

## ENGL 2306 | Introduction to Poetry (Literature): What, How, and Why

### Course Description

This course will offer an introduction to both the pleasures and the insights of poetry. For the first half of the semester we will focus on what poetry is and how we can read it. Most weeks will focus on a particular poetic device or tool of analysis (image, line, form, rhythm etc.). We will read some essays and a diverse range of poems and work to explore what makes these poems tick—what do they perform in their technique and how do they impact us as readers. During this half of the semester, we will develop the skills to discuss/write about poems both as objects to analyze, and as artworks to experience.

In the second half of the semester we will focus on why we might read poetry. During this section we will spend each week on a theme (love, identity, knowledge, justice etc.). We will read poems in order to explore how poetry might offer distinct and meaningful new ways of considering these ideas.

Underlying this class is the assumption that there is no right way to read a poem, just as there is no right way to write a poem. Poetry is an ever changing artform with an ever changing set of contexts—historical, cultural, and personal—that influence it. In other words, the task is not to “solve” the poem or to get the “right answer.” The task is much more difficult than that; it is to be *attentive*—to the nuances of the poems, to their contexts, and to ourselves. I hope that in this class we will learn both about poetry and about who we are as readers of poetry.

### Learning Outcomes

- Students will become proficient at recognizing and writing about a range of poetic devices and formal features including metaphor, image, enjambment, meter, rhyme, sonnet, villanelle, and more.
- Students will develop the skills to discuss how poetry can help us differently understand sociocultural and critical concepts such as identity, community, knowledge, love, and grief.
- Students will engage a range of poetry that is diverse in style and in historical and cultural background.
- Students will consider multiple theoretical ways of reading and writing about poems.
- Students will reflect on and develop skills to critically discuss their own personal response to poems.

### Assignments

**Short Response Papers (SRP)** (2 total) and **Short Analysis Papers (SAP)** (2 total): 20%

These are short (300-500 word) papers designed to help you build your skills at engaging poems on two fronts: critical analysis and personal response. You will choose which poems you write on, but each paper is due *on the day we read that poem for class*. I encourage you to start doing these early in the semester. For more information, see the full assignment write-ups.

**Leading Discussion Assignment: 10%**

Everyone will choose a poem and they will lead discussion on that poem. This isn't a presentation, per se; it's an opportunity for you to take the reins and decide what you think is interesting and productive to talk about with regard to a particular poem. This assignment will be graded on a ✓ + (100%), ✓ (85%), or ✓ - (50%) system. In other words, everyone should get an A or a B. For more information, see the full assignment write-up.

**Midterm Exam: 10%**

The midterm will be a short exam that requires you understand the key terms that were disseminated with regard to each week's poetic device/tool of analysis. As long as you understand what the terms mean and how they could be useful in analyzing a poem, you shouldn't have a hard time with the exam.

**Quizzes, Participation, In-Class Writing, Engagement: 15%**

We will have short reading quizzes throughout the semester. Reading quizzes can't be made up, since that doesn't make sense, but if you miss a day for an excused reason, get in touch with me and we'll figure it out.

**Argument Essay (8-12 pages): 25%**

This is the culminating piece of writing that you will produce this semester. It should be thoughtful, critical, and the product of having spent a lot of time with the poems that you are writing on. It will be due at the end of the semester.

**Final Exam: 20%**

For the final exam you will be asked to produce two short in-class essays. One will ask you to demonstrate that you can use the terms we developed in this course to generate ideas about a poem that you are encountering for the first time. The second prompt will be provided during the final exam.

Our final exam is Monday, May 11th from 11am-2pm.

**How to approach...**

**...readings:** The first time you read a poem, read it out loud. Pay attention to what is being made explicit in the poem, and what is being suggested. Pay attention to how it sounds, how it *feels*. Allow yourself to have a reaction. Allow yourself to be affected.

Most poems benefit from multiple readings, and so you should probably expect to read each poem two or three times before coming to class. *Don't look for the "right answer."* Poems aren't puzzles to be solved. The best readings of poems work to open the poem up, to loosen it, to find new ways into its many strange angles and openings. The thing you want to avoid is closing the poem down. Sometimes we do this under the guise of "objectivity" or "authorial intent" and make claims like "this is what the poem means." Sometimes we do this under the guise of "subjectivity" or "personal interpretation" and make claims like "this is just what it means to me." While there is certainly both a subjective and objective element to reading poems, both "this is what the poem means" and "this

is just what it means to me” render the poem inert, static, dead. I’m not saying that you should ignore what you think the poem means, or what it means to you, but you should use those insights not to shut down the poem, but to give us more reason to read it again and again and again.

Lastly: look up words that you don’t know!

**...writings:** Your writing assignments should be honest, thoughtful, and critically engaged. They should be the product of having spent a lot of time with a poem or poems.

Don’t just go for the low hanging fruit. The best writings, particularly for the major essay, should illuminate the poems in new ways. While you may have to discuss what is obvious and straightforward in a poem, you should be doing so in order to get at things that are not obvious and straightforward.

**...class discussion:** This class is really designed around discussion. As such, you should come in every day prepared to talk as a group about the readings. Be prepared to voice your reaction, whether it’s love, hate, confusion, frustration, horrified, moved to tears or whatever. Be prepared to voice your analytical thoughts: what an enjambment is doing, the suggestions of an image, the impact of a form. For some people voicing their thoughts this way comes easily, for some people it doesn’t. Do what you’ve got to do to come to class ready to participate in a conversation.

With that said, take care of yourself first. We will be reading some poems with heavy themes and intense images. I will do my best to give you a heads up to things that strike me as particularly triggering, but poetry can be a really personal experience and there are certainly going to be poems that hit different registers for you than for me. If you ever need to get up and leave the classroom, please do so. If you read a poem before class and feel like you really need to sit the discussion out, give me a heads up if you’re comfortable doing so but, as I say, take care of yourself first and foremost.

## Unit Breakdown

### Unit 1 - What and How is Poetry?

In this unit we will begin with essays and ars poeticas that encourage asking questions about what poetry is. Then we will spend the following weeks exploring image, metaphor, music/rhythm, lyric and narrative poetry, and form in order to deepen our skills in analyzing poems. At the end of this unit we will return to the question of “what” is poetry as we look at visual and sound poetry that challenges many of our assumptions about poetry.

Sample of Readings: Elisa Gabbert - “What Is Poetry”, Audre Lorde - “Power”, Marianne Moore - “Poetry”, Susan Sontag - “Against Interpretation”, Elizabeth Bishop - “The Fish”, Vievee Francis - “A Flight of Swiftlets Made Their Way In”, Robert Hass - “A Story About A Body”, George Peele - “Bethsabe’s Song”, Thomas Hardy - “During Wind and Rain”, Kevin Young - “Ode to the Midwest”, Robert Frost - “Out, Out”, Christina Rossetti - “Goblin Market”, Shakespeare - Sonnet 29, Matthea Harvey - “Michelin Man Possessed By William Shakespeare”,

Diana Khoi Nguyen- “Tryptic”, Hugo Ball - “Karawane”, Nance Van Winckel - from *Book of No Ledge*

## **Unit 2** - Why is Poetry?

In this Unit we will consider why we read, study, and write about poetry by dedicating each week to a particular theme. Themes include love, identity, grief, community, activism/justice, and knowledge. We will read a range of poems that explore these themes and discuss how the poems might offer distinct insight into them.

Sample of Readings: Rita Dove - “Heart to heart”, Ada Limon - “Love Poem with Apologies for my Appearance”, William Wordsworth - “Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”, Adelia Prado - “Serenade”, Meg Day - “Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible]”, Emily Dickinson - “It Was Not For Death I Stood Up”, Thom Gunn - “Lament”, Philip Levine - “What Work Is”, Donika Kelly - “A Dead Thing That, In Dying, Feeds the Living”, Walt Whitman - “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”, Martin Espada - “Vivas To Those Who Have Failed: The Paterson Silk Strike, 1913”, WH Auden - “September 1st 1939”, June Jordan - “Song for Soweto”