Spring 1-15-2003

ENG 2091G-099: Literature, the Self, & the World (Poetry)

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"'Tis the wind, and nothing more," says the woeful, lonely voice of Edgar Poe’s legendary poem, “The Raven.” He’s trying to figure out who’s been “tap, tapping” at his chamber door, the way you might want to know who the bozo is who’s been banging at your dorm room door some sleepy morning. “Who’s there,” we ask, echoing the first line of Hamlet, and announcing, too, the central theme of this course.

Reading or hearing a poem is an attempt to answer this greatest of human questions, the question of identity. But every poem is an act of ventriloquism, and we can’t always know or trust who’s speaking. Perhaps it’s the poet, but it could be someone else, the way we create ourselves as we go along. Who are you anyway? Do you always sound the same, or are you not, like all of us, a person always in the process of becoming?

Poems are usually spoken by a single voice, but what kind of words does the speaker use and in what order? Is this person a hero or a creep, or, more likely, a little of both? Maybe he or she is in love like you, or perhaps has been hurt in that attempt, also like you? Or you’ll be reading Robert Frost’s poem, “A Servant to Servants,” and suddenly realize you are listening to your mother and understanding for the first time her joys and sorrows.

Frost will be one of the poets we’ll read a lot, as will be one of his contemporaries, T.S. Eliot. We will compare and contrast these two great “ventriloquists” and do the same with two of their nineteenth century predecessors, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, odd bed-fellows, to say the least. We’ll be more contemporary, too, and more culturally diverse as we listen to voices from our own country and outside it. We’ll also watch the movie, Il Postino, the funny and touching film about Pablo Neruda’s life on an Italian island.

Requirements:
1. class participation
2. daily quizzes
3. three papers of 2-3 pages
4. final oral report on the poetry of another culture; paper of 8-10 pages based on oral presentation
Grades:

I do not calculate grades by percentage points. Instead, I consider your overall performance in the class. I do value hard work and serious effort. I also value a sense of humor and a positive attitude. Above all, I value your curiosity—your desire to learn.