

English 131

Katy Ryan, ENGL 131, Spring 2008

ENG 131: Poetry and Drama

Katy Ryan

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Course Description

This course will provide you with an introduction to poetic and dramatic forms. We will consider how writers avail themselves of existing forms and experiment to create new ones. Of the many kinds of poems, we will focus on verse forms (villanelles and sonnets), elegies, and open forms. Of the many kinds of plays, we will study agit-prop (agitational propaganda), social realism, and epic theatre. We will only touch the surface of the complicated histories associated with these literary forms, but my hope is that this surface will shimmer with intellectual and artistic possibilities. While much of our study will concentrate on the formal elements of literature, we will also attend to meaning and content; that is, we will consider both the how and what of literary texts. In the first half of the semester, we will concentrate on poems, and as spring arrives, we will turn to plays.

Course Goals

- To increase your intellectual curiosity about life and literature
- To gain an understanding of the formal elements of poetry and drama
- To learn to ask perceptive questions of literary texts
- To compose logical and well-supported analytical responses to literature
- To contribute with confidence to class discussion

Required Texts

The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms, eds. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland

Irwin Shaw, *Bury the Dead*

Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*

Tony Kushner, *Homebody / Kabul*

Course Requirements

- 1) Exams 50%
- 2) Two Quizzes 20%
- 3) Four Reader Responses 20%
- 4) Participation 10%

1) Two Exams

There will be two exams. The first will be on Feb. 28 and the second will be a take-home exam due during finals week. The midterm exam will consist of brief answers to technical, conceptual, and/or historical materials covered in class as well as longer responses to analytical and comparative questions. For the midterm, you must supply your own blue book. The take-home exam will give you a chance to respond to essay questions about the plays; that is, it will cover the second half of the semester.

2) Quizzes

Two quizzes will test your knowledge of poetic and dramatic terminology.

3) Reader Responses

Process

You will write four 500-word, single-spaced responses to the poems and plays. The due dates for these responses are on the syllabus. Each time you turn in a response, you should also turn in your previous graded responses. This enables me to track your progress and to identify problem areas in your writing. You can staple your responses together or collect them in a thin folder. I will return to you ungraded any responses that do not meet these requirements. Late responses will not be accepted unless there is a documented emergency.

Content

This mini-essay should begin with an interpretive question that you have about the material. That is, it should NOT be a summary of a poem or a play. Given the brevity of these responses, you should choose one scene, one character, one image, or one idea to analyze closely, rather than attempting to explicate an entire poem or play. **Be sure to ground your interpretation in the language of the literary text by quoting directly from the play or poem. (See handout on how to quote literary texts.)**

Purpose

These responses will help you to contribute to class discussion, to strengthen your writing, and to prepare for exams.

4) Attendance and Participation

You will participate in class as writers, readers, and members of a scholarly community. We will conduct our class in a circle format, which means that everyone will be expected to contribute at every class period. If this course were only about reading poems and plays, we could all do that by ourselves. If it were only about listening to what one person has to say about literature, we could all find a great lecture on video or audio. But English courses are about more than the act of reading and the acquisition of information. They are also about learning how to think, and some of the best learning happens in literature classes that are truly interactive—with a critical mass of voices participating at every session. Active participation will thus be required of each student.

I understand the pressure, uncertainty, and boredom that can lead to silence in the classroom. I will do my best to create an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and open, intellectual inquiry. We will move through the poems and plays while also moving around a circle in conversation. There are many ways that you can contribute to discussion: you can ask questions about our readings; read a poem aloud (this will happen daily); make observations; read aloud your written responses. Your original poem will be counted toward participation.

***If you miss more than three classes, your final grade will be reduced one letter grade. For each additional absence, your final grade will be reduced by a half letter. If you experience an emergency, please speak with the Dean of Student Affairs and have the necessary documentation forwarded to me.

Descriptions of Letter Grades

At mid-semester, I will ask you to hand in a self-assessment of your work and an evaluation of the class. This reflection will allow us to make adjustments to maximize learning in the second part of the semester. The following are descriptors for letter grades which correspond with my own sense of what these grades mean.

A = Excellent/Outstanding. This evaluation indicates a consistently excellent record in all aspects of the course, including discussion, written assignments, and exams. This grade conveys that the student has engaged thoroughly and skillfully with the course content. The student has not only demonstrated an understanding of the literary material but has also demonstrated a sophisticated ability, in class and in written work, to pose serious, critical, and challenging questions. The student has further evidenced a capacity to situate the course readings in a historical, theoretical, or conceptual framework.

B = Very good/Good. This evaluation indicates a strong record in all aspects of the course, including discussion, written assignments, and exams. This grade conveys that the student has grappled reliably and consistently with the course content and has demonstrated a mature understanding of the literary material. The student has made insightful connections between texts, has regularly contributed to class discussion, and has moved toward asking challenging questions.

C = Average/Competent. This evaluation indicates a competent record in most aspects of the course. This grade conveys that the student has fairly consistently and seriously engaged with the material and has demonstrated basic comprehension of the texts. That performance has been inconsistent, perhaps strong in one area and weak in another, or uneven within a certain area. This grade may indicate that the student is doing basic literary analysis but is not asking particularly vigorous or difficult questions. It may also signal that the student is intellectually capable of stronger work but has not rigorously fulfilled the course requirements, e.g., work was late, incomplete, or unpolished.

D=Poor/Consistent Difficulties. This evaluation indicates a poor record in most aspects of the course. The student has minimally met the requirements but has not been consistently or seriously involved with the course. Usually the student has performed below average in discussion, written assignments, and exams. This may be because the student is not interested in the course material or is unfamiliar with the protocols of English studies and has not made the necessary efforts to find out. The student has not demonstrated mature critical writing and thinking skills, and has not posed sufficiently complex questions.

F=Failure. This evaluation indicates a failing record overall in the course. The student has not met the minimum requirements of the course and has not demonstrated competency in the subject matter. (A grade of "F" does not mean that a student is a failure, but simply that the work in this area did not meet minimum standards.)

Grading Scale

A+ 98-100 points

A 97-94 points

A- 93-91 points

B+ 90-88 points

B 87-84 points

B- 83-81 points
C+ 80-78 points
C 77-74 points
C- 73-71 points
D 61-70 points
F 60 points or below

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Plagiarism/Cheating. The following definitions are from the West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog. Please see the section on Academic Integrity and Dishonesty for the full definition and discussion of procedures.

Plagiarism: material that has been knowingly obtained or copied in whole or in part, from the work of others . . . including (but not limited to) another individual's academic composition.

Cheating: doing academic work for another student, or providing one's own work for another student to copy and submit as his / her own.

Scholastic dishonesty: involves misrepresenting as your own work any part of work done by another; submitting the same paper or substantially similar papers to meet the requirements of more than one course without the written approval and consent of all instructors concerned; depriving another student of necessary course materials; interfering with another's work.

Clear cases of plagiarism or cheating may result in an unforgivable F for the course. If you have any question about how to document sources, please talk to me.

Cell Phone Courtesy. Before class, please turn off cell phones.

Social Justice. I share the University's commitment to social justice and try to create a learning environment based on open communication and respect. Please let me know if there is any way to create a more inclusive environment that is free of discrimination based on race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color, or national origin.

Accommodating Disabilities. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation, please let me know. You should also make arrangements with Disability Services (293-6700).

Emergencies or Health Crises. If you have an emergency or serious health problem in the course of the semester, you or your family should contact the Office of Student Life in E. Moore Hall (293-5611). The Dean of Student Life will communicate with me concerning your problem and authorize me to make arrangements for you. Please reserve the Dean's services for serious circumstances.

Schedule

- Jan 15 Introductions.
 "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks
- Jan 17 Introductory Statement to *The Making of a Poem* (xiii-xvi) and "Poetic Form" by Eaven Boland (xxi-xxx)
 Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck"
 Close-Up on "Diving into the Wreck"
 Handout on poetic terms and writing responses

The Sonnet

- Jan 22 Review poetic terms #1
 Verse Forms Overview (3-4); The Sonnet at a Glance, History, and Contemporary Context (55-59)
 William Shakespeare, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day"
 William Wordsworth, "Composed upon Westminster's Bridge, September 3, 1802"
 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*
- Jan 24 Edna St. Vincent Millay, "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why"; Countee Cullen, "From the Dark Tower"; e.e. cummings, from *"Tulips and Chimneys"*
 Close-up of a Sonnet: "What my lips have kissed"
 Reader Response: One-page analysis of one of sonnets due

The Villanelle

- Jan 29 Review poetic terms #2
 The Villanelle at a Glance, History, and Contemporary Context (5-8);

Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"; Close-Up of a Villanelle: "One Art";
Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"

Jan 31 Theodore Roethke, "The Waking"; Hayden Carruth, "Saturday at the Border";
Marilyn Hacker, "Villanelle"

The Elegy

Feb 5 Review poetic terms #3
Overview of Shaping Forms (165-66); Elegy Overview (167-169)
Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach"; Garrett Hongo, "The Legend"; Mark Doty,
"Tiara"

Feb 7 Louise Bogan, "Tears in Sleep"; Claude McKay "Tropics in New York" (148)
In-class writing: original poem
**Reader Response: One-page analysis of one of the villanelles or
the elegies due**

Open Forms

Feb 12 **Quiz on poetic terms 1-3**

Feb 14 T.S. Eliot, "Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Feb 19 Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West"
Original poem due

Feb 21 Allen Ginsberg, "America" and Langston Hughes, "I, Too"
In-class writing on Ginsberg's "America"

Feb 26 Sharon Olds, "The Language of the Brag"; Ai, "The German Army, Russia, 1943"
Yusef Komunyakaa, "Starlight Scope Myopia"

Feb 28 **First Exam**

Mar 4 Lucille Clifton, "move" and selections from *The Terrible Stories*

Mar 6 Introduction to Drama: Aristotle and Augusto Boal
Discussion of participatory theatre
Revision of original poem due (optional)

Mar 11 **Quiz on dramatic terms**

Agit-Prop Plays

Mar 13 *Bury the Dead*
Clip of Canadian Performance

Mar 18 *Bury the Dead*
Reviews and In-class Performance

Mar 20 *Bury the Dead*

Spring Break

Social Realism

Apr 1 Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*, Act 1
Langston Hughes, "Harlem" (epigraph)
Introduction by Robert Nemiroff

Apr 3 *Raisin in the Sun*, Act Two
Reader Response: One-page analysis of *Raisin in the Sun* due

Apr 8 *Raisin in the Sun*, Act Three
Reviews and In-class Performance

Apr 10 *Raisin in the Sun*
Clips from movie version

Epic Theatre

Apr 15 *Homebody / Kabul* Act One

Apr 17 *Homebody / Kabul* Act Two

Apr 22 *Homebody / Kabul* Act Three and Periplum
Reader Response: One-page analysis of *Homebody / Kabul* due

Apr 24 *Homebody / Kabul* Afterword
Reviews and In-class Performance

Apr 29 Take-Home Exam

May 1 Review and workshop for take-home exam

Take-home exam due on Monday, May 5, by noon in Colson 221