

TECHNIQUES OF POETRY

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WRITERS

Syllabus
ENGL 591
Techniques of Poetry
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Office Hours: T & Th: 10 – Noon & 1 – 3

PURPOSE:

We may not all remember the first poem that made us feel, in the words of Emily Dickinson, as though “the top of [our] head been taken off,” but most of us would agree that that’s how it starts. We get struck by poetic lightning. We read a poem and somehow it goes right into us, right through us—into bone or marrow or something that feels like the soul. I didn’t have much use for poetry when I was a boy, or even when I was a young man; I didn’t like it very much. And yet here I am today, more devoted to the art than ever, and I can say without the least doubt that in the beginning that devotion, that thrilling love for poetry, did not begin with books but with individual poems.

This is as it should be, no doubt. Not for no reason is there a “Favorite Poem” project, as opposed to a Favorite *Book* of Poems Project. But because I have been, over the last 30 years regularly if periodically at work on books of poems, I have become more and more interested in what goes into such a literary construction. What makes a book of poems a book? Is there a difference, beyond the merely semantic, between a book of poems and a collection of poems? How does one reconcile the linear arrangement of a book of poems with the spatial, time-stopping characteristics of the lyric poem? Does a book of poems have an arc, like the narrative arc of a novel or even of some collections of stories? Is there something in the individual poem in a book that mirrors the book’s totality? Is there something in the book’s totality that shows up in the individual poems? Is there heaven in a grain of sand? Eternity in an hour?

We will read a book per week in this class, all by living contemporary American poets. We will analyze and attempt to come to grips with 1) the poet’s voice and style—his or her individual poetic; 2) the shape of the book as a whole; 3) and, most subjectively perhaps, the quality of the book’s accomplishment. Students will do a great deal of writing in the course, often in the “style” or the borrowed voice of the poet under discussion, and sometimes in a critical way, in analytical prose. All students must submit, at the term’s end, a “project” consisting of a short, chapbook-length collection of original poems *written as part of the course’s assignments*, and

accompanied by an introduction explaining the processes—the problems and challenges, the satisfactions—of its assemblage. Each student will be responsible for leading a class discussion of the week’s assigned title.

TEXTS

Addonizio, Kim, *Tell Me*, BOA Editions
Baggott, Juliana, *This Country of Mothers*, Southern Illinois UP
Campo, Rafael, *Landscape with Human Figure*, Duke UP
Dent, Troy, *HIV, Mon Amour*, Sheep Meadow
Derricotte, Toi, *Tender*, Pittsburgh
Fairchild, B.H., *The Art of the Lathe*, Alice James
Hamilton, Saskia, *As For Dream*, Graywolf
Harrison, Jeffrey, *Feeding the Fire*, Sarabande
Hoagland, Tony, *Donkey Gospel*, Graywolf
Howe, Marie, *What the Living Do*, Norton
Lee, Li-Young, *Book of My Nights*, BOA Editions
Lux, Thomas, *The Street of Clocks*, Houghton Mifflin
Millar, Joseph, *Overtime*, Eastern Washington UP
Pinsky, Robert, *An Explanation of America*, Princeton UP

REQUIREMENTS:

- a. Each student will lead one weekly presentation of one of the course’s required texts. If you have a favorite (or a favorite poet) among these titles, let me know as soon as you can, and I’ll try to accommodate your preferences.
- b. A weekly response to the book. This response may come in the form of a poem, or a small group of poems, “in the style of” that week’s poet; or it may be a more academic/scholarly response to the text. If the latter, responses should concern themselves with a) what the student sees as the book’s larger ambitions (its vision, its intents, its themes, for example), and b) the poet’s formal and craft-centered approaches (style, structure, etc.)
- c. A final project: either a substantial scholarly paper on an additional title by one of the poets under consideration, or a paper on another text that might be seen as influential or *from the same or a similar tradition* as one of the poets at hand. The alternative project, from MFA students, is a brief, chapbook-length collection of original poems for which one of the collections under consideration serves as the impetus (in the style of, reflecting the approaches of, etc.).
- d. Consistent participation in class discussion, religious attendance.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WRITERS – SPRING 2001
JOHNS HOPKINS PROGRAM

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Through extensive reading, analysis, and discussion, along with brief writing assignments this course introduces you to a range of fiction writers and poets to widen your understanding of contemporary American literature. Class discussions will emphasize technique and craft in assigned works, as well as provide an overview of broad trends which will, ultimately, enrich your own writing. By learning how to read as writers, I hope you will also better understand your own position, and have more techniques at your disposal. The course also involves eight sessions with published writers, poets, and critics. I have asked them to each speak about different issues of craft and to answer your questions.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

<i>Burning Down the House</i>	Charles Baxter	Graywolf Press
<i>Donkey Gospel</i>	Tony Hoagland	Graywolf Press
<i>The Hours</i>	Michael Cunningham	Picador USA
<i>Mao II</i>	Don DeLillo	Penguin, USA
<i>Castro's Curveball</i>	Tim Wendel	Ballantine
<i>The Frequency of Souls</i>	Mary Kay Zuravleff	Penguin, USA
<i>Pears on a Willow Tree</i>	Leslie Pietrzyk	Harper Collins
<i>Gallagher's Travels</i>	Jean McGarry	Johns Hopkins UP
<i>Woman Who Got Her Leg Cut Off at Maidstone Club</i>	Julia Slavin	Picador, USA
<i>The Lucky Gourd Shop</i>	Joanna C. Scott	MacMurray & Beck

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. On *The Hours* and *Mao II* students will write one paragraph and present a brief (3-4 minute) analysis of an assigned aspect of fiction writing (i.e. point of view, tone, plot, narrative structure, etc.) related to the two novels.
2. One analytic essay, (not a book report) 3-4 pages, double-spaced, about a contemporary novel, short story or poetry collection not on the reading list. A list of authors will be passed for you to choose from. You should know the title of the author's most recent work and begin collecting criticism/book reviews on it. This essay should be clearly focused on matters of craft, technique, and style. It should also touch on how this writer fits into contemporary trends, what previous authors may have influenced his or her style, etc.
3. Oral presentation (10 minutes maximum) follow-up on the author (trend) you wrote about for your analytic essay, focusing on the type of writing (i.e. minimalism, postmodernism, women's, multiculturalism, etc.) this author employs and how it corresponds to the trends we've been discussing. Research the particular movement or school this author belongs to so that you can educate the class about it. For example, if you choose to read a postmodernist novel, you should also define what postmodernism means, inform the class who some of the other leading postmodernist authors are, and discuss distinguishing features of this type of writing in contrast to others.
4. One position paper, 2-3 pages, double-spaced, where you will try to articulate where you stand as a writer. Why is it necessary for you to write? How does publishing fit into you last

answer? What does your world view include and exclude? (i.e. what do you write about? and why?) The point of this assignment is to make you more aware of your own practice of art.

5. You are expected to attend two literary readings in the Washington/Baltimore area over the semester and write up brief responses. I will distribute a list of upcoming readings.
6. A one-page handout on a literary journal, which includes: a) the editor(s), address, submission requirements, style of writing, special interests or slant and b) a representative poem or page of prose. Bring in a copy of the periodical for the class. The purpose of this assignment is to broaden the scope of your journal reading, so please avoid the most well-known magazines for fiction and poetry. To find these, you may need to go to a university library, the Library of Congress or a good bookstore (The Writer's Center, Chapters, or Politics and Prose).

CLASS SCHEDULE:

Week 1

Introductions to the course and participants.

Week 2 – Alan Cheuse visits.

- e. Read the Norton Introduction to Postmodern Fiction (handout).
 - f. Read Malcolm Bradbury's "American Fiction for the 1970s-1990s" (handout).
 - g. Read *Burning Down the House*, Chapter 3.
 - h. Read John Barth's "Literature of Exhaustion," "Literature of Replenishment."
 - i. For analytic essay, find latest title of your author, begin collecting information.
 - j. Prepare three questions to ask author Alan Cheuse about trends in contemporary American writing.
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Week 3 – Tony Hoagland visits.

2. Read *Donkey Gospel*.
 3. Read Jonathan Holden's "American Poetry 1970-1990" (handout).
 4. Read Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" (handout).
 5. Prepare three questions to ask Tony Hoagland.
 6. Read your individual author.
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Week 4 – Discussion of *The Hours*.

1. Read *The Hours* and assorted handouts.
 2. Written and oral response to assigned aspect of fiction in *The Hours*.
 3. Optional: Read the first 29 pages of *Mrs. Dalloway* (Virginia Woolf)
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Week 5– Discussion of *Mao II*.

1. Read *Mao II* and assorted handouts.
 2. Written and oral response to assigned aspect of fiction in *Mao II*.
 3. Optional: Read *Burning Down the House*, Chapter 1.
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Week 6 – Tim Wendel visits.

Read *Castro's Curveball*.

Questions and paragraph response to *Curveball*.

Week 7 – Mary Kay Zuravleff visits.

Read *The Frequency of Souls*

Read *burning Down the House*, Chapter 5

Questions and paragraph response to *Frequency*.

Week 8 – Leslie Pietrzyk visits.

Write a three-page analysis of the work you read.

Read *Pears on a Willow Tree*.

Read *Burning Down the House*, Chapter 6.

Prepare three questions about *Pears*.

Week 9 – Jean McGarry visits.

Read *Gallagher’s Travels*

Questions and paragraph response to *Travels*.

Week 10 – Julia Slavin visits.

Read *The Woman Who Cut Her Leg Off at the Maidstone Club*.

Read *Burning Down the House*, Chapter 6

Questions and paragraph response to *Maidstone Club*.

Week 11 – Joanna Scott visits.

Read *The Lucky Gourd Shop* and handouts.

Read “Scent of a Woman’s Ink” (handout)

Optional: Read *Burning Down the House*, Chapter 6

questions and paragraph response to *Lucky Gourd Shop*.

Week 12 – Stephen Dixon visits & oral presentations.

Read handouts: “Why Do I Write?” (Didion and Orwell) and student examples.

Write Position paper, “Why I Write” 2-3 pages, double-spaced, articulating your own stance as a writer. Make enough copies to pass out to the class.

Prepare oral presentation on your selected author/literary trend (10 minutes).

Read a few of Stephen Dixon’s stories. Prepare three questions for him.

Week 13 – Final class – Literary Journals

Prepare a one-page handout on a literary journal. copy this for the class.

Read student position papers.

Compose a “Top Hits List” of your favorite novels, short story collections, poetry collections, and books about writing.