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 + by appointment

American Poetry and Poetics

ENG 3050 / 5077

W 4:20-6:50, Brownson 16

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The primary aim of this seminar is to help you understand and appreciate some of the most innovative, challenging, and exciting American poetry of the late 19th and 20th centuries. In particular, this course will address itself to the following question: What, if anything, makes American poetry distinctively American? To answer this question adequately we will need to interrogate the various assumptions and ideologies that necessarily cling to the word, "America," which is simultaneously a bounded place, a set of principles, and a psychological attitude that continues to fascinate and frustrate observers around the globe. We'll also need to work to define the possibilities and limits of the category of "poetry." As a corollary to our investigation of the American-ness of American poetry, we will also raise two related questions about American literary history: What was Modernism? What is (or was) Postmodernism?

As a result of taking this course, you should possess the reading skills and historical background to appreciate many varieties of recent American poetry. This course will also offer some exposure to the methods and uses of professional literary criticism. This course is intended for advanced English majors and graduate students who have some familiarity with basic poetic techniques and forms. Pre-requisites for undergraduates: ENG 1009 and a minimum of one 2000-level course in English that has focused in some detail on how to read poetry.

Course objectives:

In this course, students will develop skills in:

- using literary terms, including those pertaining to theories, appropriate to the study of American poetry
- comparing a work of poetry to other works in its genre
- discussing a work of poetry in its social, political, and historical context
- applying an understanding of literary history to the comparison of works across periods
- citing primary and secondary sources fully and properly

This course will also reinforce the following fundamental skills in reading and writing analytically about literature:

- reading texts actively and with literal comprehension
- identifying literary techniques and elements of literary style
- supporting assertions with appropriate textual examples
- constructing logically sequenced and focused arguments

- communicating ideas clearly and with grammatical correctness

Course topics:

- definitions of American poetry as a category of analysis and historical tradition
- study of the influence of Walt Whitman and his idea of democratic poetry
- how to create an original poetic form; the relation of form to politics and sexuality
- the narrative arc (or break) as poetry shifts from early to late 20th c.
- characteristics that link American poetry to art, film, and music
- citation

Student Learning Outcomes:

- Through weekly short analysis exercises, students will demonstrate their understanding of and ability to apply literary terms and theories.
- By writing a comparative essay concerning related elements of two or more poems, students will demonstrate their ability to compare works within a genre; their understanding of the history of the poetry; and their fundamental skills in analytical reading and writing.
- By writing a contextual essay that analyzes a novel in light of relevant theory, history, and criticism, students will demonstrate their ability to analyze literary works in context, their fundamental analytical skills and writing skills, and their mastery of appropriate citation of primary and secondary sources.
- By writing a research essay in stages, students will demonstrate their ability to respond to revision and build a larger argument out of smaller discrete parts.

GENERAL EDUCATION COMPETENCIES:

This class fulfills *two* of Manhattanville's General Education competencies as defined by the Core Curriculum Committee:

1. Critical Analysis and Reasoning (6 credits)

Students will be able to:

- articulate clear, precise, well-organized thought
- use language appropriate to the subject and to the context of the thinking.

Courses offered in fulfillment of this competency must explicitly offer instruction in and evaluation of basic reasoning skills, which include being able:

- ❖ to distinguish **claims/conclusions** which result from rational **arguments** from premises, **statements of fact** and **assumptions**
- ❖ to understand **when** and **why** facts, observations, experiences support a claim.
- ❖ to understand **what claims/conclusions** can reliably be drawn from a given set of facts, observations or experiences.

- ❖ to employ inductive or deductive reasoning to formulate a valid argument in support of a claim/conclusion
- ❖ to be able to understand that the **reliability** of an argument's claim/conclusion depends upon the truth of the argument's premises

2. Written Communication (6 credits)

Students will be able to:

- Demonstrate the ability to write clearly and with grammatical accuracy in English.
- Produce written work that has been improved by supervised revision for style and content through multiple drafts and/or sequential assignments.
- Engage critically with primary and secondary sources, and quote, paraphrase and cite this material ethically and correctly.

Employ the vocabulary, concepts and compositional techniques appropriate to the academic discipline.

Student learning outcomes will be assessed by the following methods: successful submission of 10 weekly writing assignments (described below), an oral presentation on an academic article, a comparative "close reading" essay and a final research essay, developed over multiple drafts.

REQUIRED TEXTS* (ORDER ONLINE: NOT AVAILABLE AT M'VILLE COLLEGE BOOKSTORE):
Walt Whitman: *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Michael Warner (Penguin) [ISBN: 0142437689]

ADDITIONAL REQUIRED TEXTS ON BLACKBOARD (UNDER "COURSE MATERIALS")

Most of our readings will be posted online to Blackboard (<http://blackboard9.mville.edu/>) under 12SP_ENG_3050_01: American Poetry. You can locate these .pdf files (poetry and criticism) under the relevant poet's name. You are **REQUIRED** to print out each of these readings out and bring them with you to class (the M'ville library offers free printing) and / or to download a copy to your e-reader.

COURSE POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

If you require any accommodations as a result of a documented disability, it is your responsibility to submit appropriate documentation to Manhattanville's ADA coordinator, Carin Horowitz (carin.horowitz@mville.edu), who will then notify me of your necessary accommodations. Please take care of this as soon as possible after the beginning of the semester, and well in advance of any paper deadline. I will work together with you to make sure that you are able to thrive in this course.

I. ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Your engaged presence and lively participation in the daily work of this course is both encouraged and expected. All class meetings will include a certain amount of discussion in either large or small groups, so it is crucial that you come to each class fully prepared, which means that you have completed the reading assignments for that day and begun to develop your own opinions and questions about them. Much like a class in science or sociology, an English course requires you to study the materials (texts), not just to read them. That means taking careful notes, underlining important passages, and possessing a clear sense of plot and character development before you walk into class. Please feel free to ask questions at any time during a lecture or class discussion, especially if a word or an idea is confusing to you. You must bring the appropriate book with you to class, as we will frequently read aloud and discuss specific details of passages from the text.

Attendance Policies

I will ask you to initial a sign-in sheet at each class meeting as a record of your attendance. If you arrive late to class and have missed the sign-in sheet, you will be counted ABSENT. I reserve the right to count “absent” those students who are repeatedly late (even if they manage to sign-in), or who repeatedly disrupt the class by text messaging or talking excessively to their neighbors.

More than one unexcused absence will lower your course participation grade, and **more than three absences will result in automatic failure of the course.** Absence from class for observation of a religious holiday is excused, college-wide; if you will be observing a holiday, please let me know so that we can make any necessary arrangements for assignments. Other absences (for instance, because of illness, an athletic event, a musical performance, a court hearing, or a death in the family) are considered excused only when the Office of Academic Advising notifies me directly. Please do not make appointments with the doctor or with your advisers during the hours our class meets.

When calculating your course participation grade, I will take into account the frequency of your participation in our discussions, the insight and thoughtfulness of your remarks, the effort given to in-class exercises, and your overall class attendance.

II. ASSIGNMENTS: ESSAYS, ORAL PRESENTATION, AND WEEKLY READING RESPONSES

Instructions and guidelines for analytical essays will be handed out in class, as scheduled on the syllabus; I will also post them to our Blackboard site. You are responsible for asking questions about any instructions or guidelines that you do not fully understand and for keeping track of deadlines. I will supply you with a checklist of the elements and qualities that I evaluate when grading your essays. You will have an opportunity in class to ask about any grading criteria that are confusing or unfamiliar to you; you’re also welcome to ask me individually. Writing tips and handouts will be posted under the “Writing Tips” section on Blackboard.

Oral Presentation (10 minutes per student):

This assignment asks you to do two things:

1) to give a short, oral presentation that summarizes the argument of one academic article (consult “Criticism” for that week on the syllabus). Oral presentations should last **NO MORE THAN 10 minutes** per student. (I will lower your grade if you run over the time limit—please plan accordingly).

2) provide a handout that a) addresses the article’s critical approach (biographical, formalist, historical, feminist, etc.—ask me if you are having trouble with this), b) lists the titles of the poems discussed in the article, and c) presents three or more important quotes from the article.

At least one week in advance, the student should contact me (in person or via email) about which article they plan to report on (I will happily provide suggestions) and any other questions they may have.

10 Weekly Responses (150-300 words) to Questions Posted on Blackboard.

Each Wednesday morning before our class meets—no later than noon (I will lock the thread)—you will respond to one of several questions that I post to the “Discussion Board” of our Blackboard site. Your responses are to be critical and analytical in nature, and they should avoid reactions that are subjective, personal, or based on an opinion unrelated to the text. When possible, please try to address your responses to specific poems.

These responses are required for the first three weeks of class. After that, you may skip a maximum of three weeks throughout the rest of the term. In other words, I will be looking for 10 weeks of questions / responses at the end of the term for “A”-level participation. I reserve the right to lower this grade if the submitted responses seem hastily written, overly vague (i.e. indicate that you did not do the reading), or lacking in quality.

Essay 1: A Comparative “Influence” Essay using 3-5 Scholarly Sources (6-8 pages).

Your first essay asks you to compare the poetry, theories, or themes of Walt Whitman to poets who wrote in the 20th century (Williams, Oppen, or Rukeyser). Your goal is to examine how later poets uphold or depart from Whitman’s innovative program for American poetry, his unique style, methods of representation, or his subject matter. For this first essay, you will incorporate at least three scholarly sources, to be drawn from those posted on Blackboard (where possible) as well as those you locate independently via the M’ville library. A more detailed description of this assignment will be handed out in class.

Essay 2: A Longer Research Essay that Addresses Some Aspect of American Poetics (10-12 pages).

Your final essay asks you to analyze the relationship of one or more poems to a contemporary statement about literary history and / or the principles of composition (“poetics”). Note: the particular passages that you select from poems and statements of poetics should not repeat what has been extensively discussed in class. Please make an original investigation into a unique set of texts and/or problems. You may build on Essay #1 where appropriate, though it will be important to show what you’ve gained from the second half of the course. Please consult with me individually if you choose this option.

How many poems you discuss and which theoretical statements you select are up to you: you may show how an author’s statement of poetics is embodied by his / her poetry, or perhaps how it departs from his / her stated intentions; alternatively, you may want to use the critical ideas of one poet to explicate the poems of a different poet. In any case, it is essential that you make cogent connections between the abstract concepts and categories of the treatise on poetics and the specific lines, images, sounds, and figures of speech in individual poems.

The final essay is a research essay; as such, it requires you to make an original argument about the work of one or more poets in light of a minimum of 5 academic articles. Please choose from among the articles and books listed in the Selected Bibliography at the back of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, articles posted to our class website, or those you discover by consulting databases such as the “MLA Bibliography” or “Literature Online.” If you have trouble locating scholarly materials at the M’ville library, please consult with me. I may be able to help you acquire relevant materials, some of which I have in my personal library.

In order to write a successful research essay, it is essential for you to clearly articulate your own interpretive position as distinct from that of other commentators; in other words, I want to gain a clear sense of *your* approach and how it differs (even in minor ways) from the approach taken by others.

Several weeks before the essay is due, you will be asked to submit an annotated bibliography of your eight sources; this will help to prepare you to meet the source requirement. A more detailed description of this assignment will be handed out in class.

For Graduate Students

You have the choice of submitting 2 shorter essays on the same schedule as the undergraduates or submitting an 18-20 page term paper on a topic of your choice (for which you will submit a proposal and work in progress). In either case, you will be expected to incorporate secondary sources and

criticism as appropriate to graduate-level work. Please consult with me individually to let me know which option you have chosen and how it advances your course of graduate study.

Late Essays

Deadlines for all essay assignments are firm. Late papers will be docked 1/3 a letter grade for each day it is late (i.e., a C+ paper becomes a C when submitted 24 hours past the deadline; a B paper becomes a C when submitted 72 hours past the deadline). I allow each student a **free, one-time extension**, for up to 48 hours, to be used for either of the two essays (unless you are a senior – no extension is possible for Essay #2); in order to apply the extension, however, **you must notify me at least 24 hours in advance of the original deadline**; no exceptions!

III. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Everything you contribute to this course—your analytical essays, quiz responses, exam answers, writing exercises, and comments in class—should be your own original work. Unless otherwise directed by the instructor, students do not need to consult sources outside of our assigned readings; however, if you do so for a written assignment, you must properly and fully cite all sources that you consult, using parenthetical notation, with full bibliographical citation in a footnote or on a “Works Cited” page. In addition to the resources listed in Section III, summaries of MLA citation style are also available on our library’s website at:

<http://www.mville.edu/Library/Services/ResearchAssistance/BibliographicCitation/Default.aspx>

You may discuss your essays with peers but you are not to accept corrections, assistance with phrasing, or significant conceptual help from anyone. If you are ever unsure of the difference between legitimate reliance on a source and plagiarism, please feel free to run it by me.

If you commit a major infraction of academic integrity (including but not limited to plagiarism), it will result in an **automatic grade of zero (0) on that assignment**. In plagiarism cases, no revisions or “rewrites” will be permitted. Please note that a grade of “0” on any essay or exam will put your final grade for the semester in serious jeopardy, and that **cheating and/or plagiarism may result in a grade of “F” for the entire course**.

IV. GRADE BREAKDOWN

Quality of Weekly Responses – 15%

Attendance and Class Discussion – 15%

Oral Presentation and Handout – 10%

Influence Essay – 20%

Final Research Essay – 40% [60% for graduates writing a term paper]

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS:

* Please note that readings and assignments should be FINISHED by the date indicated. All pieces marked “Criticism” are available under the poet’s name on the left tab of Blackboard (BB)

1/25 Introduction: Whitman, America, Democracy; or, What Makes American Poetry American?
Some definitions and reservations about the category of “American poetry.” Short poems by Whitman (“One’s-Self I Sing”), WCW (“Apology”), Hughes (“I, Too, Sing America”), Stevens (“Of Modern Poetry”), O’Hara (“Ave Maria”)

Recommended: Randall Jarrell, “The Obscurity of the Poet” (BB)

2/1 Walt Whitman, a Democratic Cosmos: “whoever degrades another degrades me”

Whitman, “Song of Myself” [1855], “The Sleepers,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “Song of the Open Road” (3-67, 84-102, 132-150)
Poetics: “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson (330-362)

Criticism: Calvin Bedient, “Walt Whitman” (general overview—not for presentation)
Philip Fisher, “Whitman and the Poetics of a Democratic Social Space”
George Kateb, “Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy”
Patrick Redding, “Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912-31”

2/8 “Camerado, I give you my hand!”: Queer Bonds and National Belonging in Whitman

Walt Whitman, “Starting from Paumanok,” “I Hear America Singing,” “Once I Pass’d Through a Populous City” + draft version, “Live Oak, with Moss,” “Calamus,” “Mannahatta,” “Years of the Modern,” “One’s-Self I Sing,” “A Passage to India,” “A Noiseless, Patient Spider,” “Gods,” “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors,” (183, 200, 204-10, 211-24, 228, 252-4, 271, 274-84, 292, 297, 299)

Poetics: “Preface to Centennial Edition, 1876” and “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” (368-394)

Criticism: David Simpson, “Destiny made manifest: the styles of Whitman’s poetry”
Betsy Erkkila, “Democracy and (Homo)sexual Desire” + “Whitman and the Homosexual Republic”
Michael Lynch, “‘Here is Adhesiveness’: From Friendship to Homosexuality”

2/15 “the imagination is an actual force comparable to steam or electricity”: Reality and Vitality in Early Williams

William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* [1923] [In addition to the prose, focus on: “By the road to the contagious hospital” (183), “Easter stars are shining” (186), “The rose is obsolete” (195), “The decay of cathedrals” (213), “The pure products of America” (217), “so much depends” (224), “The crowd at the ball game” (233)

Poetics: “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry” [1917]

Criticism: Marjorie Perloff, “William Carlos Williams” ((general overview—fine for paper but not for presentation)
David Perkins, “The Impact of William Carlos Williams”
Stephen Burt, “William Carlos Williams: They Grow Everywhere”

2/22 Poetry Beyond the Middle Class: Williams’ Career from 1917-1939

William Carlos Williams, from *Collected Poems, Vol. 1*: 61-5, 67-8, 70-4, 77, 86-8, 153-4, 371-2, 375-89, 447-8, 452-4, 463: “Sub Terra,” “Pastoral,” “Gulls,” “Apology,” “Pastoral,” “Love Song,” “Tract,” “Libertad! Igualdad! Fraternidad!,” “Danse Russe,” “Portrait of a Woman in Bed,” “Winter Trees,” “Complaint,” “The Cold Night,” “The Sun Bathers,” “Nantucket,” “This is Just to Say,” “An Early Martyr,” “Item,” “To a Mexican Pig-Bank,” “To a Poor Old Woman,” “Late for Summer Weather,” “Proletarian Portrait,” “Tree and Sky,” “The Raper from Passenack,” “The Yachts,” “Wind of the Village,” “The Poor,” “Between Walls,” “A Bastard Peace,” “The Halfworld”

Poetics: “A New Measure” [1948] + “The Poem as a Field of Action” [1952]

Criticism: Robert van Hallberg, "The Politics of Description: WCW in the 1930s"

*Pass out directions for Essay 1

2/29 Rukeyser's Witness: Documentary Poetics during the Great Depression

Muriel Rukeyser, *U.S. 1* [1938] [focus on first part: "The Book of the Dead," 73-111]

Poetics: from *The Life of Poetry* + <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/21713>

Criticism: Michael Thurston, "Extending the Document: Muriel Rukeyser"

Walter Kalaidjian, "The Feminist Vanguard in the Popular Front"

John Lowney, "Buried History: The Popular Front Poetics of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*"

3/7 "We have chosen / the meaning of being numerous": Oppen's Social Being

George Oppen, *Of Being Numerous* [1968]

Poetics: "Statement of Poetics"

Criticism: Michael Davidson, Introduction to *New Collected Poems*

Peter Nicholls, "What it is: *Of Being Numerous*," from *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*

John Lowney, "The Spectre of the 1930s: George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* and Historical Amnesia"

3/11 **Essay 1 is Due by 11:59 p.m.**

SPRING BREAK

3/21 "I, Too, Sing America": Hughes and the Contradictory Legacy of Whitman

Langston Hughes, from *Selected Poems* [sections entitled "Magnolia Flowers" + "Words Like Freedom"]

Poetics: "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"

Criticism: George B. Hutchinson, "Langston Hughes and the 'Other' Whitman"

George B. Hutchinson, "The Whitman Legacy and the Harlem Renaissance"

3/28 Or Does it Explode? Jazz and Social Change after the Harlem Renaissance

Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*

Poetics: TBA

Criticism: Anita Patterson, "Jazz, Realism, and the Modern Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes"

John Lowney, "Harlem Disc-tortions: The Jazz Memory of Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*"

4/4 The New Black: Feminism, Black Power, and Poetic Form

Gwendolyn Brooks, selected poems

Lucille Clifton, selected poems

Poetics: Brooks, "The New Black"

Criticism: James D. Sullivan, "Writing About Gwendolyn Brooks Anyway"

4/11: Hydrogen Jukebox: Ginsberg's Sprawling Ecstasies

Allen Ginsberg, "Howl," "A Supermarket in California," "Sunflower Sutra," "America," "To Aunt Rose," "Last Night in Calcutta," "Mugging," "Sphincter," "Personals Ad."

Poetics: "Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*"

Criticism: Paul Breslin, "Allen Ginsberg as Representative Man: The Road to Naropa"

Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation* (see professor)

4/18 "you just go on your nerve": Frank O'Hara in New York City

Frank O'Hara, from *Selected Poems*

[Focus on: 3, 15, 19, 68-9, 91-3, 109-110, 113-16, 144-5, 150-1, 155-160, 168-9, 178, 197-8, 209-211, 234, 236-7, 240, 247-51]

Poetics: "Personism: A Manifesto," "Statement for *The New American Poetry*," "Statement for Paterson Society"

Criticism: Susan Rosenbaum, "Frank O'Hara, *Flaneur* of New York"

Andrew Epstein, "Frank O'Hara's Poetry and the Cinema"

Mutlu Konuk Blasing, from *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry*

4/20: DRAFT of final essay is due.

4/25 "In Memory of My Feelings": Frank O'Hara in Love

Frank O'Hara, from *Selected Poems*

[Focus on: 33-4, 59-60, 66-7, 83-4, 100-1, 124-5, 163, 166-7, 181, 186-7, 190, 194-6]

Criticism: Steven Burt, "Frank O'Hara: Hi, Louise!"

Marjorie Perloff, from *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*

David Lehman, from *The Last Avant-Garde*

5/2 Making it New (and New and New and New . . .): Ammons' Natural Cycles

A.R. Ammons, from *Selected Poems*

[Focus on: 5-8, 11-14, 16-22, 28-42, 46-7, 51-2, 54-62, 68-9]

Poetics: "A Poem is a Walk"

Criticism: "The *Paris Review* Interview with David Lehman"

David Kalstone, "Ammons' Radiant Toys"

Roger Gilbert, "Archie's Heart"

David Lehman, "Archie's Sphere"

Bonnie Costello, "A.R. Ammons: Pilgrim, Sage, Ordinary Man"

5/6 Final Essay is Due by 11:59 p.m.