

English 343

Brian McHale, ENGL 343, Fall 2001, American Poetry

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English 343: American Poetry

Tues. & Thurs. 11:30-12:45, Armstrong 121

Description. The published course description reads: Major American poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, in this version of the course we will read a very few nineteenth-century poets (mainly Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson), and instead spend most of our time on twentieth-century poets, not all of them major, but all of them interesting and worth getting to know. The course focuses on the revolutionary changes that occurred in American poetry in the first decades of the twentieth century, with the onset of modernism. We will first remind ourselves of the traditional forms of poetry that twentieth-century poets inherited from the past, and then contrast that traditionalist poetry with the new forms of modern poetry. We will explore the nineteenth-century roots of some of the key features of modernism, in the poetry of Whitman and Dickinson. An important theme of the middle part of our course will be the problem of how to build and sustain long (that is, book-length) poems if you are starting from the modernist assumption that the individual image is the source and measure of poetic value. In the final weeks of the course we will sample some of the reactions to and divergences from poetic modernism that have come to be grouped under the umbrella-term postmodernism. But even when we are concentrating on so-called postmodernists we will try not to lose sight of how the fall-out from the modernist revolution persists right through to the end of the century.

Text. This course is based on Cary Nelson's splendid new *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2000). Nelson includes poets and poems that no one has ventured to include in anthologies of American poetry for a long time (if ever). He has recovered from obscurity many mavericks and outsiders; he has included long, strange poems that anthologists have generally shied away from (such as Melvin Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* or Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead'). I want to take advantage of this splendid new resource, and to explore it with you. Most of all, I want to take advantage of and explore with you the rich Web-site of background materials that has been developed to support this anthology. Check it out at <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps>. This Web-site includes valuable

resource material on all of the poets in the anthology, and many of the individual poems. I urge you to browse this site in advance of each class-meeting, and to use it in preparing your assignments. *Of course, if you quote or paraphrase from material on the Web-site, or use ideas you find there, in preparing your assignments, you must give credit and fully annotate your source; otherwise you will be guilty of plagiarism.*

Your obligations. Your main obligation, of course, is to attend class regularly, and to come to class every day prepared to discuss the readings assigned for that day, including the relevant background material on the Web-site. *You will be permitted two unexcused absences. If you are absent from class more than twice without presenting a credible (preferably documented) excuse, I will feel free, at my own discretion, to begin lowering your final grade.*

Apart from being there, and being prepared, your other obligations are these:

At every class-meeting, beginning from August 28, one student will be appointed each day to report orally on one poem (or one section of a long poem) of his/her choice from the assigned readings for the day. The student appointed for the day will be expected (1) to post his/her choice to our online discussion list in advance of the class-meeting; (2) to check out the relevant background material on the poem at <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps>; (3) to read the poem or section aloud in class; and (4) to speak about it for about 5 to 10 minutes. We will work through the class-list in alphabetical order. *If for any reason you are unable to deliver your report on the assigned day, you must notify me in advance so I can try to shift the assignment to the next student in alphabetical order.* Your oral report, *together with your classroom participation throughout the semester,* will account for *1/3 of your final grade.*

A take-home mid-term exam. Exam topics will be assigned on Tuesday, 25 September, and will be due on Thursday, 4 October. This will account for *1/3 of your final grade.*

An in-class final exam. The exam is scheduled for Thursday, 13 December, 3-5 pm. This will account for *1/3 of your final grade.*

Schedule of readings

All readings can be found in *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000), edited by Cary Nelson. *Reading assignments are subject to change, but any changes will be announced well in advance.*

Aug 21 Introduction

Unit 1. Traditionalist Poetry.

Aug 23 Robert Frost (all except "The Hill Wife")

28 Edwin Markham (all) ; E.A. Robinson (all); Edna St.Vincent Millay (all the sonnets); Louise Bogan (all).

30 Paul Laurence Dunbar (all); Vachel Lindsay ("The Congo"); Claude McCay (all); Jean Toomer ("Reapers," "November Cotton Flower"); Langston Hughes ("The Weary Blues," "Mulatto"); Countee Cullen (all).

Unit 2. Free Verse from Walt Whitman to Modernism (and beyond).

Sept 4 Walt Whitman (all)

6 Edgar Lee Masters (all); Carl Sandburg (all); Robinson Jeffers (all); Ezra Pound ("A Pact"); Langston Hughes ("Negro," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"); Allen Ginsberg ("Love Poem on Theme by Whitman"); A.R. Ammons ("Corson's Inlet").

Unit 3. "Difficult" Poetry from Dickinson to Modernism (and beyond).

Sept 11 Emily Dickinson (all)

13 Mina Loy (all); Marianne Moore (all except "Marriage" and "An Octopus"); e.e. cummings (all); Sylvia Plath ("Daddy," "Ariel," "Lady Lazarus"); Robert Creeley ("For Love").

18 (Rosh Hashana) Wallace Stevens (from "Anecdote of the Jar" to end, except "Study of Two Pears"); T.S. Eliot ("The Hollow Men")

20 Hart Crane (all except "October-November" and "from *The Bridge*"); Allen Tate (all); Laura Riding (all); John Crowe Ransom (all); Yvor Winters (all); R.P. Warren (all).

Unit 4. "The Care and Feeding of Long Poems": From Imagism to Postmodernism.

Sept 25 Imagism: Amy Lowell (all except "The Sisters"); William Carlos Williams (from "The Young Housewife" to "Young Sycamore"); Wallace Stevens ("Thirteen Way of Looking at a Blackbird," "Study of Two Pears"); Ezra Pound ("In a Station of the Metro"); H.D. (from "Oread" to "Garden"); Archibald MacLeish ("Ars Poetica"); Jean Toomer ("Portrait in Georgia," "Her Lips Are Copper Wire"); Hart Crane ("October-November"); Kenneth Rexroth (all).

Distribute mid-term take-home exam.

[27 Yom Kippur. Class cancelled.]

Oct 2 Building the Long Poem: T.S. Eliot ("Prufrock," "Gerontion"); Williams ("The Descent of Winter").

4 Eliot: *The Waste Land*; *Burnt Norton*.

Mid-term take-home exam due.

9 Pound: from *The Cantos*.

11 H.D.: from *The Walls Do Not Fall*; Hart Crane: from *The Bridge*.

16 Muriel Rukeyser: "The Book of the Dead"

18 Melvin Tolson: *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*; Robert Hayden: "Middle Passage."

23 Theodore Roethke: "North American Sequence"; John Berryman: from *The Dream Songs*.

25 Allen Ginsberg: "Witchita Vortex Sutra"; Ron Silliman: from *Ketjak*; from *Toner*.

Unit 5. Dissident Modernists.

Oct 30 Edna St. Vincent Millay ("Justice Denied in Massachusetts," "Say That We Saw Spain Die," "I Forgot for a Moment"); Charles Reznikoff (from "Testimony"); Sterling Brown (all); Langston Hughes (from "Three Songs about Lynching" to end).

Nov 1 Kenneth Fearing (all); Edwin Rolfe (all); Sol Funaroff (all); Tillie Olsen (all); Thomas McGrath (all).

Unit 6. Varieties of Postmodernism.

Nov 6 Objectivists: Williams (from "This Is Just to Say" to end); Reznikoff (from "Holocaust"); Louis Zukofsky (all); Lorine Niedecker (all); Carl Rakosi (all); George Oppen (all).

8 Black Mountain School: Charles Olson (all); Robert Duncan (all); Denise Levertov (all); Paul Blackburn (all); Robert Creeley (all except "For Love").

13 Beats: Allen Ginsberg ("Howl"); William Everson (all); Bob Kaufman (all); Gregory Corso (all); Gary Snyder (all).

15 Black Arts Movement: Gwendolyn Brooks (all except "Gay Chaps at the Bar"); Amiri Baraka (all); Ishmael Reed (all); Etheridge Knight (all); Michael Harper (all); Welton Smith ("Malcolm").

[17-25 Thanksgiving Recess]

27 New York School: Frank O'Hara (all); John Ashbery (all).

29 Language Poets: Gertrude Stein ("Patriarchal Poetry"); Susan Howe (all); Michael Palmer (all); Ron Silliman ("Sunset Debris," "The Chinese Notebook"); Harryette Mullen (all).

Dec 4 Others: Robert Bly (all); James Wright (all); Galway Kinnell (all); W.S. Merwin (all except "The Drunk in the Furnace"); Philip Levine (all); Adrienne Rich (all).

Unit 7. The Persistence of Modernism.

Dec 6 Robert Lowell (all); Elizabeth Bishop (all); James Merrill (all); Sylvia Plath (all except "Daddy," "Ariel," "Lady Lazarus").

Dec 13 Final Exam, 3-5 PM.