

Dr. Tina Barr

**Creative Writing: Introductory Poetry Workshop, Course 200**

Office, 307 Palmer Hall, 843-3979 at the office, 274-4905 at home. Office Hours Mondays 1:00 to 3:00 pm, Tuesdays & Thursday, 11:30 – 12:30, and by appointment. You can also email me at: [TinaBarr@rhodes.edu](mailto:TinaBarr@rhodes.edu) & [TinaBarr@bellsouth.net](mailto:TinaBarr@bellsouth.net).

**Course Description:** This class will introduce students to principles of good poetry, including prosody, through readings of work by outside writers in *Good Poems*, edited by Garrison Keillor, and through essays from Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town* and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet*. (3 texts) Students are expected to *analyze and prepare to discuss the poems and essays they read, so that they will make significant contributions to class discussion. Please don't hesitate to share your own interests with the class, by bringing in work by writers whose poems you admire.* The more each member contributes in different ways to the workshop the more interesting it will be.

A word here---students sometimes think that this course will be an "easy" one, but instead find it can be one of their most difficult classes. Most of us have written poetry to express our feelings, but poetry is an art, and it requires perhaps *more* discipline and hard work to achieve a decent poem, than to write a clear essay. You will have to relinquish the idea that you can express your feelings on paper, and that will be enough. It won't. You'll need to edit extensively, to re-think and re-write sections of your poem in order to make it a piece of thoughtful work, rather than purely and solely an expression of self. In addition, because you *are* expressing your feelings, you'll have to be willing to *examine* them and share them, and that takes courage.

**Required Texts:** *Good Poems* selected by Garrison Keillor, Viking, 2002; *The Triggering Town* by Richard Hugo, Norton, 1979 and *Letters To A Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke, Norton, 1934. (If you don't know much about prosody, also known as poetic technique, you may want to purchase Alfred Corn's *The Poem's Heartbeat* and read it on your own. I'll be teaching some prosody in class, but given the brevity of class periods, if you get lost, you'll need to catch up on your own through reading.)

**Course Requirements:**

- 1.** Students must attend carefully to the **reading requirements by preparing the reading outside of class**, and **contribute significantly to class discussion**. (30%) You must also **memorize a poem** for the last day of class.
  - 2.** Students must turn in a **portfolio** (50%) of poems at midterm and at end of term; these should consist of a folder that contains only the **final revisions** of the **best poems you have worked on from the beginning of term through midterm and then from the beginning of term through the end of the semester**. Portfolios should consist of 8-14 poems. Excellence is more important than quantity, and usually comes after careful revision. Midterm grades tend to be conservative, so grades *can* go up considerably, but *may also remain the same* for a final grade if you have been unable to improve your work.
- See next page**

**3.** Students will prepare a **10 minute (and no more because I will time you)** presentation on a poem of their choice from our anthology. On the day of their presentation they will turn in a 3 to 4 page essay. The essay should cover one technique or aspect, perhaps two, of the poem in question. **Late essays are unacceptable.** Consider these **essays (20%)** seriously. You will be graded on them. If I feel the class needs to be prodded in terms of careful attention to the assigned reading, I may surprise the class with spontaneous quizzes, which will be graded as part of class participation, and *knowledge of prosody*.

**Grading:** Grades are based on talent as demonstrated in the poems, but **achievement** in poetry is usually the result of the *work* of **editing and revising**. Writers must employ clear grammatical construction, complete sentences, and careful punctuation. They must make use of concrete imagery and careful diction. Poetry is a discipline. The use of abstract terms and generalized imagery will not result in good poetry. Careful reading of fellow students' work, careful reading of assigned texts, class participation, effort and attitude also count. The professor has been known to reduce a final grade based on attitude alone. (This falls under contributions to class discussion 30%.)

**Procedures:** Students will be responsible for turning in **two copies** of each poem they want discussed in class. One will go into the packet read and prepared for discussion; the other will go to the excellent department secretary for duplication. **The poem will be returned to the student unless he or she turns in two copies.** When packets are handed out, students should go over them before the next class period, make written comments and notations, and be prepared to offer feedback. Please note: You should prepare the weekend before, for the coming week. Sometimes we will discuss the assigned readings on Tuesdays, and the student work on Thursdays; at other times we may begin discussion with student poems on Tuesdays. Thus: "Assignment for next week" is due the following week.

**Weekly Requirements for Poems:** Students generally will turn in a poem every other week for class discussion; however they are required to complete revisions as they progress. Students should be continually revising their work. ALL students need to complete the weekly exercises, but will turn in two copies of his or her **best efforts** every other week. Thus, group A (first half of alphabet) will turn in poems on Tuesday of week 3, group B on Tuesday of week 4, etc.

**Conferences:** Conference time is built into the syllabus as part of the opportunity offered by this course. Once a student has signed up for a conference he or she must attend. **Conferences that are missed cannot be rescheduled.** Students should use this time to consult if they have difficulty with their writing, would like to share poems they'd rather the class did not see, or have questions about editing procedures. Always bring **your poetry folder to conference.**

**Attendance:** Students should miss no more than 2 classes a semester, based on a medical absence or family emergency. If you need to miss a class based on an absence of this sort, please call or email the professor. More than 2 absences may result in a reduction in the final grade for the course.

**Course Structure:** The [first half](#) of the course will be based on class discussion of outside poems, and during this explication and analysis I will be teaching you to focus on and isolate *techniques in craft, also known as prosody*. It will be your responsibility to learn about these techniques. They are based on the idea that poets use **patterns**, visual patterns and sound patterns. Poets make **rhyme or off-rhyme** sounds and their techniques for sound include **alliteration, assonance, consonance**. Poets make **images, metaphors, similes; these are pictures** based on the sensory experience of **seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling**. They create **structures** in their poems, based on patterns of **repetition, based on line lengths, stanzas, shaping**, a structure based on a **received form** like a sonnet, or a **conceived form** like Whitman's, based on biblical line length and the sound of the King James's version of the Bible in translation, or a hanging line, like William Carlos Williams's in his early work. You will learn to analyze a poem based on its **form as well as its content**. You must do this in order to prepare for the [second half](#) of the semester, which will include your presentation of a poem in the anthology edited by Keillor, *Good Poems*, and your brief technical written analysis. I want you to be able to do this verbally and in written form, in an essay. These highlighted words are terms you need to learn to use.

**Student Reports:** You should focus on 1 technical aspect of the poem you've selected to present. You should begin by giving the page number and reading the poem aloud to the class. You should then focus the discussion by asking 3 to 4 questions of your fellow class participants in order to generate discussion on this 1 technique or aspect. Your job is NOT to lecture or summarize or tell the students what the poem is about. I'll know what *you* think by reading your essay. You should take **NO MORE than 10 minutes of class time**.

**For your Essay, (3-4 pages)** focus on one to three aspects of a particular technique in a particular poem that we will NOT discuss in class, a poem that IS NOT listed on the syllabus, but is included in the anthology by Garrison Keillor that we work from. Don't try to cover every aspect of the poem unless it is extremely simple or short. For example, you might want to focus on the way a poem uses repetition (it's a. structural, b. thematic, c. emotional aspects, for example) OR your paper could focus on images OR use of sound (rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance) and meter. These are examples of 3 separate approaches to the same poem. Your questions to the class will be based on your approach in the paper. But your paper is short, and you want to write a close analysis, with *reference to the text by quoting* the words, lines, etc. you are discussing. So you must *focus* your topic. You'll need to outline your ideas ahead of time, evaluating the poem and marking aspects of it before you even think about writing. Do feel free to discuss it with me, either by telephoning me with ideas, or by email, or making an appointment with me.

**Responsibilities:** My job as your professor is to instruct you in techniques of poetic analysis and model for you the terms and approaches to that analysis during the first half of the term. That means during the first seven weeks you need to attend all classes and pay close attention. Your job is to assimilate those terms through careful attention to reading and discussion, so that you can learn how to explicate or analyze a poem, how to

find its meanings. A good poem always presents more than one meaning. A poem has meanings in the plural. It presents an array of ideas. My job is also to assist you in learning to improve your writing of poems. It is not to write the poem for you. Your job is to assimilate my suggestions and revise your work accordingly. You will not progress by assuming that you know better. You don't. You have to trust me. I've been teaching students to write since the early 1980s and my students have gone on the graduate school, publication in national journals and sometimes chapbooks and books of their own. The most difficult challenge in writing poetry is to separate your emotional defenses from making a piece of art, a finished thing, a scrutinized thing. You have to know that technique is crucial in all fields, whether it's playing basketball, taking a car engine apart, dancing, playing an instrument, driving a car, baking a cake, or writing a poem. You have to practice. You have to work. You have to measure carefully the distance between the ball and the hoop or the amount in a teaspoon, or the verb you want to use that really does some *work*.

### Week 1

Introductions, class requirements, in-class exercise, (smell/five senses) sign up for conferences next week.

*Assignment for next week:* Work on revision of draft done for in-class writing exercise. (aromatherapy) **Bring copy of poem to your conference. If you were unable to sign up for a conference, call and arrange a time.** Read Letters One, Three, and Four in Rilke's *Letters To A Young Poet*. Read in Hugo's *The Triggering Town* chapters 1 and 2. All students will turn in **two copies** of the revised drafts of the aromatherapy exercise on Tuesday, 9/7 during the class period.

### Week 2, 8/31 & 9/2                      Conference Week.

**See Dr. Barr in Palmer 307, her office, during the conference time you scheduled on the first day of class. She will post the list on her office door. Bring your typed-up drafts of the in-class exercise, aromatherapy, when you come to conference. Even if you did not manage the exercise well, or feel embarrassed, bring what you wrote regardless, she will help you with it, and this will be an opportunity to get to know the professor better!**

### Week 3, 9/7, no class on 9/9, Barr giving reading in California

Turn in revisions of aromatherapy poem. Barr drafts. Discussion of Hugo and Rilke's ideas. In class writing exercise. (flower or paper)

*Assignment for next week* Read poems in *Good Poems* edited by Garrison Keillor in chapter 11, Failure, (!) by Emily Dickinson, page 253, Wendell Berry, page 255, with attention to **patterns** of sound and image. With the same notion of pattern in mind, read Stephen Dunn's poem about lovers, "After the Argument" on page 131 & 132, as well as his poem "A Secret Life," on page 218 and "From the Manifesto of the Selfish" on 223.

Write a poem about failure. Turn in **2 copies** of a poem on the date your poems are due. Group B will turn in poems on Tuesday. Read in Rilke's *Letters* number 7 & 8. Read the whole book if you want.

**Week 4, 9/14 & 9/16** Stephen Dunn reads in Blount at 7:30pm on 9/15. Attendance is mandatory.

Discussion of anthology poems & student poems.

*Assignment for next week* Group A will turn on poems on Tuesday. (Remember to complete ALL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS.) Read poems by Robert Burns, "A Red, Red Rose," (93) and "Comin thro' the Rye," (page 113) William Butler Yeats, "He Wishes For the Cloths of Heaven," and "Politics," Maxine Kumin "Magellan Street, 1974." Revise and work on poems. Read on page 48 & 49 Billy Collins' poem, "Nightclub" and "Passengers," page 291 & 292.

**Week 5, 9/21 & 9/23** Billy Collins reads on 9/22 in the Ballroom. Attendance is mandatory.

Discussion of poems by Billy Collins, poems on love, as well as student poems.  
Discussion of poems and grading, including examples of poems.

*Assignment for next week* Write a poem about love, **but** the love could be between child and parent, owner and dog, gardener and tulips, you and football, you and a red dress. It doesn't *have* to be a poem on love between lovers. Read poems in "O Lord" section of Keillor anthology. Focus on "How Many Nights," by Galway Kinnell and "Welcome Morning," by Anne Sexton. Group B will turn in poems on Tuesday.

**Week 6, 9/28 & 9/30**

Discussion of anthology poems & student poems.

*Assignment for next week:* Write a poem about some spiritual or religious feeling. Group A poems due 10/12. Sign up for a conference with Dr. Barr. Bring the poems you've been working on and all drafts with you.

**Midterm portfolios due on 10/12, no exceptions.**

**Week 7, 10/5 & 10/7 conference week**

**Week 8, 10/12 & 10/14**

**Portfolios Due 10/12, discussion of student poems. In class writing. Fall Break until October 21<sup>st</sup>.**

*Assignment over Break:* Read section on A Day in the Keillor text and focus on poems entitled “Routine,” by Arthur Guiterman, the poem on page 34 by Emily Dickinson, “Letter to NY,” by Elizabeth Bishop and “From Song of Myself,” by Walt Whitman.

**Week 10, 10/21**

In-class discussion, group “essay” outlines on technique, & exercise---(self-portrait)

*Assignment for next week:* Read in Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town*, chapters 4 and 5. Write a poem based on the idea of “A Day.” Revise exercise. Group B poems due on 10/26. Read poems on “Music” in *Good Poems* and focus on “Her Door,” by Mary Leader, “The Pupil” by Donald Justice, “Piano” by D.H. Lawrence, “Instrument of Choice,” by Robert Phillips, and “The Grain of Sound” by Robert Morgan.

**Week 10, 10/26 & 10/28**

Discussion of poems on Music. Four student reports. Discussion of group B poems.

*Assignment for next week:* Write a poem on “music.” Listen to a piece of music.

**Week 11, 11/2 & 11/4**

Four Student Reports on poems. Discussion of group A poems.

*Assignment for next week:* Read in *Good Poems* chapter 6, A Day’s Work, and focus on “Ox Cart Man,” by Donald Hall, “Mae West,” by Edward Field, “Hay for the Horses,” by Gary Snyder. Write a poem based on A Day’s Work.

**Week 12, 11/9 & 11/11**

Discussion of poems by Hall, Field, Snyder. Groups A & B Student poems. Four Student Reports.

*Assignment for next week:* Read in *Good Poems* the section on Sons and Daughters, and focus on poems by Tom Lux, “A Little Tooth,” “My Life Before I Knew It,” by Larry Raab, “Manners” by Elizabeth Bishop, “Family Reunion,” by Maxine Kumin. Write a poem about this arena of subject. Work on revisions of your poems. **Pick a poem you want to memorize, from any period, by any poet, to recite on the last day of class. It can be a poem we have discussed. Begin to memorize it.**

**Week 13, 11/16 & 11/18**

Discussion of poems by Lux, Raab, Bishop and Kumin, Three student reports, and student poems by groups A and B.

Sign up for conferences for next week. Final Portfolio due on 12/7.

**Week 14, Conferences on Monday & Tuesday instead of class----** Week of Thanksgiving Break

*Assignment for next week:* **Work on revisions of poems in preparation for turning in your portfolio on 12/7.** Groups A and B turn in poems for discussion on 11/30. Bring enough copies for everyone; you will have to do your own Xeroxing for Tuesday.  
**Continue to work on memorizing a poem.**

**Week 15, 11/30 & 12/2**

Discussion of student poems and evals. On 12/7 turn in portfolio. Have a poem memorized for 12/7.

**Final Week, 12/7**

Last Class, recite memorized poems, class party, turn in portfolio