

Poetry Writing (EngWrt 0531), Fall 2013

Mondays & Wednesdays 3:00-4:20, 253 Biddle Hall

Eric Schwerer

Associate Professor, The Program in Creative and Professional Writing

Because of its fundamental *otherness* from the language we encounter in our daily lives, poetry requires focused attention. Much of what goes on in the world – television, facebook, text messages, traffic, alarms – is at odds with the reading and writing of poetry. I want you to fight for your right to read and write poetry, to listen with care, to succeed in stepping away from the daily *busyness* of the world, and to immerse yourself in uses of language that enthrall, delight, disturb, and maybe even liberate you.

Poetry's *otherness* also empowers writers and readers to find a diversity and quality of voice that is too often ignored or opposed by mainstream culture. Good poetry seeks to push language in directions that it is not ordinarily made to go. In this way, poetry can empower the experiences of marginalized peoples; allow us to express feelings and ideas that otherwise go unheard; discover expression – however troubling, difficult, indecorous, strange, or nonstandard – that is a radical and necessary response to dominant discourse.

This course continues explorations of the art of poetry begun in EngWrt 0500: Introduction to Creative Writing. In lectures, assignments, and class discussion, I will assume we all have written and read some poetry in college and that we all are familiar with some basic technical and expressive similarities and differences between poetry and the other written arts (short stories, plays, and creative nonfiction, for example).

The poems we will read, whether written by published poets or by classmates, need to be read more than once as you prepare for class discussion and seek inspiration for your own poetry. We will also be reading critical texts on the form and practice of poetry that both promote and challenge traditional and mainstream procedures by which poets have been valued, dismissed, represented, underrepresented, recognized, resisted, or ignored. These texts, too, will need to be read more than once as you take notes, prepare for class discussion, and formalize your responses in short academic papers and presentations.

Working with Me Outside of Class:

My office hours are Wednesdays 11:00am to 3:00pm in Biddle 223a If those hours don't work, we can easily find other times. Please send me an **email (schwerer@pitt.ed)** or talk to me after class to schedule a meeting, raise concerns, or ask questions. I want to help you work on your writing.

Required Materials:

- *A Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver
- *The Best American Poetry 2012*, Mark Doty, editor
- an active @pitt.edu email account that you monitor regularly
- a notebook for lecture notes and to use as a creative space to draft poems as well as a reflective/scholarly space to process our required readings as you prepare for class discussion
- (I've placed *Imaginative Writing* by Janet Burroway on reserve in Owen Library. You might find it a helpful resource during the semester, especially if you have not taken EngWrt 0050.)

Grading:

• Memorization and Recital of a Poem*	5%
• Fifteen Minute Presentation*	10%
• Explication Paper	10%
• Participation*	30%
• Miscellaneous Assignments	20%
• Final Portfolio	25%

***This course is designated “Speaking-Enhanced” and fulfills that requirement under Gen Ed “Speaking Competency”**

Memorization and Recital of a Poem:

By asking you to memorize a poem and recite it aloud in class, I am hoping you will experience how a poem can live inside you, can enter your long term memory, can allow your mind and mouth to feel its twists, turns, sounds, and sense.

“A” recitals will:

- demonstrate superior accuracy as regards diction, syntax, typography, and punctuation;
- be performed with excellence as regards articulation and intonation.

“B” recitals mainly satisfy the above criteria with some shortcomings. “C” recitals are clearly deficient in one or both of the criteria. “D” and “F” recitals are well below average in both criteria.

Fifteen Minute Presentation:

You will offer to us a presentation that “troubles” or otherwise grapples with assumptions about poetry. Your source material will be both poems and prose from or inspired by our assigned readings. For example, you might read aloud a poem by a canonical American Modernist as well a poem from *The Best American Poetry 2012* (or a poet that *The Best American Poetry* neglects). Then you might read aloud a passage from one of our critical texts that interrogates the ways in which poets have been recognized or neglected. You would then deliver a lecture that connects your source materials and your own ideas. Your presentation will end by you posing a discussion-prompting question to the class.

“A” presentations will:

- be of appropriate length;
- be clear as regards both volume and articulation;
- demonstrate superior engagement of the material;
- synthesize source materials in illuminating and provocative ways.

“B” presentations mainly satisfy the above criteria with some shortcomings. “C” presentations are clearly deficient in one or more of the above criteria. “D” and “F” presentations are well below average in a majority of the above criteria.

Explication Paper:

This explication paper is an opportunity for you to demonstrate your knowledge of the elements and craft of poetry and to explore the standards by which you assess a poem's technical, formal achievements. "A" explication papers will:

- be approximately 900 words long and formatted to MLA standards;
- have strong theses, focused paragraphs, and no unnecessary repetition;
- employ specific definitions, key terms, and theories that we read and talk about throughout the semester to elucidate specific language and features of the poem you've chosen;
- contain no errors in grammar, diction, or mechanics.

"B" explications mainly satisfy the above criteria with some shortcomings. "C" work is clearly deficient in one or more of the criteria. "D" and "F" are well below average in a majority of the criteria.

Participation:

Throughout this semester, various events on campus and in the city of Johnstown will feature poets and poetry. I will make you aware of some of these, encourage you to go, and do what I can to make it easy for you to attend. Likewise, if you hear of any community events of interest, please share them with us!

I want you to be an active participant in a community of writers exploring the creative process. Although there will be some lectures, the atmosphere is largely based on *you*: your writing, your responses to what you've read, your ideas and questions, your *presence*.

Your participation includes: timely completion of assigned readings; participation during in-class discussion and workshop; and fidelity to this syllabus. If you do not keep up with the reading and writing assignments and do not come to class prepared to ask questions, talk, and help lead discussion, then you will earn a "D" or "F" in participation. To earn a "C" in participation you will need to regularly contribute to class discussion. If you are thoughtfully involved during discussions and thereby convey to your peers and me a good or superior engagement of the required reading and assignments, then you will earn a "B" or an "A."

Finally, your participation also includes attendance. When you miss a class, you miss an experience that cannot be replicated or "made up." My grading system does not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. You do not need to provide an explanation or excuse for missing class. However, if you do miss a class, then contact either me or a classmate to get any notes, handouts, or updates so that you come to the next class fully prepared. It is unlikely that you will earn an "A," "B," or "C" in participation if you do not make an effort in these regard or if you miss more than five (5) classes during the semester.

Miscellaneous Assignments:

You will earn either an "A+" (100%) or an "F" (0%) in this category. To earn an "A+":

- submit drafts of poems that—although not finished or even near perfect—are typed and fairly free of spelling and grammatical errors;
- complete handwritten peer critiques of your classmates' poems that are thorough and legible;

- turn in, on time, all assignments (poems, peer critiques, exercises) and, upon missing a class, have your work here nonetheless – a fellow student can deliver it or you can email it to me prior to class as a .doc or .rtf attachment.

An “F” for the semester in the category of “miscellaneous assignments” will occur when you fail to adhere to any or all of the above criteria on more than three (3) occasions. I will make your first two “violations” clear to you in a respectful, confidential manner.

Final Portfolio:

Your final portfolio will contain a polished selection of 6 original poems which you have created and revised during this semester. It will also contain all drafts on which I or classmates have written or typed comments (this will exceed six poems and include multiple drafts and versions of individual poems), so please save everything throughout the semester. “A” portfolios will contain poems that:

- move compellingly with an effective flow;
- use diction with precision and contain detailed descriptions and vivid imagery when needed;
- contain dramatic situations (plot, narrative) or lyric utterance which unfold with grace and force;
- contain no mechanical and grammatical errors or are otherwise committed to – and consistent in their use of – experimental innovation;
- demonstrate a dedication to revision.

“B” portfolios mainly satisfy the above criteria with some shortcomings. “C” work is clearly deficient in one or more of the criteria. “D” and “F” are well below average in a majority of the criteria.

You will also write a preface to your final portfolio. It will account for 5 to 35 % of your final portfolio grade (the percentage is up to you and should be conveyed to me before you submit your final portfolio). “A” prefaces will:

- be 700 words or longer and formatted to MLA standards;
- contain no errors in grammar, diction, or mechanics;
- and satisfy, with panache, one (1) of the following two (2) criteria:
 1. Define and expound upon one or more of these qualities as regards your poetry:
 - ♣ identity and voice (as regards gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, ethnicity, age, disability, religious beliefs, or culture);
 - ♣ choice and treatment of the subject matters you are drawn to;
 - ♣ resistance to, experiments with, or adherence to specific traditions, forms, styles, or expressive modes;
 - ♣ the specific strengths and perhaps the shortcomings of the poems in your final portfolio and assess or narrate your revision process; and/or assess how your poems were received or judged by me and/or your peers throughout the semester.
 2. Research two or more of the literary journals in which authors featured in *The Best American Poetry 2012* have been published and analyze the differences between these journals as regards the types of poems they accept. Then compose your own “Contributor’s Note” were you to be published in *The Best American Poetry 2032*.

"B" prefaces mainly satisfy the above three criteria with some shortcomings. "C" work is clearly deficient in one or more of the criteria. Still worried about "D" or "F" grades at this point in the semester? If so, please see "Office Hours" above (I want to help you work on your writing).

Other Policies:

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please contact the Office of Health & Wellness Services, G-10 Student Union, (814) 269-7119 to schedule an appointment. They will work with you to determine reasonable accommodations for this course and then encourage you to contact me if you so desire. I will be glad to discuss with you any concerns that seem to you beyond the scope of the accommodations that the Office of Health & Wellness Services can provide, but please make that office your starting point.

Turn off cell phones and other electronic equipment before class. Please do not send or receive texts, even if you are hiding your phone in your lap. The first time you text, tweet, update your facebook status—whatever—in our class, your final grade will be lowered by 20%. Should you violate this policy a second time, you will receive an "F" for the semester.

Plagiarism, or passing off someone else's work as your own, is not acceptable in the academic community. Consequences will range from a failing grade in this course to expulsion from the University. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please let me help you.

You may withdraw from this class no later than October 25 (after that date, you must obtain a "Late Withdrawal" form from the Office of Academic Affairs; permission for "Late Withdrawal" is allowed under extreme circumstances).

Our Classroom as a Community

The University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown's "Vision/Mission Statement" asserts that you and I are "in a supportive living-learning environment...that is responsive both to our...personal and professional needs and to our communities' needs." It claims that you and I—and your fellow students and my fellow teachers—"reflect the richness of our pluralistic society, including more historically underrepresented persons." It encourages us to be proud of recent efforts which have made "a more inclusive community" that is "welcoming to all." These efforts, we are told, have lead to "broader levels of intercultural engagement" and to a "deeper respect for our common humanity" which have "taken us a step closer to fulfilling American's promise."

These are big claims. I want them to be true. I hope you will give me suggestions and help me to address situations or comments in which any of us feels discriminated due to our race, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, religious beliefs, ethnicity, national origin, or status as a U.S. veteran. I hope you will help me to maintain a learning environment of open communication that takes even more steps—however small-- closer toward liberty, justice, and inclusion.

List of Due Dates for Assignments (subject to updates, additions, and changes):

please note: *these assignments appear under the dates by which you need to complete them!*

WEEK ONE

Mon 8/26

Wed 8/28

Re-READ syllabus

DUE: new poem

WEEK TWO

Mon 9/2

Wed 9/4

READ Doty's "Introduction" to *BAP*

READ in *The Best American Poetry 2012 [BAP]* poets Alexie, Anderson, Armentrout, Baggot, Baker, Barot

DUE: new poem

WEEK THREE

Mon 9/9

READ in *BAP* poets Betts, Bond, Brown

READ Adrienne Rich's "Introduction" from *The Best American Poetry 1996*

READ Kowitt's chapter "I Couldn't Stop Watching"

COMPLETE the following exercises from Kowitt (handwritten is fine):

- "A Process for Recovering Memories"
- "Taking Notes on the First Poem"
- & **one** of these two poetry exercises (give yourself at least 30minutes):
 - -Poem 1: A Childhood Memory
 - -Poem 3: Family Secrets

BRING these 3 handwritten exercises to class

Wed 9/11

READ Oliver's chapters "Introduction," "Getting Ready," and "Reading Poems"

READ in *BAP* poets Chang, Chapman

DUE: a poem inspired by "Poem 1" or "Poem 3" from Kowitt

WORKSHOP GROUP "A" BRING 18 copies of above poem to class

WEEK FOUR

Mon 9/16

PEER CRITIQUES of group "A"'s poems due

READ Oliver's chapter "Imitation"

READ *excerpt from* Harold Bloom's "Introduction" to *The Best of the Best of American Poetry: 1988–1997*

READ in *BAP* poets Christle, Cole, Collins, Cooley, Corral

WEEK FOUR, *continued*

Wed 9/18

CONFERENCES

DUE: bring a new poem to your conference

WORKSHOP GROUP "B": send me an ELECTRONIC COPY of your new poem via EMAIL

WEEK FIVE

Mon 9/23

PEER CRITIQUES of group "B"'s poems due

READ "Harold Bloom's Charge That Multiculturalism in American Poetry is a Mask for Mediocrity" by Nikki Giovanni, Alvin Aubert, Calvin Hernton, and Leonard Moore

READ in BAP poets Equi, Gibb, Graber, Greacen, Hall, Hayes, Heighton

Wed 9/25

READ in BAP poets Hillman, Hirshfield, Howard

READ Oliver's chapters "Sound" and "More Devices of Sound"

DUE: a new poem

WORKSHOP GROUP "C" BRING 18 copies of above poem to class

WEEK SIX

Mon 9/30

PEER CRITIQUES of group "C"'s poems due

READ in BAP poets Howe, Huey, Johnson, Joseph, Joudah

READ *excerpts from* "The Body of Poetry, Poetics, A Taxonomy," "How to Create a Poetic Tradition," and "Coherent Decentering (Confessions of a Postmodern Poetess)" from *The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self* by Annie Finch

Wed 10/2

READ in BAP poets Katz, Kimbrell

WEEK SEVEN

Mon 10/7

READ in BAP poets Kocot, Kumin, Lindsay, Majmudar, Mason

READ "The Fish," by Elizabeth Bishop

READ Oliver's chapters "Diction, Tone, Voice" and "Imagery"

READ Doty's essay "A Tremendous Fish"

Wed 10/9

READ in BAP poets McCadden, Moore

DUE: a new or revised poem

WORKSHOP GROUP "A" and "B" BRING 18 copies of above poem to class

WEEK EIGHT

Mon 10/14

READ Oliver's chapter "Some Given Forms" and "Verse that Is Free"

READ in *BAP* poets Morse, Muske-Dukes, Nikolopoulos, Oliver, Orien, Ostriker, Pankey, Perillo, Pinsky, Rader

Wed 10/16

WEEK NINE

Mon 10/21

POEM DUE: a VILLANELLE or a SESTINA

PEER CRITIQUES of group "A"'s and "B"'s poems due

READ Oliver's chapter "The Line"

READ pages 1 through 16 of Stephen Fry's "Chapter One, Meter"

COMPLETE Fry's "Poetry Exercise 1"

Wed 10/23

READ in *BAP* poets Reece, Rekdal

READ and COMPLETE Fry's "Poetry Exercise 2" (typed, double spaced)

READ Oliver's chapter "Revision"

POEM DUE: a **revision** of any poem you've written thus far this semester

WORKSHOP GROUP "C" BRING 18 copies of above poem to class

WEEK TEN

Mon 10/28

READ in *BAP* poets Seidel, Shaughnessy

PEER CRITIQUES of group "C"'s poems due

SCAN "Postolka (Prague)" by Christian Wiman

Wed 10/30

READ "Ghazal: To Be Teased into DisUnity" by Agha Shahid Ali and "Haiku" by Jean Hyung Yul Chu, from *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*, edited by Annie Finch and Kathrine Varnes

READ poems by Ali, Chu

WEEK ELEVEN

Mon 11/4

READ in *BAP* poets Shippy, Smith, Snider, Strand, Szporluk

READ Oliver's chapters "Verse That Is Free"

Wed 11/6

DUE: new poem

WORKSHOP GROUP "A" BRING 18 copies of above poem to class

DEADLINE to tell me which poem you are tackling for your explication paper

WEEK TWELVE

Mon 11/11

PEER CRITIQUES of group "A"'s poems due

READ "Hip-Hop Rhyme Formations: Open Your Ears" by Tracie Morris, "Pantoum's Postcolonial Pedigree" by Vince Gotera, and "Metrics of Rap" by DJ Renegade and "Low Coup as a Contemporary Afro-American Verse Form" by Amiri Baraka from *An Exaltation of Forms*

READ poems by Morris, Gotera, Renegade, Baraka

FIFTEEN MINUTE PRESENTATIONS

Wed 11/13

DEADLINE to tell me which poem you are memorizing

DUE: new or revised poem

WORKSHOP GROUP "B" BRING 18 copies of above poem to class

FIFTEEN MINUTE PRESENTATIONS

WEEK THIRTEEN

Mon 11/18

PEER CRITIQUES of group "B"'s poems due

READ in *BAP* poets Ruefle, Russ, Ryan, Salter, Schwartz

FIFTEEN MINUTE PRESENTATIONS

Wed 11/20

FIFTEEN MINUTE PRESENTATIONS

DUE: new or revised poem

WORKSHOP GROUP "C" BRING 18 copies of above poem to class

WEEK FOURTEEN

Mon 11/25

READ in *BAP* poets Tobin, Tretheway

conferences (*my conference time:* _____)

Wed 11/27

WEEK FIFTEEN

Mon 12/2

PEER CRITIQUES of group "C"'s poems due

READ in *BAP* poets Wheeler, Wright, Yezzi, Young, Young

FIFTEEN MINUTE PRESENTATIONS

Wed 12/4

EXPLICATION PAPER DUE

STUDENT RECITALS of MEMORIZED poems

FIFTEEN MINUTE PRESENTATIONS

FINALS WEEK

Tue 12/10 Final Portfolios Due by 3:00pm

This Is Where I Was Born

but it's not mine
Tears as she tries to speak in english
not her first language
Can't remember the words of her roots
Decided to stop because people laughed
What does it mean when they chain up our tongues
When they take our languages they take our lives
Not just language but everything
my family did
Couldn't talk about them in school
Everybody laughed
Her face a rupturing dam
Ashamed, I mocked my mother
So afterawhile
I just stopped talking

Chrystos, 1991

#1251

Silence is all we dread.
There's Ransom in a Voice —
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.

Emily Dickinson, 1860 (?)
