

ENWR 312: Writing Poetry: Form & Technique

Instructor: Dr. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett
Class information: UN 2002, T 5:30-8:00
Fall 2009

E-mail: susan@susansw.com
Office: Dickson Hall 316
Office hours: T 4-5:30, Th afternoon by appt.

COURSE POLICY STATEMENT

Course Description

This course is designed to introduce students to craft of writing poetry in a workshop environment. With the understanding that poetic form is different from formalist verse, we will explore writing poetry through a variety of traditions as well as learn some basics of prosody. Forms and traditions we will practice include the sonnet, the litany, the ballad, the blues lyric, free verse and organic form, ekphrasis, writing in a persona, performance poetry, and hip-hop. We'll also discuss specific aspects of poetic craft such as diction, metaphor, resonance, stanza, and the line. After revising your writing, you will create a final portfolio with an artist's statement reflecting on your process as a writer and the strengths and weaknesses of your writing. Your attendance and participation are crucial to your success in this class. Prerequisites: ENWR 200 and departmental approval.

Required Texts and Materials

An Exaltation of Forms, Eds. Annie Finch and Katherine Varnes
Writing Poems, Michelle Boisseau, Robert Wallace, and Randall Mann
A journal or notebook used solely for this class
Facilities/funds to make copies of your writing for each workshop member

Grading Policy

60% Final portfolio with an artist's statement/self-evaluation
25% Weekly in-class critiques (written and spoken)
15% Attendance, participation, and exercises

Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty is defined by the university as “any attempt by a student to submit as his/her own work that which has not been completed by him/her or to give improper aid to another student in the completion of an assignment, i.e., plagiarism” (please view the entire policy at <http://www.montclair.edu/deanstudents/regulations1.html>). This can include “double-dipping,” or using one piece of writing to satisfy the requirements of more than one course. Since our focus in this course is literary production, work you turn in for this class is to be new, original writing created specifically for this workshop (except in the case of revision exercises). Please ask if you have any questions about this policy.

Workshop Etiquette

The purpose of our workshops is not to “fix” poems but rather to help the author discover his or her poem through process. In this regard, our comments in workshop should aim toward the neutral, descriptive, and interrogative—in the words of Janet Burroway, not *What I like* but *What this piece is like*. Only then can we critique whether or not the writing is successful in what it wants to achieve and offer constructive criticism to guide the poem in that direction.

As guides, our goal should be to find a balance in the tenor of our comments; too much praise can be just as poisonous as too much criticism. Finding this balance is the most difficult part of a workshop, but it also can be the most rewarding.

As authors, it is our responsibility to not just to listen to but to *hear* how our readers describe our writing in a non-defensive way. This openness is part of the process of the poem, and entertaining the suggestions of others—even as they may seem to counter our own senses—may be just the thing that gives the writing flight.

In order to encourage this openness, we will for the most part follow the gag rule in workshop: While a piece of writing is being discussed in class, the author should remain silent. There are exceptions to this rule, however, which we will inevitably discover together. Poems are birds, not birdcages, and if they have strong enough wings they deserve to stretch them.

Of course, in all things you are expected to behave with maturity and respect for others. If you exhibit behavior that is threatening or that disrupts the learning experience, disciplinary action will be sought according to university policy.

Responding to Poems

Our workshop is a hard-copy environment, which means that on certain dates indicated on your syllabus, typed hard copy drafts of your writing are due for distribution to each member of the class. Before arriving to each workshop, you will write commentary on your peers’ hard copies and return your written commentary to them in workshop. It is expected that you will respond in writing to *each* poem *each* week, even as we may not discuss everyone’s poem in class that week. To do this, you will need to craft your written responses to each poem before each class meets (in the neighborhood of 2-5 sentences is appropriate).

Deadlines and Distribution of Poems

These workshop drafts, as all assignments, **are due at class time on the date posted** (not that afternoon or evening). Because assignment deadlines are posted with ample advance notice, extensions for assignments will not be granted.

Please pay special attention to when poems are due, for you should not expect that your classmates (or instructor) can and will be available to pick up poems outside of class. If you miss a due date for a poem, you will receive no credit for your participation that week and you may, at the discretion of the instructor, miss your turn at workshop. **Please do not e-mail your poem to the instructor or the entire class after it is due.** This not only creates headaches for each of your class members, it is disrespectful and taxes your classmates' time and resources. Please also make sure you have made enough copies to distribute to everyone in class. Showing up with one copy of your work does not constitute meeting the deadline.

If you are absent on a day when an assignment is due, you are still responsible for meeting that deadline. You can accomplish this by having a classmate distribute copies of your poem for you. If non-workshop assignments are due (i.e., a paper or review) and you must be absent, you may e-mail it to the instructor. You are also responsible for picking up any handouts or poems that you missed before our next class meets. These will be available in a box outside my office located at Dickson Hall 316.

Attendance and Participation

Attendance and participation are required in this course, and both will affect your grade. Missing **more than two classes** constitutes missing a significant part of the course and will affect your final grade. Should you miss class, you are responsible for meeting all assignment deadlines, contacting a member of class in order to keep up with readings and assignments, and notifying the instructor in advance of your absence if possible.

E-mail and BlackBoard

We will, on occasion, communicate via e-mail during the semester. For this reason, students are required to have a working e-mail address that they check regularly. For the most part, this communication will announce campus activities related to our course topic. However, in the event that last-minute changes to our class schedule have to be made, these changes will be communicated via e-mail. All class assignments, schedules, etc. will be posted on BlackBoard should you ever need another copy.

Final Portfolios

Please save all drafts of your writing for this class (including reviews, drafts of poems, and statements of poetics). You will be asked to include them in your final portfolio.

Information for Students with Disabilities

Both the university and I are committed to keeping this classroom and course material accessible. If you have a learning or physical disability, please inform me at the beginning of the course either after class or in office hours. In the rare case where a class assignment is not accessible, an alternative assignment requiring the exercise of equal skill and knowledge can be arranged.

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Abbreviations: WP=*Writing Poems*, Boisseau *et al*
EF=*An Exaltation of Forms*, Finch and Varnes

SYLLABUS (subject to change)

WEEK 1: Introduction

T 9/8 Class intro and discussion of policies
In-class reading and writing exercises: What is poetry? What is good poetry?
Handouts: Gioia/Kennedy "What is poetry?," Pound (12), Hass (204) Kelley (228-30), Gernes; Graham and Somers-Willett Self-Portraits
Prosody survey
Poem 1 assigned: Self-Portraits

WEEK 2: Prosody and Sonnets

T 9/15 **Poem 1 Due (Self-Portrait)**
Read WP Ch.1 Starting Out (1-21) and Ch. 3 Making the Line I (44-60 only)
Read EF "The Sonnet" (297-307)
Review prosody survey, sonnet handout

WEEK 3: Metaphor

T 9/22 **Poem 2 Due (Sonnet)**
Read WP Ch. 7 Metaphor (136-59)
Handouts: Notter, Collins, Somers-Willett litanies
Workshop: Self-Portraits

WEEK 4: Lists and Litanies

T 9/29 **Poem 3 Due (Metaphor)**
Read EF "The List Poem" (359-65) and handouts
Workshop: Sonnets

WEEK 5: Stanza and the Line

T 10/6 **Poem 4 Due (List or Litany)**
Read WP Ch. 4 Making the Line II (69-88)
Discussion of stanza forms (for further reading, see Part II of EF)
Lineation exercise
Workshop: Metaphor

WEEK 6: Revision

T 10/13 **Poem 5 Due (Line and Stanza: Hand in two versions of the same poem with different line and stanza choices)**
Read WP Ch. 11 Devising and Revising (231-249 only)
Handouts to discuss next class: Snyder, "Bamboo," Somers-Willett, "Zero," Kelly, "Dead Doe"
Workshop: Lists and Litanies

WEEK 7: Repetition and Resonance

T 10/20 **Revision due (1 copy of old and new for instructor)**
Read WP Ch. 5 Sound and Sense (89-102 only) and handouts; Revisit Bishop, "One Art" (WP 67)
View *The Fountain* in class (96 min.)

WEEK 8: Free Verse and Organic Form

T 10/27 **Poem 6 due: Repetition and Resonance**
Read EF "Free Verse" (73-80) and "Organic Form" (325-33)
Workshop: Line and Stanza

WEEK 9: Ballads and the Blues

Tu 11/3 **Poem 7 Due: Free Verse/Organic Form**
Read EF "The Folk Ballad" (167-79) and "The Blues" (188-97)
Workshop: Repetition and Resonance
Handouts for next class: Ekphrastic and Persona poems

WEEK 10: Persona and Ekphrasis

T 11/10 **Poem 8 Due: Ballad or Blues**
Read WP Persona (165-68)
Lecture on ekphrasis, discussion of handouts
Photos assigned
Workshop: Free Verse

WEEK 11: Performance Poetry and Hip-Hop

T 11/17 **Poem 9 Due: Persona/Ekphrasis**
Read EF "Performance Poetry" (341-51), "Hip-Hop Rhyme" (223-27), "The Metrics of Rap" (272-78)
Workshop: Ballads/Blues

WEEK 12: Workshop

T 11/24 **Poem 10 Due: Performance Poem/Hip-Hop**
Workshop: Persona and Ekphrasis

WEEK 13: Workshop

T 12/1 Workshop: Performance Poem/Hip-Hop

WEEK 14: Closing Session

T 12/8 **Portfolios due;** Course wrap-up and evaluations