; Group A is up for workshop
Poetic List 8

Thursday, 11/7

Read: Workshop Group A

Write: Workshop letters

Tuesday, 11/12

Read: Donald Justice, "Mule Team and Poster" (202-3)
James Merrill, "Willowware Cup" (248-9)
Yusef Komunyakaa, "Facing It" (537-8)
Jorie Graham, "San Sepolcro" (550-1)

Write: Poem 5; Group B is up for workshop

Thursday, 11/14

Read: Elizabeth Bishop, "Poem" (38-9)
Frank O'Hara, "Why I am Not a Painter" (208)
Workshop Group B

Write: Workshop letters
Poetic Lists 9 and 10

Tuesday, 11/19

Read: Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art" (37)
Theodore Roethke, "The Waking" (44-5)

Write: Poem 6; Group C is up for workshop

→ Memorizations: 14 lines of poetry either written out or, for extra credit, recited

Thursday, 11/21

Read: Workshop Group C

Write: Workshop letters

Tuesday, 11/26

Read: TBA

Write: Exercise 8 and 9 (revision) due by Sunday, 12/1

Thursday, 11/28

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Tuesday, 12/3

Read: Group workshops

Write: Workshop comments (group workshops)

Sunday, 12/8

Final portfolios due in my office by noon