

Topics in Literature: Reading Modern Poetry

“American Poiesis: Imagining the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”

Hartwick College
ENGL 250-B (3 Credits)
Fall 2017

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TuTh 10:10 – 11:40 am, Clark Hall 252

Office Hours: Tu 3:30 – 5:00
and by appointment

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*

Required Texts

Dickinson, Emily. *Dickinson: Poems*. Everyman's Library, 1993.
Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land and Other Writings*. Modern Library, 2002.
Hejinian, Lyn. *My Life and My Life in the Nineties*. Wesleyan, 2013.
Moore, Marianne. *Complete Poems*. Penguin, 1994.
O'Hara, Frank. *Lunch Poems*. City Lights, 1964.
Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf, 2014.
Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855 Edition*. Dover, 2007.

Catalog Description

A study of various authors, themes, movements, genres, with attention to their historical context. May be repeated with different course content.

Course Description and Purpose

For thousands of years poetry has been one of the principal forms humans have employed when trying to understand themselves and the world into which they are thrown. But it would not be terribly shocking to suggest that today most people do not read poetry. Other forms of media have not only replaced it as a dominant cultural form, but some might even claim that poetry has been relegated to “the ash bin of history.” Why is this? Why has poetry mostly vanished from our collective cultural landscape, read primarily by a small group of people that include academics, poets themselves, or, in many cases like your own, college students who are required to take some form of English course? Is it because of a common conception of poetry as “difficult”? Or has the increased speed of contemporaneity, the hyper-accumulation of texts, and the short attention spans encouraged by twenty-first-century discursive forms (texting, blogging, YouTube, Twitter, et cetera) done a kind of violence to the practice of reading poetry? Is there

simply too much stuff available for our perusal to give to poetry the kind of attention which it not only deserves but often requires in order to be read at all? In other words, *why read poetry?*

This course is purposely structured, both in its readings and in its writing assignments, to provide entrance points into the questions above, specifically around further questions pertaining to *interpretation, the imagination, representation, history, identity, politics, and modernity*. Reading *Modern Poetry*, whose subtitle is “American *Poiesis*: Imagining the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” will consist of rigorous and expansive engagement with important works by United States writers, including Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Lyn Hejinian, Marianne Moore, Frank O’Hara, Claudia Rankine, and Walt Whitman.

These poets have been selected because each provides a space from which to investigate the procession of modernity in the US in relationship to the poetic utterance—i.e., what can poetry do and what is its role in an increasingly mechanized, mediated, violent, war-torn, rapidly paced, and objectified world? What can the imagination, in attempting to represent the world, produce through the poetic utterance in a world increasingly deaf to its call? We will be consistently asking difficult questions, we will be reading some fairly challenging poetry, and we will be writing thoughtful, engaged criticism, but it is the contention of this course that understanding the world through poetry can offer valuable tools for navigating some of the transformations of the early twenty-first century.

Learning Outcomes

In addition to the basic skills of literary and poetic analysis, students in this course will: 1) learn to interpret poems closely and carefully; 2) learn to make critical arguments supporting their interpretation of individual texts; 3) learn to situate poems within their cultural, political, social, and literary context; and 4) learn to draw upon the work of others to support their analyses.

Course Requirements and Assignments

Texts—Students will be required to have read and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts for each class meeting. This also entails that students bring the texts to class, whether the book or *printouts* of the .pdfs from D2L. Additional readings for the course (see below) can be found under the “Readings” section of D2L. *Failure to bring the assigned text(s) to class will count as an absence*. Do not let the content of or common preconceptions about this course fool you (i.e., poetry is generally short): this course asks students to read *quite* a bit, and *very* carefully. Our meetings and discussions will depend upon the rigorous, intelligent, and frequent involvement of each and every participant of the class, and this involvement is simply not possible if students do not come to class prepared. All students must obtain the edition of the texts specified above. Unless individual arrangements are made with the instructor, electronic versions of the texts will not be permitted. Students should expect to read around 75–150 pages per week.

Papers—Students will be asked to write two essays of 4–6 pages and a final paper of 7–10 pages during the course of the semester, along with five short papers of around 2 pages each. These papers are designed to build upon one another in preparation for your final paper. Their percentage of your grade will reflect this process. All papers should be proofread and polished. They should be typed, double-spaced, in 12 point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins, and should accord to MLA guidelines for citation and format.¹ Students who do not

¹ I would *highly* recommend that students purchase the indispensable 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook* (2016). For a good website on MLA style visit <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. I urge students *not* to rely

follow directions or fail to meet the basic requirements of an assignment—e.g., not meeting the page requirement,² failing to format a paper correctly, or failing to upload a paper to D2L—will automatically cost that student a *minimum* of 5% of their grade (so B+ to B-, B to C+/B-, et cetera). Papers will be assessed primarily on the *strength of their argument, the quality of their idea, and the rigor of their analysis*. Due dates for these papers are below. The assignments will follow. All papers *must* be handed in as hard copies in class *and* submitted on D2L. There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically upload your papers.

Quizzes—Students will often be given unannounced short quizzes on the assigned material. Students who have done the reading will, for the most part, find these quizzes quite manageable. Students who fail a quiz will lose two points off the possible fifteen points of their participation grade. If you do the math, multiple failed quizzes could dramatically lower your grade. Unless otherwise informed, all quizzes are open book.

Participation—As we will be engaged with critically reading texts and exploring them together in class, an absolutely crucial part of this course is student participation. Though I will lecture from time to time, the class is conceived as a collective inquiry into the subject matter and class time will primarily be based around discussion that privileges students’ thinking, reading, and writing. I am quite excited to delve into the material, as I see it as both quite challenging and, in all honesty, quite fun. But this class will be a two-way street and will require the input of all its participants. I am completely aware that some students may be more vocal than others, but if I see a student consistently attempting to add to the discussion, I will take this into consideration. I have a habit of a rambling a bit, so please help me with this by asking questions of me if you are unclear. Asking questions can be an excellent way of participating. Since this class will rely heavily on student participation, your attendance is a necessity. More than three absences can be grounds for failure, in which case you may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances. Also, anyone observed using their mobile phone or another digital device during class, whether I call attention to it or not, will be marked absent for the day. Phones will not be tolerated in this class, and the use of laptops or tablets in this course will not be permitted unless special arrangements are made with the instructor.³

Grading

Participation: 15%

Short Papers: 10%

Essay 1: 15%

Essay 2: 20%

Final: 40%

on EndNote or software found in Microsoft Word or online to format your “Works Cited” pages, for your citations will more often than not be incorrect, especially since MLA style was recently updated and older software may not reflect recent changes. Students should also note that each text for the course has been correctly cited in MLA format either in the “Required Texts” section above or in the Endnotes below (in other words, there is little excuse for incorrect citations).

² 4–6 pages means that the paper must be at *least 4 full pages* (i.e., not 3 ½ or 3 ¾ pages). Students will not be penalized for going over the page requirement (within reason).

³ On how information is more fully retained if notes are taken by hand rather than on a computer, see Meyer, Robinson. “To Remember a Lecture Better, Take Notes by Hand.” *Atlantic*, 1 May 2014,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/05/to-remember-a-lecture-better-take-notes-by-hand/361478/>.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism is a serious and intellectually inexcusable offense, and it will simply not be tolerated. It will result in an immediate zero for the assignment and I will file a formal charge with the Office of Academic Affairs; plagiarism could also result in more serious action, including a student failing the class completely and being suspended from the College. *Plagiarism includes: lack of proper citations when quoting from someone else's work, representing someone else's work as your own, and knowingly allowing one's work to be submitted by someone else.* This should ultimately be a fun and stimulating class, and there is absolutely no reason for you not to take advantage of being able to do your own work and discuss it in an academic environment. Violations of Hartwick's Academic Honesty policy are not limited to plagiarism—for example, cheating and submitting a paper to more than one class would constitute violations—so students should familiarize themselves with Hartwick College's policy on academic honesty at: <https://www.hartwick.edu/academics/student-services/academic-affairs/academic-policies/>.

Academic Adjustments and Modifications

Hartwick College is committed to upholding and maintaining all aspects of the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. If a student with a disability wishes to request academic adjustments, they should contact Erin Braselmann, Director of AccessAbility Services, at braselmann@hartwick.edu, or AccessAbilityServices@hartwick.edu. AccessAbility Services is located on the 5th floor of Yager Hall in the Center for Student Success. Any information regarding a student's disability will remain confidential. Requests for academic adjustments should be made as early as possible. Students must present me with an updated Academic Plan Letter for the 2017–2018 academic year in order to be eligible for academic adjustments.

The Writing Center

Located in Clark Hall 230, the Writing Center offers events, courses, and one-on-one tutorials for students. Tutors can help you with your writing for classes or any writing project, and can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a tutor once or regularly over the course of the semester; the Writing Center will also respond to queries via email. In some cases, I may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can seek assistance on your own. Their services are free. You can browse the services at <https://www.hartwick.edu/academics/student-services/writing-center/>, or make an appointment by emailing wcenter@hartwick.edu or calling (607) 431-4910.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a College e-mail address (username@hartwick.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the College for official communication with students and I will also communicate with students via their hartwick.edu address. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to communications from either the College or from me in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to communications sent to their Hartwick e-mail address.

Special Assistance

Hartwick offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties. The Counseling Center is located in the Perrella Health Center and offers psychological services and sexual assault services. Appointments can be made Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm, by calling (607) 431-4420 or emailing counselingcenter@hartwick.edu.

Statement on Classroom Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion, or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

Calendar⁴

- 8.29 Introduction
Syllabus
Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro”¹
- 8.31 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”²
William Carlos Williams, “This is Just to Say”³
Kenneth Koch, “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams”⁴
Lynn Emanuel, “The Politics of Narrative: Why I Am a Poet”⁵
- 9.5 **Short Paper 1 Due**
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet”⁶
Walt Whitman, preface to *Leaves of Grass* (pp. 3–20)
- 9.7 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (pp. 21–68)
- 9.12 **Short Paper 2 Due**
Re-read Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (pp. 21–68)
- 9.14 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (pp. 69–109)
- 9.19 **Short Paper 3 Due**
Emily Dickinson, *Dickinson: Poems* (pp. 17–69)
- 9.21 Emily Dickinson, *Dickinson: Poems* (pp. 73–139)
- 9.26 **Short Paper 4 Due**
Emily Dickinson, *Dickinson: Poems* (140–97)
- 9.28 Emily Dickinson, *Dickinson: Poems* (201–48)
- 10.3 **Essay 1 Due**
T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (pp. 99–108 and pp. 3–7)
- 10.5 Mary Karr, “How to Read ‘The Waste Land’ So It Alters Your Soul Rather Than Just Addling Your Head,” in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (pp. ix–xxviii)
T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (pp. 38–56)
- 10.10 Re-read T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (pp. 38–56)
- 10.12 T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (pp. 8–37)
- 10.17 No Class, October Break
- 10.19 Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (pp. 5–52)
- 10.24 Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (pp. 53–91)
- 10.26 Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (pp. 96–151)

⁴ Additional readings may be assigned when appropriate. For ease with citation, bibliographic endnotes to the additional readings have been provided below in MLA Style.

- 10.31 **Essay 2 Due**
Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* (pp. 1–41)
- 11.2 Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* (pp. 42–82)
- 11.7 Lyn Hejinian, “Barbarism”⁷
Lyn Hejinian, *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* (pp. 3–51)
- 11.9 No Class, Class Canceled
- 11.14 Lyn Hejinian, *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* (pp. 52–100)
- 11.16 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (pp. 1–55)
- 11.21 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (pp. 59–113)
- 11.23 No Class, Thanksgiving Break
- 11.28 **Short Paper 5 Due**
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (pp. 114–61)
- 11.30 Mark Edmundson, “Poetry Slam”⁸
Ben Lerner, “The Hatred of Poetry”⁹
- 12.7 **8:00 am – 11:00 am**
Final Papers Due
Class Wrap-Up and Final Lecture

Endnotes

Epigraph: Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Life and Literary Opinions*. Vol. 7, edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, Princeton UP, 1983, p. 304.

¹ Pound, Ezra. “In a Station of the Metro.” 1913. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed., edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, W. W. Norton, 2005, p. 1297.

² Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense.” 1873. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, translated and edited by Ronald Speirs, edited by Raymond Geuss, Cambridge UP, 1999, pp. 139–53.

³ William Carlos Williams. “This is Just to Say” .1934. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed., edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, W. W. Norton, 2005, p. 1274.

⁴ Koch, Kenneth. “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams.” 1962. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed., edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, W. W. Norton, 2005, p. 1693.

⁵ Emanuel, Lynn. “The Politics of Narrative: Why I am a Poet.” *Then, Suddenly*, University of Pittsburgh P, 1999, pp. 16–19.

⁶ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The Poet.” 1844. *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, Modern Library, pp. 287–306.

⁷ Hejinian, Lyn. “Barbarism.” 1995. *The Language of Inquiry*, U of California P, pp. 318–36.

⁸ Edmundson, Mark. “Poetry Slam: Or, The Decline of American Verse.” *Harper's*, vol. 327, no. 1958, July 2013, pp 61–68.

⁹ Lerner, Ben. “The Hatred of Poetry.” Manuscript. Originally published as: Lerner, Ben. *The Hatred of Poetry*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jake Wolff for the language used in the “Learning Outcomes” section of this syllabus.