

ENGLISH 200: INTRODUCTION TO POETRY WRITING

Spring Semester 2014

M/W 2:00–3:15 PM, Palmer Hall 203

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Office hours: M/W 12:00-1:30 PM, 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

- Eight writing exercises
- Four 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 eight 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 four poems, three of which will be discussed in workshop. At the end of the semester you will submit a portfolio that

includes these four 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 Monday, 4/21.

Workshop

I have divided the class into three groups (see p. 5), and we will workshop one group at a time. The formats for these workshops may change as the semester progresses, but this is how the submission process will work:

- 1) The Monday before your group is up for workshop, you will email your poem to me **before** class (pasted in the body of the email *and* attached as a Word document). I will compile a packet of the group's poems and email it to the class later that day.
- 2) 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. 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.
- 3) You will print out copies of these letters, as well as copies of the corresponding poems, and distribute them to their respective authors at the end of the workshop.
- 4) Additionally, you are required to email me all of your workshop letters, copied and pasted in the body of the email (not attached!), by 9 PM of the day before workshop.

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 novelist Valerie Sayers will be giving a reading on campus the evening of Tuesday, March 25. Your attendance at the reading is mandatory. Information about the time and location will be announced as soon as it's available.

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) First Lines (5); include a few sentences describing the author’s strategy
- 2) Effective or Interesting Line Breaks (5); include a few sentences explaining your choice
- 3) Significant Details (10); include a few sentences explaining your choice
- 4) Descriptive Verbs (10); include a few sentences explaining your choice
- 5) Useful Adjectives (10); include a few sentences explaining your choice
- 6) Rhetoric: plain statement, overstatement, and understatement; label accordingly (5)
- 7) Figurative Language, half of which should be metaphors; label accordingly (10)
- 8) Sound Effects, esp. assonance, consonance, and alliteration); label accordingly (10)
- 9) Concrete Images (10); include a few sentences explaining your choice
- 10) Last Lines (5); include a few sentences describing the author’s strategy

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, as well as any additional information listed above.

Sample entry for List 1 (First Lines):

“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.

Sample entry for List 2 (Effective or Interesting Line Breaks):

“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.

Sample entry for List 7 (Figurative Language):

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

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*.

Workshop Group A: Amanda, Michael, Josh, Lauren, and Ashley

Workshop Group B: Emily, Mariah, Buckley, Ann, Camille, and Mary Beth

Workshop Group C: Alex, Nicole, Garrett, Johanna, and Leah

Wednesday, 1/8

Introductions / syllabus review

Monday, 1/13

Read: Handout: Mark Doty, “A Tremendous Fish” (Moodle)

Write: Exercise 1 (The Ex: a list)

Wednesday, 1/15

Read: PT, “The Arts of Story-Telling” (1-15)

Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Waiting Room” (34-7)

Monday, 1/20

MLK Day – NO CLASS

Wednesday, 1/22

Read: PT, “The Arts of Story-Telling” (16-39)

Richard Hugo, “Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg” (186-7)

James Wright, “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio” (289)

Ed Hirsh, “My Father’s Back” (547-8)

Rita Dove, “Adolescence—II” (557)

Write: Exercise 2 (Groundswell)

Monday, 1/27

Read: TBA

Write: Exercise 3 (Tabloid)

Poetic List 1 (First Lines)

Wednesday, 1/29

Read: May Swenson, “Unconscious Came a Beauty” and “Stone Gullets” (98-9)

Mona Van Duyn, “A View”

James Schuyler, “Korean Mums” (176-7)

David Wagoner, “The Best Slow Dancer” (212-13)

A.R. Ammons, “Corson’s Inlet” (267-70)

Michael S. Harper, “Dear John, Dear Coltrane”

Write: Poetic List 2 (Effective or Interesting Line Breaks)

Monday, 2/3

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 1 (from Exercise 2 or 3)

Group A emails their poems to me before class; everyone else submits hard copies

Wednesday, 2/5

Read: Jorie Graham, "Orpheus and Eurydice" (552-3)

Rita Dove, "Canary" (560)

William Meredith, "Country Stars" (115)

Mona Van Duyn, "The Twins" (138-9)

John Hollander, "The Mad Potter" (334-7)

Write: Poetic List 3 (Significant Details)

Monday, 2/10

Read: Workshop Group A

Write: Exercise 4 (Character)

Workshop letters

Wednesday, 2/12

Read: Handout: Gary Jackson and Carol Ann 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)

Monday, 2/17

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)

Ellen Bryant Voigt, "Winter Field"

Yusef Komunyakaa, "Ode to the Maggot" (538-9)

Write: Poem 2 (Character)

Group B and C email their poems to me before class; Group A submits hard copies

Wednesday, 2/19

Read: Workshop Group B

Write: Workshop letters

Monday, 2/24

Read: Workshop Group C

Write: Poetic Lists 4 (Descriptive Verbs) and 5 (Useful Adjectives)

Workshop letters

Wednesday, 2/26

Prof. Wilkinson out of town – NO CLASS

Monday, 3/3

Read: Denise Levertov, “Intrusion” (180)
Philip Levine, “The Horse” (311-12)
Sylvia Plath, “The Colossus” (369-70)
Audre Lorde, “Coal” (402-3)
Li-Young Lee, “One Heart” (584)

Write: Exercise 5 (Rhetoric)

Wednesday, 3/5

Read: PT, “The Arts of Diction” (82-98)
Robert Hayden, “Night, Death, Mississippi” (83-4)
Frank O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died” (208-9)
Allen Ginsberg, from “Howl” (225-9)
Anne Sexton, “Music Swims Back to Me” (305-6)

Write: Poetic Lists 6 (Rhetoric) and 7 (Figurative Language)

Monday, 3/10 and Wednesday, 3/12

Spring Break – NO CLASS

Monday, 3/17

Read: Handout: Sonnets (on Moodle)

Write: Exercise 6 (Diction)

Wednesday, 3/19

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

Monday, 3/24

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)

Write: Poem 3 (Sonnet)

Group A, B, and C email their poems to me before class; no need to submit hard copies

Wednesday, 3/26

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)

Monday, 3/31

Read: Workshop Group A
Write: Exercise 7 (Blank Verse)
Workshop letters

Wednesday, 4/2

Read: Workshop Group B
Write: Workshop letters

Monday, 4/7

Read: Workshop Group C
Write: Poetic List 8 (Sound Effects)
Workshop letters

Wednesday, 4/9

Read: Donald Justice, "Mule Team and Poster" (202-3)
Frank O'Hara, "Why I am Not a Painter" (208)
James Merrill, "Willowware Cup" (248-9)
Yusef Komunyakaa, "Facing It" (537-8)
Jorie Graham, "San Sepolcro" (550-1)

Monday, 4/14

Read: TBA
Write: Poetic List 9 (Concrete Images) and 10 (Last Lines)
Poem 4 (Ekphrasis)
Group A, B, and C email their poems to me before class; no need to submit hard copies

Wednesday, 4/16

Read: Group workshops
Write: Workshop letters

Monday, 4/21

Read: TBA
Write: Exercise 9 (Revision)
→ Recitations: 14 lines of poetry either written out or, for extra credit, recited

Wednesday, 4/23

Read: Group workshops
Write: Workshop letters

Wednesday, 4/30

Final Portfolios due in my office by noon