

Creative Writing: Poetry

Hartwick College
ENGL 312-C (4 Credits)
Fall 2017

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12:20 – 2:20, Clark Hall 329

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

“If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way.”

—Emily Dickinson, quoted in a letter by Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Required Texts

Bök, Christian. *The Xenotext (Book 1)*. Coach House, 2015.
Forché, Carolyn. *The Angel of History*. HarperPerennial, 1995.
Koch, Kenneth. *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. Touchstone, 1999.
Lerner, Ben. *The Lichtenberg Figures*. Copper Canyon, 2004.
McDonough, Jill. *Reaper*. Alice James, 2017.
Smith, Tracy K. *Life on Mars*. Graywolf, 2011.

Prerequisites

The successful completion of ENGL 213 (Introduction to Creative Writing) or EDUC 214 is a prerequisite.

Catalog Description

Practice in the writing of poetry; exercises in form. Readings in prosody, poetics, and contemporary poetry. Does not count as a literature course. (EL)

Course Description and Purpose

Welcome to Creative Writing: Poetry. In this course you will read the work of published poets, compose poems of your own, and study poetics (that is, critical writing about poetry). Building upon work you have already done in Introduction to Creative Writing, the primary focus of this class will be honing your *craft* in a workshop setting by engaging with the “nuts and bolts” of writing, the techniques, choices, and strategies that will allow you to continue to explore your poetic voice. We will cover a wide range of contemporary poetry in order to learn about and explore the formal elements necessary for successful poetic composition. Along with paying careful attention to the effective use of image, metaphor, line-breaks, sound, shape, and voice in poems, we will also be particularly interested in working within both established and invented forms. This focus on *form* is geared toward giving us a better understanding of the various writers we will be reading and for helping workshop participants to explore the power and necessity of *limitation* in their own work.

Further, we will be discussing a wide range of poets (some I will assign; some you will discover on your own). It is essential for a writer to develop ways of thinking and talking critically about the work of others and to be aware of the literary, cultural, economic, social, and political milieu in which they reside, so you should be prepared to read a substantial amount of poetry concerned with contemporary issues. We will carefully engage with the work of such renowned poets as Christian Bök, Carolyn Forché, Kenneth Koch, Ben Lerner, Jill McDonough, and current US poet laureate Tracy K. Smith. Encountering the work of these poets will prepare you to think about broad issues within twenty-first century poetics, analyze and assess other students' writing, and evaluate your own compositions. These writers will also invite us to think about the role and function of poetry at the present time. It will probably come as no surprise if I suggest to you that to be alive in 2017 is to exist in a time of crisis. Given the political, economic, and social realities of our era, many are questioning the relevance and value of the arts and humanities (to say nothing of poetry!). Against much of the doom and gloom that dominates so much of today's discourse, one of the contentions of this class is that poetry remains an essential human activity for not only *responding* to the various crises of contemporaneity, but for *thinking, imagining, building, and creating* a different, better world. So I am eager to see what we can imagine and create together.

How This Course Works

The main concern of this class is *your* writing, and because of that, though we will be extensively reading and critically writing about the work of established poets, you will be asked to bring in a substantial amount of your own work. At its most simple, you will be expected to write a poem every week. Sometimes these poems will be composed in response to specific assignments and sometimes you will have the freedom to write whatever you would like. But for at least the first poem or so, I would simply like to see where you are at.¹

The primary way we will focus on your writing will be during class in a traditional writing workshop. If you look below on the calendar, though some deviation exists, the first half of class will be predominantly devoted to discussing the assigned reading on Tuesdays and to student presentations on Thursdays, and the second half of most classes will be devoted to conversations about student writing. It is rare for me to deviate from a course calendar, so come ready to discuss the various texts expected to be covered or workshopped each day.

Workshops will be run in a more or less a traditional manner. Each student will have about 25 or so minutes devoted to their work by the class every two to three weeks. After the class roster has been solidified, I will hand out a workshop schedule and I will assign a primary reader for each student. The primary reader will be principally responsible for responding to their assigned writer's work. This means that the primary reader should write extensive notes, comments, and critiques on *each* piece of writing from this student, along with writing a 1–2-page reflection on that students' writing each time they are workshopped. The primary reader will also be responsible for opening up the conversation about that person's writing: making

¹ Though I will not generally put limits on what you can write about in this class, a disclaimer is necessary: Creative writing classes are sometimes inaccurately presumed to be places to work through personal issues rather than spaces in which to rigorously study the practice of an *art*. Obviously students will be drawing upon their own experiences, but they should keep in mind that this is principally a course on *craft* and *form*. Consequently, I urge students to try to stay away from overly sentimental issues (e.g., a recently deceased grandparent) or subjects that often result in cliché (e.g., a romantic relationship in high school gone wrong). Though powerful writing about such subjects can be and obviously has been produced, these subjects can lead students away from the primary focus of this class: learning and practicing the basic formal elements of poetic composition.

initial comments and asking a few key questions that will lead into a productive class discussion. In addition, each student will be expected to write brief comments on *everyone's* writing—all of it—though these comments do not need to be encyclopedic.

In workshops, students will read their work aloud, followed by someone else reading it aloud, with an ensuing group discussion of the writing and the issues of craft presented by the piece. During workshop, the student whose work is being discussed will remain silent until the end, at which time they will be able to ask questions (note: not provide explanations). Though we will of necessity be honest and forthright in the criticism of our peers' work, all members of the workshop should strive to make their criticism *generous* and *constructive*. Comments during workshop should aspire not only to improve the work but to better situate it within a student's larger project as a writer. Rather than "nitpicking" about small things, I will always be more interested in the bigger ideas at stake and the specific issues of craft and form in a student's writing, so please be aware of this and *always* be respectful of your peers in whatever discussion we are having.²

Learning Outcomes

In addition to the basic skills of literary and poetic analysis, students in this course will: 1) learn to identify conventional creative writing techniques; 2) learn to read as writers and use this knowledge to more successfully write and discuss poetry; and 3) learn to produce poems that demonstrate an understanding of literary and formal conventions while also articulating a personal artistic vision.

Other Course Requirements and Assignments

Texts—As this course is structured around the knowledge that becoming a strong, careful reader of poetry is essential for beginning to develop as a poet, students will be required to have read and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts for each class meeting, including the writing of your peers. This also entails that students bring the texts to class, whether the book, *printouts* of the .pdfs from D2L, or copies of your peers' work. 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.* Please do not let the nature of this class fool you, as students sometimes assume that little writing or reading is involved with poetry (because poetry is most often fairly short); on the contrary, 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 me, electronic versions of the texts will not be permitted. Students should expect to read between 35 and 75 pages per week.

Portfolio—Submitted during the week of final exams, the portfolio will represent the culmination of your work throughout this semester and will make up the most significant portion of your grade. Your portfolio should include all the original poems you wrote with my comments on them and eight newly revised poems. The writing in the portfolio should consist of what you feel best represents the work you did in this course. The eight revised poems should display an

² In general, I prefer trying to figure out what a piece *is* saying, what it *means*, what *work* it is doing, what it is *accomplishing*, et cetera, before beginning the activity of saying what a piece should be doing differently.

awareness of the various issues that were discussed in class, thoughtful revisions based on comments provided during workshop and in written feedback, and the final drafts should be polished, finished writing (ostensibly ready for publication). The writing submitted in your portfolio should also display a firm grasp of the conventions and craft of poetry that we discussed throughout the semester. More details about the expectations for your portfolio will be provided later in the semester.

Individual Poetry Assignments—Throughout the semester you will be asked to complete a number of individual poetry assignments. These will not be graded, though they will be returned to you with my comments after each of your workshops. For reasons of logistics, poems will not be accepted late. Failure to turn in a poem will cost a student 7% off their final portfolio grade. (So, for example, if a student does not turn in three poems, the highest possible grade they could receive on their portfolio would be a C+ [79%.]) The due dates for poems are below. The assignments will follow. All poems *must* be handed in as hard copies in class to me *and* to every other member of the class; they *must also* be uploaded to D2L (that way, if you have to miss class, you will still receive credit for turning in your assignment on time and they will be available digitally to your peers). There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically upload each of your poems.

D2L Uploads—So that it is easy for *all* members of the class to easily find someone’s writing on D2L, please save all files in the following format: Last Name, First Name--Poem ##. So, for example: Fest, Bradley--Poem 01.

Workshop—Most days, we will be discussing the work of two different members of the class in a workshop. Each member of the class is responsible for reading and commenting on each piece of writing that student has completed since their last workshop. Students effort in workshop and during the discussion of assigned readings will factor into their overall participation grade.

Essays—Students will be asked to a critical essay of 5–6 pages near the end of the semester. This paper is designed to allow you to reflect upon our discussions of the readings and the issues of craft we will explore, and should demonstrate thoughtful, critical engagement with the writing of others. 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.³ Students who do not follow directions or fail to meet the basic requirements of the essay assignment—e.g., not meeting the page requirement,⁴ 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- → C+, B → C+/B-). Papers will be assessed primarily on the *strength of their argument, the quality of their idea, and the rigor of their analysis regarding elements of*

³ 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 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 no excuse for incorrect citations).

⁴ 5–6 pages means that the paper must be *at least 5 full pages* (i.e., not 4 ½ or 4 ¾ pages). Students will not be penalized for going over the page requirement (within reason).

form, style, and craft. The due date for this paper is below and the assignment will follow. The essay *must* be handed in as a hard copy in class *and* uploaded to D2L. There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically upload your essay.

Presentation—At some point during the semester, each student in the class will be responsible for giving a 10–15 minute presentation on the work of a contemporary poet and then to lead a discussion of their work for around 30 minutes. Students will be assessed on the overall quality of their presentation, the depth and care of their research, the insightfulness and rigor of their reading, and the thoughtfulness of their questions. Depending on final enrollments, the schedule for presentations might change, in which case I will provide a syllabus with an updated calendar by Tuesday, September 12. See the “Presentation” handout for more information.

Responses—For each class in which we will be workshopping students’ work—usually two students per class—all members of the course will be responsible for writing marginal comments on the work their peers have completed since their last workshop and must write a brief paragraph about what they thought each piece was doing well and their thoughts on how to improve it. Make sure to read and comment on your peers’ work prior to coming to class. Though I will not be formally checking on the comments that you provide to your peers, believe me when I tell you that it will be clear to me who is providing thoughtful, detailed, constructive comments and who is shirking their duty. If it is clear students are failing to provide comments on *everyone’s work, every class*, their participation grade will be negatively impacted and significantly so, and, if necessary, I will begin collecting these comments.

In addition to comments on your peers’ work, each member of this class will be a primary reader for another member of the class. Primary readers are expected not only to introduce and guide workshop discussion about their assigned writer’s work, they should also provide thoughtful and *substantial* comments to that writer. Each day a primary reader’s writer is workshopped, the primary reader should not only make marginal comments directly on the page, but write a 1–2-page letter (double-spaced), addressed to the writer, about that person’s work so far. These comments will be given to the writer *and* submitted to me as hardcopy (you will not upload these to D2L). These responses will receive a completion grade (so full credit if you do them; no credit if you fail to do them or if they are in some way unacceptable—i.e., the response is cursory, incomplete, rushed, mean-spirited, insulting, et cetera). Please consult the handout on “Primary Reader Assignment” for further details.

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 percentage points off their total final 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 discussing each other’s work frequently in class, an absolutely crucial part of this class will be 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 discussions that privilege students’ thinking 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.⁵

Grading

Participation: 20%

Primary Reader Responses: 5%

Presentation: 10%

Essay: 20%

Portfolio: 45%

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.

⁵ 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/>.

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. 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.

Calendar⁶

- 8.29 Syllabus
Introductions
In-Class Writing Exercise
Lynn Emanuel, “The Politics of Narrative: Why I Am a Poet”¹
Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro”²
William Carlos Williams, “This Is Just to Say”³
Kenneth Koch, “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams”⁴
- 8.31 **Poem 1 Due**
Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days* (pp. 13–49, 210–11, 229–31, and 293–94)
- 9.5 **Poem 2 Due**
Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days* (pp. 51–92; also read through a few poems in the back of the book and select one you find particularly interesting)
- 9.7 Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days* (pp. 93–123)
Workshop
- 9.12 **Poem 3 Due**
Ben Lerner, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (pp. 1–26)
Workshop
- 9.14 Presentation
Workshop
- 9.19 **Poem 4 Due**
Ben Lerner, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (pp. 27–52)
Workshop
- 9.21 Presentation
Workshop
- 9.26 **Poem 5 Due**
Tracy K. Smith, *Life on Mars* (pp. 3–34)
Workshop
- 9.28 Presentation
Workshop
- 10.3 **Poem 6 Due**
Tracy K. Smith, *Life on Mars* (pp. 35–70)
Workshop
- 10.5 Presentation
Workshop
- 10.10 **Poem 7 Due**
Jill McDonough, *Reaper* (pp. 3–33)
Workshop

⁶ Please note that additional readings or handouts may be assigned when appropriate.

- 10.12 Presentation
Workshop
- 10.17 No Class, October Break
- 10.19 **Poem 8 Due**
Jill McDonough, *Reaper* (pp. 34–63)
Workshop
- 10.24 **Poem 9 Due**
Carolyn Forché, *The Angel of History* (pp. 3–40)
Workshop
- 10.26 Presentation
Workshop
- 10.31 **Poem 10 Due**
Carolyn Forché, *The Angel of History* (pp. 41–78)
Workshop
- 11.2 Presentation
Workshop
- 11.7 **Poem 11 Due**
Christian Bök, *The Xenotext (Book 1)* (pp. 11–75)
Workshop
- 11.9 No Class, Class Canceled
- 11.14 **Poem 12 Due**
Christian Bök, *The Xenotext (Book 1)* (pp. 77–158)
Workshop
- 11.16 Presentation
Workshop
- 11.21 **Essay Due**
Stephanie Strickland, *V: Vniverse* (online, see endnote)⁵
Workshop
- 11.23 No Class, Thanksgiving Break
- 11.28 Erica Hunt, “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics”⁶
Workshop
- 11.30 Mark Edmundson, “Poetry Slam”⁷
Ben Lerner, “The Hatred of Poetry”⁸
Workshop
- 12.4 **8:00 am – 11:00 am**
Final Portfolios Due
Class Wrap-Up and Final Lecture

Endnotes

Epigraph: Dickson, Emily, qtd. in Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. "342a." Letter to Mary Potter Higginson, 16 Aug. 1870. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols., ed. by Thomas H. Johnson, Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1958, vol. 2, p. 474.

¹ Emanuel, Lynn. "The Politics of Narrative: Why I Am a Poet." *Then, Suddenly*, U of Pittsburgh P, 1999, pp. 16–19.

² 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.

³ Williams, William Carlos. "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 Strickland, Stephanie. *V: Vniverse*. 2002, <http://www.cynthialawson.com/vniverse/original.html>. The program can be downloaded at <http://www.cynthialawson.com/vniverse/index3.html>. There is also an updated 2014 version available in the iTunes store for the iPad, <http://itunes.com/apps/vniverse>.

⁶ Hunt, Erica. "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, Roof, 1990, pp. 197–212.

⁷ Edmundson, Mark. "Poetry Slam: Or, The Decline of American Verse." *Harper's*, vol. 327, no. 1958, July 2013, pp 61–68.

⁸ 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.