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ENG 4762Z-001: Advanced Poetry Writing

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Eastern Illinois University

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Writing 4762 / 4762Z: Advanced Poetry
 11:00-12:20 p.m. TR 1230-1345 Coleman 3159
 Colleen Abel

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(Please allow 24 hours for a response)

Office: CH 3811

Office hours: TR, 11:00-12:00; W 8-10

Required Texts

Buchen, Callista. *Look Look Look*.

Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red*.

Olzmann, Matthew. *Contradictions in the Design*.

Kearney, Douglas. *The Black Automaton*.

Smith, Patricia. *Blood Dazzler*.

Miscellaneous readings (D2L)

Course Description

*Sparrows were feeding in a freezing drizzle
 That while you watched turned to pieces of snow
 Riding a gradient invisible
 From silver aslant to random, white, and slow.*

*There came a moment that you couldn't tell.
 And then they clearly flew instead of fell.*

--Howard Nemerov, "Because You Asked About the Line Between Prose and Poetry" 1980

Poetry readership is on the rise, as more and more people turn to poems to provide solace, or to reflect their feelings in our uncertain times. This course will focus on the writing and revising of poems at an advanced level. Using some of the best collections of poems from the past few decades as our guide, we'll craft and revise poems that showcase each student's individual voice. Through intensive workshops, students will end the course with a complete chapbook of poetry.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you should be able to

- Identify poetic techniques and use terminology when reading poems
- Critique and explicate poetic works
- Understand the historical and contemporary context of poetry
- Write and revise your own original works of poetry
- Evaluate, constructively, the works-in-progress of your peers
- Reflect upon your own creative processes and practices

Instructional Philosophy

The course is divided into what I consider the two most important activities in learning to become a better writer: reading and writing. We will spend a great deal of time learning terminology and reading examples of poems that exemplify the techniques we are exploring. As the following writing advice attests, the way one learns craft is first by reading, then by writing.

“Read, read, read. Read everything -- trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it. Then write. If it's good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out of the window.” -William Faulker

Then, you will be asked to synthesize all that you have learned by writing your own work. You will continue reading, though the emphasis will be on your classmates' poems, and your task will turn from explicating to critiquing via workshop.

Grade Breakdown

Class Notebook: 150 points

Technique Poems: 150 points

Attendance: 100 points

Explications: 200 points

Workshop Participation: 200 points

Final Portfolio: 200 points

Note: Students taking this course for graduate credit will have slightly different requirements.

Attendance: For this class to work, you need to be here each and every day, unless there is an emergency in your life—and if there is, talk to me! I can help and can connect you with a larger support system.

For the sake of simplicity, I do not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences, with a few exceptions that I am legally required to make (military, religious, disability, etc.) You do not need to write me with an explanation or obtain a note. At the end of the term I will simply calculate how much time you spent in class (i.e. you were present for 90% of classes) and that count toward 100 points of your final grade.

Class Notebook: For this class, I would like you to keep a writing notebook*. This can be the same one you use to take class notes in, or it can be separate; it can also be a virtual document. On the majority of our meeting days, we will be doing either an in-class response writing or a creative exercise. These should go in your notebook, and I will check the notebook twice—once in the middle of the term and once at the end. Points will be deducted for any response or exercise you are missing. To receive a top grade on this notebook, all writings will be complete, thoughtful and thoroughly completed. Please keep in mind that I will be reading these, so remember that these are only semi-private documents.

Technique Poems: These poems are a chance for you to pick one technique that we have studied so far and write a poem which uses it in a conscious way. For example, when we read Callista Buchen's book, you may want to try your hand at a prose poem. In addition to the poem, I would like you to also turn in a paragraph explaining which

technique you selected, and what your poem does with it. I do not grade these poems on quality, but on the effort you put into exploring and utilizing the technique at hand. You will hand in three of these, and each should spotlight a *different* technique. If you want to use the same poem for this assignment as a poem you also turn in for workshop, that's completely fine with me.

Explications: The purpose of an explication is to analyze the component parts of one poem and, based on this analysis, to interpret the poem's overall meaning as you see it. Your final papers should be about 3 pages each. You will do two explications over the course of the term. (Students taking the course for graduate credit will do three). Do not simply paraphrase the poem's literal meaning. Your goal, instead, is to apply the literary terminology we've been discussing in class to one specific poem. For example, you might discuss how the poem's sound, images, metaphors, tone, and form all work together to create an overall theme. The only thing I ask is that, in your explications, you read AS A WRITER. English classes often ask you to read as a scholar, looking for a theme: feminist interpretations of a play, depictions of race relations or Southern society, Catholic imagery. Reading as a writer means looking closely at how the author puts the poem together, with an eye toward learning something for your own writing. You will need to do two of these over the semester, and we'll talk more about what these look like closer to the due date of the first one. Due dates are listed in the calendar.

Workshop Participation: Each of you will be workshopped four times over the semester, twice in a full-class workshop, and twice in small groups. We will discuss workshop expectations more thoroughly but please note that there are two equal components to your workshop grade. The first is your own readiness for your workshop. You must turn in your piece to D2L by the due date listed in the syllabus. **I do not accept late work** because it's unfair to your peers who are trying to comment on the piece in preparation for the workshop day. All of you will turn in work on the same day, though not all of you will be workshopped on the same day.

The second part of your workshop grade is your feedback to others. I would like you to prepare written feedback for each person being workshopped. (Try to aim for a paragraph or so, and at least aim to give them two suggestions for improvement and two things that are successful in the present draft.) Print out two copies of your feedback for each workshoppee, and give one copy to that person and one copy to me at the end of class. This must be completed before class. I will not accept late comments.

Your total workshop participation grade will be broken down thusly: You will receive 50 points for each workshop, to be divided equally between your timely posting of your own poem, and your production and discussing of feedback for your peers.

Final Portfolio: Your portfolio must consist of the following:

- 12 pages* (minimum) of poetry. (60% of grade) This is your chapbook, and so should be structured like a chapbook: with a title, table of contents, and an eye toward interesting order and unifying elements. The 12 page guideline could mean 12 poems that are a page or less. It could mean one 12 page poem. While I encourage experimentation with white space and font, you also shouldn't try to pass off a chapbook of poetry by writing one word in 36 point font on each page until you hit twelve. You should include all of the pieces you workshopped. You should feel very free to include poems that were inspired by class exercises.
**Students taking the course for graduate credit should produce 15 pages.
- A writer's statement of at least 4 pages. (40% of grade) This statement should address all of these:
 - o Your revision process. How did you go about revising your workshop pieces? How did you sort through all of the advice to figure out what your piece needed? What advice was most valuable? What do your pieces do now that they did not before?

- o Your experience with the course texts. What texts did you find most helpful to your writing? What elements did they help you understand as being relevant to your work?
- o Your experience with your classmates' work. What did you learn from them? How do they help you think about your writing?

A note about grading final portfolios. Portfolios will receive top marks if they show substantial effort and thought about revision. I am not here to grade the quality of your poems: it is my job to look at the effort that went into making the work and, especially, the openness and effort toward revision. Poems that revise by changing a few words and some punctuation will not be assessed nearly as favorably as poems that show radical reimagining, via structural changes, changes in tone or form, additions, etc.

Late work

Annotations will be docked five points for every class day they are late. Late portfolios will not be accepted.

Classroom Etiquette

There are a few matters of classroom etiquette that are important to follow to ensure your success in this class.

I do not ban electronics in my classroom, as we're all adults with outside lives. However, if I see that you're paying more attention to phones or laptops than to class, I will ask you to be more respectful; if it persists, I reserve the right to adjust your attendance grade to reflect this.

Perhaps the most important classroom policy of all concerns our learning environment. A successful learning community is one in which we can learn from people whose perspectives we might not necessarily share and I ask everyone to be constructive and mindful. Speaking our minds is a fantastic privilege of this environment, but doing so in an aggressive or hostile way helps no one.

***DISCLAIMER: One question that students often ask: is it okay if I write about ...? Usually, they want to know if I will be upset if their work contains profanity, violence, sexuality, drug use, etc. The short answer is no. What I care most about is the quality of your writing. That being said, *please do consider your audience* before you workshop a piece. Is it worth it to you to spend one of your valuable workshop slots writing a piece that will almost certainly be offensive? One exception here: if your poem contains hate speech or bias toward protected groups, I am obligated to report this to the university.

EIU Policies

- Students are expected to maintain principles of academic integrity and conduct as defined in EIU's Code of Conduct (<http://www.eiu.edu/judicial/studentconductcode.php>). Violations will be reported to the Office of Student Standards.
- Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (www.eiu.edu/~success) for assistance with time management, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.
- If you are a student with a documented disability in need of accommodations to fully participate in this class, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services (OSDS). All accommodations must be approved through OSDS. Please stop by Ninth Street Hall, Room 2006, or call 217-581-6583 to make an appointment.

Course Schedule (subject to revision)

Tuesday, January 14: Syllabus and introductions

Thursday, January 16: What can poetry do?

Tuesday, January 21: *Blood Dazzler* / Smith

Thursday, January 23: Smith

Saturday, January 25: Lions in Winter literary festival

Tuesday, January 28: Smith. **Technique 1 poem due.**

Thursday, January 30: Mock workshop and workshop theories (reading on D2L)

Tuesday, February 4: Workshop 1

Thursday, February 6: Workshop 1

Tuesday, February 11: Workshop 1

Thursday, February 13: Explication discussion (reading on D2L)

Tuesday, February 18: *Look Look Look* / Buchen. **Explication 1 due.**

Thursday, February 20: Buchen

Tuesday, February 25: Buchen. **Technique poem 2 due.**

Thursday, February 27: Small Group Workshop A

Tuesday, March 3: *Contradictions in the Design* / Olzmann

Thursday, March 5: Olzmann. **Notebook Check.**

Tuesday, March 10: Olzmann

Thursday, March 12: Midterm revisions

Tuesday, March 17: SPRING BREAK

Thursday, March 19: SPRING BREAK

Tuesday, March 24: *Autobiography of Red* / Carson

Thursday, March 26: Carson

Tuesday, March 31: Carson. **Explication 2 due.**

Thursday, April 1: Small group workshop B

Tuesday, April 7: English conference: No classes

Thursday, April 9: *The Black Automaton* / Kearney

Tuesday, April 14: Kearney. **Technique poem 3 due.**

Tuesday, April 16: Kearney

Tuesday, April 21: Revision, revisited (reading on D2L)

Thursday, April 23: Workshop 2

Tuesday, April 28: Workshop 2

Thursday, April 30: Workshop 2. **Notebooks due.**

Final portfolios due by the end of the day on Wednesday, May 6. Late portfolios will not be accepted.

**Graduate students doing a third explication will need to turn this in by the end of the day on May 6, as well.

Workshop

Sharing creative work is an exciting, but vulnerable process. There are things to remember if you are the artist, as well as if you are the audience. Here are a couple of foundational principles that successful workshops are based on.

1. This is a semi-public space. If you don't believe that audience matters—in other words, if you write only for the purposes of self-expression—this may not be the right environment for you. Dismissing what a roomful of people think about your work because you are only “writing for yourself” places your audience in an uncomfortable position. Self-expression is private and requires no external input. Art is dialogic: it requires both a creator and a receptor (audience) to make it come alive.
2. Revision is the most important part of writing. If you are interested in others' opinions, but not open to changing your work based on feedback, this may not be the right environment for you.
3. You must trust that a roomful of people have valuable things to say about your work. The people here are smart and generous; they care about literature and about reading. If you are frustrated if they seem to be “not getting it” perhaps this is a sign that something in your work needs to be clarified. This is not a sign that we didn't read it carefully ahead of time. It means that we're working through our questions and individual interpretations, and that is often the most useful part of workshop, if you are listening with an open mind to your audience.
4. All of the above may be summed up as: be open-hearted and open-minded.