

3150: Intermediate Poetry Writing/ The Modern Tradition

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Monday: 3:30-4:30 at Aura Coffee, or by appointment.

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Required Text:

Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry: Volume 1 Modern Poetry.

Ramazani, Ellmann, and O'Clair, ed. (Norton).

Reading Schedule: The Modern Tradition:

Week 1 (August 21): Introduction.

Week 2 (August 18): Whitman. Pgs. 1-22

(September 4): Labor Day

Week 3 (September 11): Dickinson.

Week 4 (September 18): Yeats. Pgs. 100-124

Week 5 (September 25): Toomer, Frost.

Week 6 (October 2): Stevens. Pgs. 235-255.

Week 7 (October 9): Eliot. Pgs. 463-471.

Week 8 (October 16): H.D. Pgs. 393-395, 401-413. Moore. Pgs. 430-447.

Week 9 (October 23): Langston Hughes.

Week 10 (October 30): Owen.

Week 11 (November 6): Auden. Pgs. 783-787, 797-808.

Week 12 (November 13): McKay.

(November 20): Thanksgiving week

Week 13 (November 27): work on revisions for final Portfolio.

Week 14 (December 4): Final week of class. Final portfolio due.

Work requirements:

1. Poems for Workshop.

Students will hand in poems (typed, single-spaced, no longer than two pages) for class commentary at least a week before they are to be discussed in class. This work must be xeroxed by each author and distributed to the students in the class (a total of 20 copies). I will hand out assignments as prompts but students are free to depart from the prompt if useful.

Due dates:

Poem 1: August 18

Poem 2: September 25

Poem 3: October 16

Poem 4: November 6

A final poem 5 is to be included in your final portfolio (December 4).

2. Criticism of each other's work.

Students are expected to read each other's work with generous attention and be prepared to discuss the work in the spirit of genuine and discriminating helpfulness. The sooner we can

build trust among us as invested in each other's progress as artists, the sooner we can move into the kind of thoughtful, honest, and close critical engagement that distinguishes the best workshop communities. Always work toward a balance of affirming strengths and exploring possible opportunities for development. Also, you are expected to make some written comments on the student poems submitted for workshop (either in the poem's margins or in paragraph form on a separate sheet of paper). Please come to class prepared with these comments since you will be expected to offer oral criticism on a regular basis. Also, please write your name as commentator at the top of the page. After workshop discussions, your comments on students' poems will be distributed to their authors for their eventual inclusion in their final portfolios.

3. Reading.

As I am sure most of us know by now, there is no possible way you can become a great writer without becoming a great reader. You are expected throughout the semester to read poems avidly and carefully with the aim of continuously evolving your sense of aesthetic possibilities. Please bring the anthology to each class.

4. Reading responses.

You are expected to write each week a one half to one page, double-spaced, typed response to one poem from your reading for that week. These responses will comprise a kind of reading journal to be handed in as part of the portfolio to be turned in at the end of the semester. You may respond to a poet (from our book or some other credible anthology) not on the reading list if you'd prefer, but please respond to a poem by a different author each week. In any case, please do the assigned reading for each week.

You will be developing more illuminating ways of discussing the intricate bodies of poems as the semester unfolds. I encourage you to pay critical attention to issues related to language (such as syntax, diction, form, music, irony, metaphor, symbol, voice), elements that will help you learn about your medium and how to become a better writer with more tools at your disposal. Avoid discussing poems exclusively on the basis of your personal, biographical relation to subject matter—no doubt an important issue, but easy to surmise and less true to the language-attentive spirit necessary to becoming a great writer. Also void unfocused claims that hinge merely on the fact that you like or don't like something or that settle for some vague superlative that has not been earned by attention to detail. Your expanding awareness of both word and world will feed your imagination, your love, your art.

5. In-class writing.

In response to prompts, you will be expected to do some in-class writing. Such spontaneous exercises will be followed by a voluntary recitation and appreciation by the class. My experience has been that students often find this process one of their favorite elements of the course. That said, it works best when people feel a sense of permission and affirmation. To that end, one need not feel judged or as if a grade is in jeopardy based the quality of this writing. All I ask is that you try. Include the fruits of these in-class writing exercises in your final portfolio.

6. Final portfolio.

Contains all your workshop poems, revisions of these poems, in-class writing, written criticisms from other students, and your reading responses. **DUE: Final day of class.**

Attendance:

Since this class is a workshop, attendance is essential. Nothing is more important to my evaluation of your seriousness. If you leave at break, you are absent. Know that more than two absences will result in a lowering of the student's grade by one grade point. The more you are in class, the more you know. I understand the desire to find out via email what happened in class, but so much will happen in each class, that questions is, by its nature, impossible to answer.

Grading:

In the spirit of allowing for grades to motivate rather than discourage, you should know in advance that in order to get a C or better in this class, the already discussed requirements must first be met. A grade of D or F signifies a failure to meet these requirements. A grade of B or A signifies signs of excellence in the following:

- 1) the student's poems themselves (**especially your revisions**: a high premium placed on willingness and ability to improve)
- 2) the careful critical engagement of writing by others
- 3) attendance/ participation (including in-class writing)
- 4) weekly reading responses

As is the case in any English class, just what constitutes excellence in a given piece of writing is a question that will be begged throughout the semester. In an effort to make the workshop into something truly useful, something generously informative and intellectually challenging, you are encouraged as much as possible to articulate the basis of judgement rather than simply asserting a mere declaration of taste. More important even than your conclusions is your method in arriving at them--that is, the level of care and intimate, focused participation reflected in your detail and rationale.

This is as much a class in the art of reading as it is in the art of writing, the two obviously feeding one another. It is important that we maintain as much as possible a constructive and process-oriented approach, ever open to new possibilities and challenges, curious about our cultural context, committed to the livelihood of the poem at hand. Each poem is potentially a stepping stone to others, ever more ambitious, vibrant, imaginative, and fresh. Perhaps one of the greatest virtues of the workshop is that it makes immediate the challenges, rewards, and frustrations of having a readership. In so doing it confronts us continually with the paradox of language, and literature for that matter, as both private and public in nature. As a somewhat simplified rule, our role as participants in a productive community is to explore what a poem says, how it says it, and whether it is worth saying.

Contract

My singular motive as your professor is to do whatever I can to help you to become a better writer. I fully dedicate myself to that.

By staying in this course, I ask students to agree to the following terms:

1. You are free to do what you want with your poems. I in turn must be free to be honest. This, I have found, is what serious students crave.
2. I also want you to leave class eager to write. To this end I try to be supportive and yet challenging in accordance with each student's needs and level of experience. The process matters deeply to me, but we all depend as well on the commitment of students in a workshop to create an atmosphere most conducive to growth.
3. Do not feel shy in challenging assumptions or asking questions. No learning environment can credibly be called serious if it ceases to tolerate self-interrogation. Same goes for artists.
4. I grade you more on how good a student of poetry you are, as opposed how great a writer you are. Thus I look to evidence of commitment and the depth of one's engagement in the craft.
5. If you ever have any concerns or problems along the way, I hope you will talk to me about them, so I can do whatever is within my power to help you.

This is a class in which writers are freely encouraged to write about whatever matters most to them. In other words, the human condition. The inclusiveness of that calling suggests as well that the most precise writing calls upon what makes us human, which is to say, our humanity. It also can open up the possibility of student poems with themes and language that other students find offensive. In many cases, offensiveness can be a productive matter of discussion where we explore different points of view, but if you have particular anxiety issues related to past trauma and feel comfortable letting me know in private, please do, and I will do everything I can to make this class a successful experience for all concerned. If you write something that, in your best judgement, might provoke a non-productive breed of anxiety in other students, please write a content warning at the top of your poem.