ENGLISH 106: INTRODUCTION TO POETRY
TERM: Winter 2018
PROFESSOR: Ben Saunders
OFFICE HOURS: Fridays, 2 pm-5pm, 366 PLC
E-MAIL: ben@uoregon.edu
GTF: Parker Smith
OFFICE HOURS: Tuesdays/Thursdays, 3.30pm-5pm, 36 PLC
E-MAIL: psmith5@uoregon.edu

AN OPEN LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

Poetry is often regarded as the most demanding of all 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 their own entertainment. In fact, many people pretend to respect poetry while actually striving to avoid it. Others might dismiss it as boring, when in fact they are probably a bit afraid of it (though understandably reluctant to admit that fear).

If poetry is indeed the most demanding of all literary genres, avoidance, frustration, and fear are entirely predictable and even reasonable responses — just as they would be in any demanding situation. So maybe we should just acknowledge that upfront. Poetry can be difficult, and difficult can be scary; fear is baked into the experience, the nature of the beast.

Part of our task this term, then, will not be to permanently dispel the difficulty and fear around poetry so much as to re-discover poetry as a source of pleasure and wisdom while acknowledging that difficulty and fear are part of the deal.

But why is poetry difficult, exactly? What is the nature of this demand that it makes of us? These are questions that the entire course will strive to address. But one quick answer 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 cannot always pay, actually, even if we want to (because it would be too much, exhausting, madness even, to always be paying the kind of attention that poetry demands).

So: learning about poetry requires you to become a bit more easy with difficulty, a bit more comfortable with discomfort, a bit more relaxed with the experience of feeling (at least temporarily) puzzled or confused. It also requires you to read actively rather than passively, to be engaged in a different way than when you read a news item or blog post or an email or text message (although having said that, the amusing accidents of the auto-correct function can sometimes jolt us into a new awareness of language, in ways that poets are often deliberately trying to achieve).
But 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 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? That’s the kind of thing we can hope for here, at the highest level: language aspiring to the condition of music (to paraphrase an old aesthete).

It’s my belief, then, that if we accept that difficulty is part of the game, and if we are also willing to learn a little bit about the basic formal techniques of the genre, we can find a very special form of enjoyment in this art. We may even sometimes stumble into rapture. I don’t think it’s too much to say that if we can learn to love poetry at least some of the time, despite the difficulty, then we 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 all in this course: that you could 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 even have 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 books for a while — and also do the assignments we set you, and really just give this class the precious gift of your time.

At the very least, I can promise that if you do these things (read the poems, do the assignments, show up and pay attention, get a bit more comfortable with difficulty) 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.

_Only you can decide if that sounds like a worthwhile goal in and of itself._ 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 don’t have to take _this_ class, with _this_ professor. But if you want to learn more about poetry, with no higher motivation than the desire to learn more about poetry, then you are in the right place — and while this class will no doubt sometimes challenge and frustrate and maybe even frighten you, it will also be fun.

With respect and good wishes,

Professor Saunders
The remainder of this syllabus will describe the requirements and assignments for the course in a more traditional manner. But understand: a **syllabus is like a contract.** It lays out your responsibilities as students over the next ten weeks in very specific detail. **Staying registered in the class is equivalent to signing the contract.** So please read the whole thing now, ahead of time — not week by week or just when the assignments are due — so you know exactly what you are getting into before you make the commitment.

**REQUIRED TEXTS**


Copies are available for purchase at the Duck Store. Additional readings will be handed out in class in photocopied form.

**REQUIRED TIME**

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.

**POLICIES AND PENALTIES**

**Attendance is mandatory.** You are expected to come to every lecture and every meeting of your discussion section. **Unexcused absences** will result in a lowered grade, at the rate of 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. from A to A-) for every unexcused absence. No further warnings will be given about this policy. In the event of illness, a family emergency, or certain approved University business (e.g. participation in a sporting event) an absence may be considered “excused” — at my discretion or that of your GTF, Mr. Parker Smith. **Please inform me (or Parker) of the reason for your absence before the class in question or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as reasonably possible afterwards if you wish to be excused.** Remember, if you do have to miss a class, it is your responsibility to make sure you are adequately prepared for the next session.

**Use of electronic devices such as laptops, tablets, or cell-phones during the lectures is strictly forbidden** (with the exception of students with documented disabilities who may use laptops and/or recording devices, with my prior approval). Texting or surfing the web during class is distracting and disrespectful, both to the instructor and to your classmates. Students who violate this policy will be marked as “absent (unexcused)” for the class in question, and will see their final grades lowered accordingly. **Please close your laptops and put away your phone before the start of class.**
Late assignments will be downgraded, at the rate of 1/3 of a letter grade for every day past the due date. In certain circumstances (an illness or other unavoidable crisis), this penalty may be lifted — at the discretion of your GTF. **If you anticipate having a problem completing an assignment on time, let your GTF know as soon as possible.** Last minute requests for extensions will not be accommodated except in the event of a documented emergency.

**Always bring the required text to class.** Students without a text will be counted as absent and downgraded accordingly. You can’t even pretend to be interested if you don’t have a book in front of you. *(This penalty applies equally to the handouts with additional poems and study materials that we will supply; we expect you to have the right handouts on the right day. There will be fair number of these, so you are advised to purchase a file folder to store them, along with your own notes.)*

**Plagiarism (presenting the research or insights of others as if it were your own work) will result in automatic failure of the course.** Loss of financial aid is a common additional consequence. In certain cases (a second offense, for example), plagiarism can result in dismissal from the University. *(In one particularly unpleasant term I was forced to fail eight students in a class of forty. Yes, that’s 20% of the class; yes, I failed them all, outright; yes, at least one of those students lost her financial aid and was unable to complete her degree.)* **It is not worth the risk.**

Finally, you should be aware that many of the texts we will read this term deal with adult subjects using adult language: religion, politics, and sexuality — by which I mean the full range of human sexual practices — are all potential topics for lecture and discussion. Nor will we shy away from the frank acknowledgment of human cruelty and violence. Kneejerk expressions of moral indignation can feel good and are common in the world of social media; but such displays are generally at odds with good scholarly practice. You are not required to like everything you read or agree with everything you hear me say — indeed, I hope for a more complicated response than that — but you must be ready to meet the various intellectual and ethical challenges of this material with an open mind if you chose to take this course.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

**Reading Quizzes:**

Every class will begin with a short quiz on the readings for the day. These quizzes will be designed to reward those of you who have read the assignments and paid attention in previous classes. All aspects of the readings (including the short biographical essays that accompany each selection of poetry in the Norton) are fair game. I will provide study questions at the end of every class to help with the next batch of readings; these will help you prepare for the quizzes, too. There will be no “make-up” quizzes, so you will also be rewarded for punctuality and attendance.
The Elements of Poetry:

I will post a full description of this assignment to Canvas. It basically involves breaking a poem down into component parts, like stripping an engine. It is a detail-oriented task, best approached over several days, thirty minutes at a time, rather than in a five-hour marathon session the night before. (Please trust me on this. If you delay and then try to do this assignment all at once, you’ll hate it, hate me, and under-perform. But if you tackle it one or two sections at a time over a period of a few weeks you’ll find it relatively easy, and you’ll learn more from it.) I will also provide an example version of the assignment on Canvas. You should print and study this example carefully before attempting your own. See the “schedule of readings” below for the due date.

Paraphrase and Guided Close Reading:

Again, the full assignment will be posted on Canvas. It will introduce you to two of the most basic techniques of literary criticism. See the “schedule of readings” below for the due date.

PERCENTAGE VALUES OF GRADED WORK

Reading Quizzes: 40%
The Elements of Poetry: 30%
Paraphrase/CLOSE Reading: 30%

Discretionary extra credit of up to a third of a letter grade will be awarded for distinguished class participation. (Please note: this does not mean that you get points merely for talking. But students who regularly demonstrate familiarity with the readings, and who advance our discussions by asking pertinent questions, and who ground their observations in specific details from the texts will be rewarded for their contributions.)

SOME USEFUL RESOURCES FOR POETIC TERMS/VOCABULARY

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms

Academic, mostly trustworthy.


Slightly less academic and so less trustworthy, but often helpful.
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.
SCHEDULE OF LECTURES, READINGS, AND DUE DATES

WEEK ONE

T Jan 9  Introduction: What Is Poetry?
Collins, “Introduction To Poetry.”
Yeats, “The Song of Wandering Aengus.”
Carroll, “Jabberwocky.”
Morgan, “The Loch Ness Monster’s Song.”
Hopkins, “The Windhover.”
Larkin, “This Be The Verse.”
(Handouts)

Th Jan 11 Effects of Rhythm, Caesura, and Enjambment
Dickinson, “I Felt a Funeral In My Brain.” (Norton 1: 34)
Hardy, “The Voice.” (Norton 1: 57)
McKay, “If We Must Die.” (Norton 1: 501)
Pope, “Sound and Sense.” (Handout)

WEEK TWO

T Jan 16  The Sonnet, From Renaissance to Modern
Some Petrarch, Wyatt, Spenser, Shakespeare (Handout)
Frost, “Design.” (Norton 1. 221)
McKay, “The Lynching.” (Norton 1. 502)
Millay, “I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed.” (Norton 1. 512)
Millay, “I Will Put Chaos Into Fourteen Lines.” (Handout)

Th Jan 18 Villanelles and Sestinas
Roethke, “The Waking.”
Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.”
Plath, “Mad Girl’s Love Song.”
Kipling, “Sestina of the Tramp-Royal.”
Ashbery, “The Painter.”
James Merrill, “Tomorrows.”
(Handouts)
WEEK THREE

T Jan 23  
Blank, Free, and Found
Milton, Excerpt from “Paradise Lost, Book One.” (Handout)
Stevens, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” (Handout)
Ginsberg, “America.” (Norton 2. 347)
Williams, “This is just to say.” (Handout)

Th Jan 25  
The Cusp of The Modern: Dickinson/Hardy/Yeats
Biographical Essay on Dickinson. (Norton 1. 30-32)
Dickinson, “The Brain—is wider than the Sky.” (Norton 1. 38)
Biographical Essay on Hardy. (Norton 1. 41-44)
Hardy, “Hap,” “Neutral Tones,” and “The Darkling Thrush.” (Norton 1. 44, 44, and 48)
Biographical Essay on Yeats. (Norton 1. 90-94)
Yeats, “September 1913,” and “The Second Coming.” (Norton 1. 102 and 111)

WEEK FOUR

T Jan 30  
Folk Wisdom or Faux Wisdom: The Poetry of Robert Frost
Biographical Essay on Frost. (Norton 1. 201-203)
Frost, “Mending Wall,” “The Road Not Taken,” “Birches,” “Fire and Ice,”
“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” “Neither Out Far nor In Deep,”

Th Feb 1  
“Mud, Blood, and Sugar Stick”: In the Trenches with Wilfred Owen
Biographical Essay on Owen. (Norton 1. 523-524)
Brooke, “The Soldier.” (Handout)
Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” “Strange Meeting,” “Greater Love,”
“Exposure.” (Norton 1. 527-535)

WEEK FIVE

T Feb 6  
Modernity as Crisis: T. S. Eliot

Th Feb 8  
Getting Loopy with Gertrude Stein
Biographical Essay on Stein. (Norton 1. 176-178)
WEEK SIX

T Feb 13  Aesthetic Ontology: The Inner World of Wallace Stevens
Biographical Essay on Stevens. (Norton 1. 235-237)

Th Feb 15  ... But Some Are More Modern Than Others: Langston Hughes, Melvin Tolson, and Countee Cullen
Biographical Essay on Tolson (Norton 1. 590-592)
Tolson, excerpts from “Harlem Gallery” (Norton 1. 593-599)
Biographical Essay on Hughes (Norton 1. 684-687)
Biographical Essay on Cullen. (Norton 1. 726-727)

Fri Feb 16  Assignment (“The Elements of Poetry”) due: 5pm, 36 PLC.

WEEK SEVEN

T Feb 20  A Poet’s Poet: Elizabeth Bishop (I)
Biographical Essay on Bishop. (Norton 2. 15-17)
“The Man Moth,” “The Fish,” “Roosters,” “Sestina.” (Norton 2. 18, 21, 23, 30)

W Feb 22  A Poet’s Poet: Elizabeth Bishop (II)
“The Armadillo,” “In the Waiting Room,” “Poem,” “One Art,” “North Haven.” (Norton 2. 31, 34, 40, 43, 44)

WEEK EIGHT

T Feb 27  Letting It All Hang Out With John Berryman
Biographical Essay on Berryman. (Norton 2. 92-93)
Berryman, all selected “Dream Songs.” (Norton 2. 93-100)
WEEK EIGHT (cont.)

Th Mar 1  
**Guest Lecture by Mr. Parker Smith**  
“The Confessional School vs. The New York School”  
Biographical Essay on Robert Lowell (Norton 2: 119-121)  
Biographical Essay on Anne Sexton (Norton 2: 431-432)  

WEEK NINE

T Mar 6  
**“The Woman is Perfected”: Sylvia Plath**  
Biographical Essay on Plath. (Norton 2. 593-595)  

Th Mar 8  
**Modern Life Is Rubbish: Philip Larkin**  
Biographical Essay on Larkin. (Norton 2. 210-211)  

Fri Mar 9  
**Assignment (”Paraphrase and Close Reading”) due: 5 pm, 36 PLC.**

WEEK TEN

T Mar 13  
**Working Class Hero: Tony Harrison**  
Biographical Essay on Harrison. (Norton 2. 669-670)  
Harrison, “Book Ends,” “Marked with D,” “V.” (Norton 2. 672, 674, 676)  
“They and [uz].” (Handout)

Th Mar 15  
**The Last Five Poets: Duffy, Martínez, Cole, Lee, Alexie**  
Read them all, in a big inhale. What would you say about the world of contemporary poetry on the basis of these poems and poets ...?