Poetry is often regarded as the most demanding of literary genres — the loftiest and most profound, the hardest to write, the most difficult to study. Thanks to this challenging reputation, even English Majors are unlikely to read poetry for pleasure. In fact, many people pretend to respect poetry while actually striving to avoid it. Others dismiss it as boring, when actually they are probably a bit afraid of it (though perhaps reluctant to admit that fear).

If poetry is indeed the most demanding of all literary genres, then avoidance, frustration, and fear are entirely reasonable responses—just as they would be in any demanding situation. So maybe we should just acknowledge that, upfront. Poetry can be difficult, and difficulty can lead to frustration and anxiety. These things are baked into the experience.

But why is poetry difficult? In some ways, this is a question that the entire course will strive to address. One quick answer, however, is that poetry is difficult because it asks us to pay a kind of attention to language that we are not used to paying—a kind of attention that we could not always pay, actually, even if we wanted to—because it would be too much, exhausting, madness even, to always be paying the kind of attention that poetry demands as we go about our ordinary business.

At the same time—and this is the good news—poetry is not always difficult, and never only difficult. (If it were, then why would anyone bother with it, after all?) It can also be moving, biting, soothing, angry, philosophical, erotic, moralizing, elegiac ... and hilarious. What’s more, the best poets can shift rapidly between these different tonal registers across a single stanza, playing with our intellects and emotions like a concert pianist at the keyboard.

Have you ever been transported by music, so that everything else seems to drop away, and you feel purely present? That’s the kind of thing we can sometimes hope for here, at the highest level: language aspiring to the condition of music to produce the experience of rapture.

I’m not going to pretend that if you take this class, poetry will never again be difficult or frustrating to you. Instead, our goal will be to discover some of the other things that poetry can be, while always accepting that difficulty is part of the deal: the nature of the poetic beast.

It’s my belief that if you can accept the challenges that are part of this game, and if you are also willing to do some work—learn a little bit about the formal techniques of the poetic genre, occasionally look up words and concepts that are unfamiliar, make a good faith effort to approach reading actively rather than passively—then you can find a very special form of enjoyment in this art. I don’t think it’s too much to say that if a person can learn to love poetry, at least some of the time and despite the difficulty, then they may have begun to learn a whole new mode of being in the world: a whole new orientation towards life.

And that’s really my grand, absurd hope for you—that if you take this course you might actually catch a glimpse of a new orientation towards life! How crazy is that? I can hardly believe I am saying it!

But here I am, and here you are.

For that to have even a chance of happening, however, you’ll have to come out to meet the poets, as it were. More prosaically, you’ll have to read their work. And I do mean read it—put the phone down and
close the door and be alone with the texts for a while—and also complete the homework assignments, and really just give this class the precious gift of your time.

I can guarantee this much, at least: if you do these things (complete the assignments, get a bit more comfortable with difficulty, and really read those damn poems) then by the end of this course you will have become more acquainted with a few key works by some of the major poets in our language, and will have learned some terms and techniques to help you talk and write about them. In short, you will be more literate.

Only you can decide if that sounds like a worthwhile goal. If it strikes you as insufficient reason to invest the energy required, that’s a good thing to acknowledge, too. There are plenty of other ways of meeting an Arts and Letters requirement, and you should find one that compels you. You do not have to take this class, with this professor.

But if you do want to learn more about poetry, with no higher goal or aim in mind other than to learn more about poetry, then you are in the right place. And while this class will no doubt sometimes challenge and frustrate you—in accordance with the nature of the beast—it will also be fun.

With respect and good wishes,

Professor Saunders

**Basic Course Structure and Goals**

**Goals**

Over the course of this term we will:

- expand the horizons of our knowledge through purposeful reading;
- discover a range of exciting, challenging, and influential poems from the past few hundred years;
- learn how to describe some of the verbal techniques that distinguish poetry from other kinds of writing;
- learn how to recognize a variety of verse forms;
- broaden our conceptual vocabulary and historical knowledge in ways that will enhance our appreciation of these art works;
- practice our skills of observation, analysis, and critical thinking in our discussions and written responses.

**The Basics**

The course is divided into ten weekly Modules, each made up of two sessions, each with their own set of readings and Study Questions, all available on Canvas. For the first five Modules we will focus on the rhetorical techniques and formal structures that distinguish poetry from other kinds of writing. That means things like rhythm and meter, rhyme, figurative language, and various verse forms and genres.

Then, in Modules Six through Nine, we will look at key works by a series of twentieth-century poets from Britain and America. You will get a chance to apply the formal knowledge we’ve acquired during the first few weeks, and also to consider some additional illuminating contexts (both historical and literary).

Finally, in Module Ten, we will read two recent (21st century) poetry collections, the impact of which will (I hope) be enhanced by the preceding nine weeks of work.
A Little Everyday Goes a Long, Long Way

Modules One-through-Nine will all contain:

- A PDF (or two) of the required readings for each session (usually no more than a half-dozen shorter poems per PDF);
- A PDF (or two) of ungraded Homework Study Questions, designed to enhance your understanding of the required readings;
- A locked and timed Weekly Reading Response Question.

Please read the PDFs of required poems and do your best to answer the Homework Study Questions prior to lectures; those lectures will be much more helpful to you if you have done so. You will gain a better understanding of the lecture contents, and will also be more prepared to contribute and ask questions. You will also be more prepared to answer the Weekly Reading Response Questions. To learn more about these Reading Response Questions click on the first "Detailed Assignment Description" link, elsewhere in the Welcome Module.

Besides the readings and Reading Response Questions, there will also be two additional assignments:

- "The Elements of Poetry," due at midnight on Monday of Week Five (February 1), and
- a "Guided Close Reading," due at midnight on Monday of Week Ten (March 8).

Again, to learn more about these assignments, click on the appropriate "Detailed Assignment Descriptions" links elsewhere in the Welcome Module on the Canvas site.

The UO Course Catalog states: “students should anticipate that each credit requires at least three hours a week for class meetings and homework.” This is a four-credit course, so you should plan to devote at least twelve hours a week to the class. The workload will be quite manageable (and much more enjoyable) if you are able to give about 60-90 minutes to this class every day that we do not have a Zoom session, and an additional 30-60 minutes on the days when we do.

To that end, each Module also contains a "Recommended Work Schedule" for each week of the term, to help you keep track of your various tasks.

I know that during stressful times it can be even harder to find the will and energy for work than during normal times—but I promise that doing a small amount every day will actually reduce your stress.

Remember that brain exercise is like physical exercise; a careful hour of study each day will net you much greater results than a rushed marathon session the evening before a piece of work is due. Remember, too, that paying for an education is not like paying for a meal or ordering a product from Amazon. Unlike those other kinds of transactions, when it comes to school you get out what you put in.

So please be ready to put something of yourself into the course, and to commit to the study process—and you really will get something back!

**Grade Percentages Breakdown As Follows**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly Reading Responses</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Elements of Poetry</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided Close Reading</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discretionary extra credit of up to a third of a letter grade (the difference between, say, a B and a B+) may also be awarded for distinguished class participation. This does not mean that you will get points merely for talking. But students who regularly demonstrate familiarity with the readings, and who advance our discussions by asking pertinent questions or making good observation (grounded in specific details of the text) will be rewarded for their contributions. Remember, you can ask questions and make observations in the Zoom Chat if you are shy about speaking up directly.

Required Texts

For Modules 1-9, the required readings will be provided in PDF form. To read the PDFs without leaving the Canvas site, click on the Readings tab in any given Module, and then click on the magnifying glass icon; to download the PDF so you can access it at anytime, click directly on the link.

I strongly recommend downloading and printing the Readings and Study Questions and storing them in a binder or folder; then you easily write answers directly on the Study Question papers, and make notes directly on the texts. The practice of note-taking by hand will also help you to remember things. It may also be easier for you to look back through your notes to find different concepts and ideas from the earlier weeks of the class if you have printed them up as hard copies.

In Module Ten, we will stop working with PDFs and instead read two short collections by two contemporary (21st century) poets. Please do not wait till the last weeks of term to order these books. You won't be able to participate in the final weeks of class if you don't have them, and this could effect your performance and grade. So please purchase them as early as you can in the term.

The books are:

- *Big-Eyed Afraid* by Erica Dawson, and
- *The World’s Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy:

Course Policies Re. Late Work, Academic Integrity, and Academic Accommodations

Late Work

Work is due by the times indicated on the assignments, without exception. Late assignments will be downgraded by a third of a letter grade for each day they are late, unless explicit permission for an extension has been granted in advance by your GE.

Emergency Extensions

Extensions can sometimes be granted in the event of emergencies (for example, illness, a family crisis, or similar circumstance). Please request the extension as soon as you know you require it, and give your GE a realistic estimate of the time you will need to complete the work.

We understand that life can sometimes throw us for a loop, wrecking even the most carefully laid plans, and we are more than willing to offer reasonable accommodations when we can; but we can only do so if we are informed. So, above all, stay in touch.

Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty will result in an automatic failing grade. In addition, all incidents of plagiarism will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct.
Plagiarism is the use of another person’s words or ideas without acknowledgment. All external sources (whether quoted directly or paraphrased) must be properly documented. Cutting and pasting from online sources without due acknowledgment is plagiarism; but so is rephrasing someone else’s work without acknowledging the source; it is also considered plagiarism if you ask or pay someone else to do academic work in your name. To avoid the charge of plagiarism you should always:

- Accurately quote the original author’s words when you are quoting.
- Enclose the quotation within quotation marks.
- Follow the quotation with an in-text citation.
- Introduce quotations with a phrase that includes the author’s name (EG “Baxter argues that...”)
- Always provide a list of references with full citation information at the end of the paper.

Above all, remember:

- If you paraphrase someone else’s ideas or words rather than quoting directly, you still must cite the source for all the ideas and concepts that you are paraphrasing, with in-text citations, footnotes, and phrasing that includes the author’s name.

For further guidance, see the UO library website (under “How-To Guides” on the library homepage) for more on citation practices. If you remain uncertain as to what constitutes plagiarism, definitions are available in the “Student Conduct Code” section of the Student Life website (http://studentlife.uoregon.edu). You are also welcome to contact any of us if you have any questions about these definitions.

**Academic Accommodations**

If there are aspects of the course design that result in disability-related barriers to your participation, please contact the Accessible Education Center in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu for additional resources and support. If the AEC determines that you need accommodations, please email both Professor Saunders and GE Bob Craven as soon as possible, so we can meet with you and make appropriate adjustments.

**Course Content Advisory**

Just like novels and movies, poetry can treat adult themes and subject matter. You can expect to encounter profane language in some of the readings for this class, as well as depictions of sex and violence. In addition, some of the texts we read may express historical attitudes that we now broadly reject as a society; some may express political or religious ideas that do not accord with your own beliefs; and some, no doubt, may simply fail to satisfy your personal aesthetic preferences.

But that’s okay, because you are not required to like everything you are asked to read in this course—indeed, we hope for a more complicated reaction than that. Discussions of art works at the college level require more than just a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" response, after all.

Nevertheless, insofar as possible, you are required to adopt an attitude of critical distance when discussing difficult and distressing representations and topics—or even just when we are talking about works that don’t appeal to you very much. The cultivation of such an attitude is fundamental to the process of studying the arts and humanities at the college level; our intellectual labors also require us to become sensitive to the role played by different contexts (historical, institutional, national, political, personal) in the shaping of meaning.
It might help to bear in mind that pleasure is not the primary motive for scholarly reading—though it certainly can prove pleasurable at times. Instead, our primary motive is the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of certain reading skills (things that may themselves lead to more rarified forms of pleasure, with time and experience).

You should also bear in mind that a text or artwork need not express current values to be a source of knowledge, or to be worthy of preservation and discussion, or to be a suitable whetstone on which to sharpen our skills of analysis and interpretation. Indeed, as history shows, “current values” are not set in stone but subject to revision and change, and the study of art and literature is in part the study of these shifting processes of evaluation and interpretation. It is part of our job to try to understand why values—aesthetic and political—become established, and why and how they change.

The cultivation of critical distance, contextual knowledge, and an awareness of the contingency of value is good practice not merely for scholars of literature, art, and media; it may also help prepare us to live as members of a diverse and inclusive society by encouraging a perspective of informed tolerance.

Please bear these precepts in mind if you choose to take this course!

**Managing Disagreements With Respect**

We won’t always agree.

In college-level courses in the humanities, agreement is not even the main goal. The point is to be challenged by new ideas about the complex relationships between art, language, literature, media technologies, culture, and politics—and to become more discerning with regard to what constitutes a persuasive argument.

Unfortunately, we are all capable of giving offense accidentally—sometimes due to misunderstanding, and sometimes out of lack of knowledge. If the topic at hand is inherently sensitive or difficult, the risk of an accidental hurt is more likely.

But in a college classroom setting, we must try to assume the good faith of all participants.

Remember, it is unlikely in such circumstances that anyone is deliberately trying to give offense. Moreover, our collective responsibility as a learning community is to try to help one another in the face of our misunderstandings and insufficiencies. That means being patient with one another when we express ourselves poorly or speak from ignorance—something we will all do from time to time. (And yes, that includes professors.)

Having said that: good faith discussion is impossible without basic respect for human difference and diversity. No student should ever be discriminated against on account of their age, race, gender, sexual orientation, class status, prior educational attainments, religion, or appearance; in addition, personal insults, name-calling, and mockery will not be tolerated. If you are ever subject to discriminatory language or behavior as a student, please let me know, so that we can take steps to address the problem.

Finally, though, let’s try always to assume the best of one another, even—or especially—when we disagree. In the end, that’s the only way we can hope to learn from one another.

**One Final Golden Rule**
As the humorist, actor, and author Stephen Fry has observed, it is easy to read a poem too quickly — but almost impossible to read one too slowly. They are for sipping, like expensive, aged whiskey or fine rare wine, not for gulping down like the artificially colored, carbonated, and corn-syrup-filled concoctions that are so popular with children. That is because poems are not like most forms of writing; their primary purpose is not to impart information, just as the primary purpose of fine whiskey is not to quench thirst. Instead, what both strive to impart is an experience.

So if there is one watchword for this course, it is “savor.”

I know we are all busy, but sometimes you must find the time to take the time. So please — I am earnestly begging you, here — every week, pick a few of the poems you have been assigned, and tell yourself “I’m going to read this as slowly as I can.”

This is really important.

Any Questions?

I’m sure you must have some. If so, please ask ... that is why we are here.