

# Creative Writing 301-80/English 605: Poetry Workshop I

Main Hall 213 TR 7:15-10:00 p.m. [updated 10/30/08]

Office hours:

T-Th 9:15-10:45 a.m.

Th 3:30-4:45 & 6:30-7:00 p.m.  
& 10-10:30 p.m.

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## **Required Books**

*A Coney Island of the Mind* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti [0-8112 0041 8]

*Selected Poems* by Mark Strand [0-679-73301-9]

*Native Guard* by **Natasha Trethewey. Poet-in-Residence this Fall!**

*Feeding the Fear of the Earth* by Patrick Lawler [1-886976-18-X [through SPD Books]

*Neon Vernacular* by Yusef Komunyakaa [0-8195-1211-7]

*The Gold Cell* by Sharon Olds (Knopf, 1987) [ISBN-13: 9780394747705 ISBN: 0394747704]

*Skin Tax* by Tim Z. Hernandez [ISBN-13: 9781890771935 ISBN: 1890771937 978 1890771935]

& Selected web sites and handouts.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Dialogue between writers is the soil from which many great works have been born. Literary friendships between writers are often much more than moral support; writers help each other in very profound ways. When a writer has a friend who really understands what she or he is doing, this understanding reader often fosters more creative and inventive and interesting writing. There are many instances in the history of literature when literary friends helped to create a great classic. In our class, the same ideas apply. We will strive to create conditions in which literary friendships can evolve so that you can become constructive insightful readers for each other as well as inspiring writers for each other.

About half way through the term you will be required to start going on poetry dates with your peers. This work outside of class is designed to accelerate your progress in the class. (Details to follow.)

Constructive dialogues enable you to develop more self-awareness as you see yourself participating in a larger literary world. If you have ever thought of your creative writings as belonging solely to yourself, here you have to agree that your writings belong to a larger society. This is a great opportunity because it means your work has an audience that cares; it is also a great burden because it means your work has an audience that cares.

## **About the Readings:**

You CANNOT become a strong writer without becoming a strong reader; you need to read in a deeper way than most people do. Creative writers need more imaginative and personally meaningful ways of reading. All the great writers began as great readers. Writers have to experience the greatest depths of pleasure and pathos in reading before they can even know what to aim for as writers. But at the same time, writers read (and re-read) opportunistically, i.e. with a need, a hunger, a willingness to use, absorb, learn, and/or steal. Reading as a writer means studying the craft. In dialogues about literature, then, our goal is not just appreciation of literature for its own sake but for what makes it work, its techniques. We will discuss literature by primarily contemporary writers:

- \* to appreciate the craft, forms, and techniques of poetry better....
- \* to give you the specific vocabulary (more advanced literary terms) to discuss writing....
- \* to inspire you to experiment....
- \* to increase your ability to see other perspectives and interpret other styles/aesthetics....
- \* and to help you understand and appreciate who the competition is!

NOTE: There may be some optional field trips to readings and nearby readings/slams that you may attend. There may also be opportunities for some of you to read in some public venues. Qualified and highly motivated students may intern for *Many Mountains Moving: a journal of diverse literary contemporaries*.

### **ABOUT THE WORKSHOP:**

The goal of workshop dialogues is to help you gain more independence about aesthetic decisions. The class helps you see the real consequences of each choice you make. In contrast to the ideas, positions, values of others, you must develop for yourself the insight and skills to overcome your own aesthetic, philosophical, technical, political and/or generic problems. Workshop participation is where you actually do much of the learning that happens in this class. It can be great fun, but it can also be extraordinarily hard work for your intellect and emotions.

[Advice: if you ever feel that the whole class is biased against your kind of poetry or that I am biased against it, do not give up your rights to express your views to me or your classmates. It is always better to talk about these things rather than to let them fester. Frequently, such feelings of bias are based on misunderstandings.]

### **THE WORKSHOP FORMAT:**

In this workshop, you read everything a week ahead and respond by writing on copies of the work before it is discussed. Further, I will collect from each of you a copy of all of your peer responses so that I can evaluate how seriously you are responding to your peers. The advantage here is that everyone takes the job of responding more seriously because it is a large part of your grade. You will help each other more and, ultimately, become more independent as writers. (NOTE: Your written feedback should supplement your oral feedback; it does not replace talking in class!)

Generally, participation in this class runs at or near 100%, which is how things ought to be. (If you want to read an essay about the pedagogical theory behind this practice, go to this URL: <http://www.schoolcraft.cc.mi.us/pdfs/cce/00HartingLoo.pdf>.)

As a writer in a workshop, you learn to more effectively focus on those areas where your work needs critical attention. In a typical week, as many as 7-8 people will bring to the workshop a poem or a fragment of a longer poem (the maximum length is 1-2 pages typed). When it is your turn to present, you will read your work aloud to the group, and then the class will discuss it – starting with your own question—while you remain silent. You may respond afterwards, and the class may ask its own questions, as time permits.

We will get through as many as 7-8 people every week, so in a class of 15 or so, you would have to present new work every two weeks **starting next week**.

**NOTE:** *Usually, you must make copies of your own work for the class and hand it out in advance. If you miss your submission deadline for any reason, you may not be allowed to workshop the following week. Further, if you are absent without an acceptable excuse when it is your turn to get workshopped, you forfeit your turn in the workshop rotation. If you miss two or more of your turns in the rotation, you may automatically fail the course.*

### **PRACTICAL GUIDELINES:**

Our goal is to create a comfortable environment for sharing work, so please follow these guidelines when you present work:

- (i) Bring new work whenever possible.

Recycling old work almost always results in slower progress and less actual learning.

Significant revisions of earlier work, however, are often a good thing to present to class.

- (ii) Always bring at least one question about your work whenever you present anything.

If you are still evolving as a writer, you should have at least some doubt in your mind about some part of any new work. It is not as productive to bring old works about which you feel

- completely certain. (If you are sure it is perfect, you won't need, or want, any help.)
- (iii) Decide what you hope to accomplish with a work before you bring it to workshop.  
You can help your peers get to the heart of the work if you think it through beforehand instead of abdicating all responsibility and depending on everyone else to decide what you have accomplished or failed to accomplish.
  - (iv) NEVER ask others to rewrite your work—your work is always your responsibility.

When you are responding:

- (i) Try to discern the writer's goals before you judge how successful the work is.  
One has to know what a work is trying to do before one can judge if it works; one must understand the needs of the work before one can constructively critique it.
- (ii) Try not to prescribe remedies for someone else's work.  
This puts a writer in the position of a patient or, worse, a disease. Even though many ask for such treatment (imagining the short-term pain will be worth the long-term gain), any one standard that forecloses dialogue deprives someone of her/his chance to think creatively through the work.
- (iii) Try to be as honest as possible but be aware of others' feelings....
- (iv) NEVER rewrite others' work in your own voice....
- (v) NEVER assume that any work is autobiographical....  
Even if a writer says, "This really happened," we will discuss the work without reference to anyone's "real life." But we will ask about the verisimilitude (or the life-like quality) of the work because readers need to willingly suspend their disbelief. Just because something really did happen does not mean it is credible.

### **Students with Disabilities**

West Chester University wants to accommodate persons with disabilities. Please let me know what needs you have and/or contact the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities at extension 3217. With enough notice, special accommodations can be made.

If you have some special needs due to a disability or condition that is acknowledged by the university, please tell me during the first week of classes.

### **SUMMARY OF COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

- (i) Write and present new work regularly (every second week). In the end, you must submit a final portfolio of works (10-15 double-spaced pages of poetry.) More than half of this work MUST have appeared in the workshop, and all of it should be revised.  
30% OF YOUR GRADE COMES FROM THE FINAL PORTFOLIO.
- (ii) Respond in writing on others' drafts and respond aloud in workshop dialogues. Your workshop participation reflects your development as a writer within a community and your depth as a critical reader of the works of others.  
30% OF YOUR GRADE COMES FROM WRITTEN AND ORAL PARTICIPATION.
- (iii) Read great poems and write about and discuss them. Reading response logs are required HW. There will also be other HW assignments and quizzes.  
35% OF YOUR GRADE COMES FROM HW LOGS AND QUIZZES.
- (iv) You must also have two one-on-one conference with me at some point during the term.  
5% OF YOUR GRADE COMES FROM THE ONE-ON-ONE CONFERENCES.  
(This is a PASS/FAIL requirement i.e. if you are prepared and you show up before midterms, you pass this requirement.)

### **Final Portfolios—Principles & Practical Guidelines for Evaluation:**

Ideally, the work is moving, evocative, powerful and comprehensible. The feeling is fully realized.

Rule of thumb—*it makes people want to read more.*

The work demonstrates aesthetic sense appropriate to the needs of the subject of the work, and it shows an awareness of the needs of a real audience (however you define that).

Rule of thumb—*it says what you intend to others. There are no inconsistencies or misleading or inadvertently offensive or obscure cues in the writing.*

The manuscript represents your work in the best possible light, i.e. it has no mechanical, grammatical mistakes, unintended errors in factual information, misspellings etc.

Rule of thumb—*it is ready to present to a total stranger like an editor.*

The work shows growth, development, or increased range or depth or inventiveness:

(i) new works

(ii) revisions of earlier works—reflecting changes in aesthetic sense....

(iii) fresh, original, innovative, or engaging use of whatever genre is presented.

Rule of thumb—*you feel a difference &/ or other people notice a change.*

**Important:** quality is far more important than quantity! Even if you have ten pages of outstanding material, your grade will be hurt if you surround it with lesser work. Be selective when you submit your final portfolio just as you would when you submit to any respectable publication.

Important: there are RED FLAGS in poetry mss. that automatically disqualify them from being published or read as seriously as they deserve. RED FLAGS will pull down your grade.

### **ADVISORIES:**

It has happened in the past that a student will fail this course or have great difficulty because he/she does not believe in the value of the workshop process and/or the value of revision. This class is mostly an intense workshop, so you have to agree to work with the class this way. If you think that everything that pours out of yourself is perfect and it would be a violation of your integrity to revise anything, you may not be able to do well here.

Some have also struggled or failed because of excessive unexcused absences or chronic tardiness.

It is even possible to fail due to intolerant attitudes e.g. sometimes a student thinks that others in the class are writing “filth.” If you feel this way and you antagonize your peers, you may be interfering with the rights of other students to learn. Please bear in mind that the subject matter that people decide to write about is entirely open and up to each writer in the class. In the past, poems have covered subjects such as alcohol and drug use, violence, sex, sexual situations, sexual violence, sexual humor, interracial dating, profanity, heresy, suicide, war, politics etc. If you are worried that will not be comfortable in a class where all the above, and more, is acceptable, please talk to me. Artists need artistic freedom, so it would be wrong for me or anyone in the class to censor or bully anyone in the class due to subject matter. There are a few things that are off limits though... (See “Your right to express moral, social, cultural, religious and political themes etc.... Special exceptions,” below.)

## **BASIC CONCEPTS /GUIDELINES**

### **The concept of individual answerability in writing**

There are no innocent bystanders in writing — you are answerable for your words. Even drug-induced and trance writings bear the individual stamp and style of the author whether s/he knows it or not. And even though it has become fashionable in some Postmodern poetics to say that one creates the work with inherent indeterminacies, letting readers add or subtract whatever they want, writers are still answerable for their abdication of answerability. The way one writes defines a self, a world, a style.

### **Your right to express moral, social, cultural, religious and political themes etc.**

You are entitled to any view of the world that you choose in your writing. Just be aware that when you adopt a theme or a style that reflects a certain stance, you may offend others, and your peers are entitled to voice objections. If you state certain moral, immoral or amoral agendas, others may question them, especially when such issues interfere with the aesthetic of the work.

Keep in mind, however, that our job here is merely to improve creative writing, not to improve anyone's views, solve world problems, or save lives. But it is worth noting that the greatest literature has almost always had moral (and other) dimensions beyond its aesthetics.

### **Special exceptions to the above....**

Please follow commonsense—do not attack, harass, denigrate, slander, ridicule or brutally satirize anyone in our class. On the other hand, according to the law famous public figures are expected to tolerate some degree of attacks, ridicule and brutal satire etc. And if what you say about a public figure is true, it is not slander.

If your work is in a gray area, e.g. graphic violence, and you are not sure if it is appropriate to bring to class, please consult with me. A rule of thumb: if there is a distinct possibility that your work will upset others so much that they feel unable to participate in class with you, talk to me. There may be other ways to accommodate your work beyond the workshop.

### **Understanding the significance of genre in workshop dialogues....**

Beyond just finding one's voice, every writer has to search for the most perfect form or at least the most useful, potent or beautiful method. In this search, everything begins with an understanding of genre. Understanding the genre (including the audience, origin, or purpose of a work) reveals the essential qualities a work has or lacks. The needs of the work may depend upon the larger dialogue between the writer and his/her living audience. However one may search for the true, the good, the beautiful, or give pleasure to an audience, understanding the limits of genre strengthens one's work.

### **Plagiarism**

If you ever knowingly use someone else's writing and try to pass it off as your own to the professor, you may be guilty of plagiarism, which may warrant an automatic F. Plagiarism does not include acknowledged collaborations or other approved learning situations.

**The full Schedule of weekly assignments is forthcoming:**

Week 1:

Intro to the course and some of the books. Intro to some of the methods and some of the writing exercises. Class introduces itself and does a first writing exercise together. Create Group #1 & Group #2.

*[Please note that this syllabus may change. Assignments may be added or removed. There will also be some extra credit opportunities. Some readings may also shift around due to the availability of guest poets.]*

First book to read: *A Coney Island of the Mind* (through page 46.) Be prepared to discuss on Week 2. Please use the internet to look up artists in the work such as “Goya,” especially the series of works called “The Disasters of War.” (Compare with *ACIM*, pp. 9-10)

Bring 15 copies of a NEW poem for next week. Bring a question for the class with the poem.

Week 2:

Discuss Ferlinghetti’s work.

Workshop poem #1 from Group #1.

HW Read *ACIM* pp. 47-53 and 67-70 for Week 3.

Week 3:

Last Ferlinghetti discussion. First HW log due (300-500 words on a single poem or a single pattern of imagery or symbolism in a few poems. Discuss emotion, tone, and meaning in relation to the images and symbols.)

Workshop poem #1 from Group #2. Group #3 poem #1 due (18 copies).

HW Read Strand, pages 3-4, 9-16, 19-32, 39-52, 66-75.

Week 4: 09/18

Workshop group #2 Poem #1 & discuss Strand. Quiz possible.

Group #1 poem #2 due (18 copies, typed). Finish Strand, pages tba.

Week 5: 09/25

Workshop group #1 poem #2. Discussion of Strand. HW Log #2 due.

Over the weekend read Trethewey (whole book). Group #2 poem #2 due, 21 copies.

Week 6: 10/01, 02

W: Required attendance at reading by Trethewey 7 p.m.

Th: Workshop group #2 poem #2. Discuss Trethewey.  
Group #3 poem #2 due.

Week 7: 10/09

Workshop group #3 poem #2. Discuss Trethewey.

Journal #3 due on Trethewey. Group #1 poem #3 due

Read Lawler through page 59. Listen to audio online & see suggested readings.

Group #1 poem #3 due.

Week 8: 10/16 **Fall Break**

Th: Workshop group #1 poem #3. Lawler identification quiz on first poems: “black elk,” “Ed McMahon,” “Alan Shepard,” “Those Who Died,” “Humphrey Bogart,” “Tonto has a Dream,” “Virginia Woolf Touches the Cerebrum,” “Petula Clark Sings to Rodney King...”  
Discuss Lawler. Finish Lawler for next week.

**Advice:** keep close to a computer with web access or a good encyclopedia for the references to famous people etc. Sometimes the title is really interconnected to the poem. Sometimes the title is more like background music.

**Group #2 poem #3 due.**

Week 9:

10/23 Workshop group #2 poem #3. Discuss Lawler's poetry.

Group #3 poem #3 due.

Reading in *The Gold Cell* by Olds pages 3-52.

Week 10:

10/30 Group #1 poem #4 due. Lawler logs due on any one poem—how imagery and themes are related.

Week 11:

11/06 Group #2 poem #4 due.

Reading in *The Gold Cell* by Olds — finish the book.

**Olds Quiz possible on the poems on pp. 3-8, 14-19, 24, 36, 48-52.**

Week 12:

11/13 Group #3 poem #4 due. Discuss *Neon Vernacular*.

Reading in *Neon Vernacular* by Komunyakaa pages 4, 11, 24-33, 64, 69-72, 74, 77, 96-98,

Reading in *Neon Vernacular* by Komunyakaa pages 129-159, 176.

Week 13:

11/20 — poem for CLASS PORTFOLIO DUE (This is not the same as the final portfolio!)

Komunyakaa logs due.

**Optional revisions due for last class workshops.**

Reading in *Skin Tax* by Hernandez pages tba.

**Thanksgiving Break**

**Week 14: 12/04 Last Class— Final Portfolios due.**

Last Quiz on Hernandez poems. Last discussion of poems by Hernandez.

**Dec. 11<sup>th</sup>, Final Exam is optional, 8:30-10:30 p.m.**