English 261, Introduction to Poetry

Instructor:
Office:
Office Hours:

Course Description: This course focuses on ways of reading, understanding, and appreciating a wide variety of English and American poems. During the first half of the semester, we will explore different ways of discussing and defining poetry, poetic language, and poetry's formal and thematic elements. During the second half, we will read chronologically the work of a group of English and American poets, emphasizing historical change and continuity and the relations between poets. At the end of the course, you should be able to read poems closely and sensitively and you should possess a general understanding of the poetic tradition in English; perhaps most importantly, I hope this class teaches you to love poetry and leaves you wanting to read more.

Student Learning Outcomes:
At the end of the course, students will be able to:
*use critical and practical concepts to analyze a range of poems and kinds of poetic form (CO7)
*compose well-supported and coherent interpretative analyses of individual poems (CO1)
*articulate the relationship between poems and their historical, artistic, and literary contexts (CO7)
*demonstrate knowledge of poetic technique through expressive recitations of poems and a critical review of a poetry reading (CO7)
*expressively read at least one poem in a public setting, demonstrating an understanding of poetic form, rhythm, theme, and shape (CO7)

Core Objectives:
This course develops CORE OBJECTIVE 1 – Effective Composition and Communication, which stipulates that students be able to compose written, oral, visual, and other forms of discourse for a variety of scholarly professional, and creative purposes.

This course satisfies CORE OBJECTIVE 7 – Artistic Composition, Interpretation, & Expression, which stipulates that students apply techniques of critical analysis to study and interpret artistic works in the context of culture, society, and individual identity.

Required Text:
Helen Vendler, Poems, Poets, Poetry (Bedford)

Course Requirements:

Attendance. Attendance is mandatory in this class, as is arriving promptly. If you must miss a class, be sure to check with a classmate to find out what you missed and to get any assignments given in class. In the case of long illnesses or other crises, please contact me.

Reading and Participation. Careful study of the poems and critical reading assigned for each class is crucial to your understanding and to our class discussions. The readings are not long, so you should read each poem carefully and more than once, noting its formal features (meter, rhyme scheme, etc.) as well as your observations and questions about form, theme, vocabulary, sections you liked, etc. (Some poems raise a lot of questions.) I will often ask you to consider one or several questions about the next day's readings; I may also ask you to write in class on
assigned poems or the critical models and terms set out by Vendler. You should come to class prepared to speak; I may call on you to do so.

**Written Requirements:**
Barring verifiable illness, you must hand papers in on due dates. I will penalize late papers harshly. Papers must be typed, double-spaced, and stapled, with numbered pages, one-inch margins, a 10- or 12-point font, and an interesting title (not simply "Explication of Shakespeare"). Papers must be proofread (a process which includes, but is not limited to, spell-checking). Be sure to keep a copy of each paper you hand in.

**Explications/Imitations/Review.** During the first half of the semester, you are to write two brief (2-3 page) explications of poems assigned for the class; these explications must be handed in before class discussion of those poems (the first is due on or before 2/6, the second on or before 2/27). You are also to compose two imitations or parodies of poems read in class, at least one of which must be a poem in a fixed form using rhyme and meter (i.e., a sonnet or ballad) (due on or before 2/13 and 3/18, respectively). You also must attend and write a brief (2-3 page) review of a poetry reading sometime during the course of the semester (due by 4/10). I will distribute more information on these assignments soon.

**Explications.** An explication is a short (1-2 page) essay that closely analyzes the language and form of a poem or an excerpt from a poem. It is not a summary of the poem’s “story” or plot. Rather, it identifies the techniques the passage employs (word order, imagery, tone, point of view, etc.), and in particular poetic devices (patterns and irregularities in sound, line length, assonance and alliteration, caesura, etc.). In your explication, you should show the reader how to read the passage, pointing out what is most important. Choose a short poem or short (no more than 15-20 lines) excerpt from a longer poem for explication. (If you focus on an excerpt, be sure briefly to mention the significance of your particular passage to the poem as a whole.) If you choose an entire poem, you may want to limit your discussion to one or two aspects of its language. For example, you may want to look at how the imagery evolves, or at the occurrence and significance of reader address.

The most important reason I have assigned explications is to help you develop sensitivity to poetic language and a vocabulary with which to express what you notice. Your explication should present a thesis, although this does not need to be as fully worked out as in a formal essay. You may choose to expand one of your explications for the first paper; even if you do not, the skills you develop in writing explications will inform your essays.

**Imitations.** Writing an imitation of a particular poem generally involves imitating that poem’s style; your subject matter should be at least somewhat different, although you might try to think of a subject or approach that your poet might have been interested by. If you prefer, you may write a parody of a poem we have discussed in class (see Koch’s “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams,” for example), in which you follow the form but choose a different subject, ideally one that points out the limitations of some element of the original; you may also exaggerate some element of the original’s style in ways that reveal the limitations of the original’s style. Your imitation should be as long or short as you think is appropriate.

**Papers.** You will write two papers of 3-5 pages each. The first will closely analyze a single poem, focusing on its form, technique, and shape. The second will connect at least three poems on a similar theme written during different time periods. These papers should demonstrate and elaborate on the explication skills you developed earlier in the semester.

**Exams.** There will be two hour-long exams in the class. In addition, during finals week, the class will organize, publicize, and participate in a “favorite poems” reading, in which each class member will introduce and expressively read a published poem. There will also be several
unannounced reading quizzes.

**Presentation.** Each of you will recite a poem you have memorized (of at least 12 lines) that is not on the syllabus and present a brief (5 minute) introduction to the poet and explication of the poem. I will distribute more information on presentations soon.

**Grading.** I will give the following weight to your work in calculating your final grade for the course:

- 15% short assignments (explications, imitations, reviews)
- 10% papers
- 30% exams, quizzes
- 10% final reading
- 15% participation, presentation

I will post assignment grades on WC and update them periodically throughout the semester.

**Academic Conduct.** Plagiarism (copying all or part of someone else’s work and passing it off as your own) is a serious form of academic misconduct and will not be tolerated in this class. The following definitions and possible courses of action are taken from the Academic Standards section of the university catalog:

- Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following: Plagiarism: defined as submitting the language, ideas, thoughts or work of another as one’s own; or assisting in the act of plagiarism by allowing one’s work to be used in this fashion. . . .

Sanctions for violations of university academic standards may include the following: (1) filing a final grade of “F”; (2) reducing the student’s final course grade one or two full grade points; (3) awarding a failing mark on the test or paper in question; (4) requiring the student to retake the test or resubmit the paper.

The policy in this course is to file a final grade of F. All incidents of plagiarism are reported to the Office of Student Conduct and become part of the student’s academic record. Please review the definition of plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty in a writers handbook and note that plagiarism may include partial and inadvertent as well as deliberate misrepresentation of one’s own work.

**Disability Services.** The University of Nevada, Reno is committed to equal opportunity in education for all students, including those with documented physical disabilities or documented learning disabilities. If you have a documented disability and will be requiring assistance, please contact the instructor or the Disability Resource Center (Thompson Building Suite 101) as soon as possible to arrange for appropriate accommodations.

**Audio and Video Recording.** Surreptitious or covert video-taping of class or unauthorized audio recording of class is prohibited by law and by Board of Regents policy. This class may be videotaped or audio recorded only with the written permission of the instructor. In order to accommodate students with disabilities, some students may be given permission to record class lectures and discussions. Therefore, students should understand that their comments during class may be recorded.
**Academic Success Services.** Your student fees cover use of the Tutoring Center, the University Writing Center, and the Math Center. Students are encouraged to take advantage of these services as needed.

  Tutoring Center: ph. 784-6801 or visit www.unr.edu/tutoring  
  University Writing Center: ph. 784-6030 or visit www.unr.edu/writing_center  
  Math Center: ph. 784-4433 or visit www.unr.edu/mathcenter

**Schedule of Assignments:**

All readings are in Vendler unless otherwise indicated. While we will not discuss all assigned poems in class, you are responsible for carefully reading and thinking about all of them. These assignments are subject to change.

1/14: Introduction; what is a poem? 
"When I Have Fears," Keats (handout)  
"Poem," Williams (handout)

**I. TOWARD A DEFINITION OF POETRY**

**The Poem as Stopped Time**

1/16: *The Persephone Myth*  
"Persephone," from *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (handout)  
"Pomegranate," Gluck (handout)  
"Pomegranate," Boland (handout)  
"Bavarian Gentians," Lawrence, 94  

"The Poem as Life," 3-14  
"Describing Poems," 101-4

1/21: *Capturing the Moment: Image, Metaphor, Symbol*  
"The Red Wheelbarrow," Williams, 607  
"In a Station of the Metro," Pound, 501  
"Design," Frost, 421  
"A Green Crab's Shell," Doty (handout)  
"The Windhover," Hopkins, 445

"The Poem as Arranged Life," 25-53

1/23:  
"To Autumn," Keats, 161  
"Musee de Beaux Arts," Auden, 322  
"Poem," Bishop, 339  
"The Snow Man," Stevens, 548

**Poetic Speakers and Audience**

1/28: *The Lyric "I"*  
"Skunk Hour," Lowell, 44
"Song of Myself," Whitman, 569
"I heard a Fly buzz," Dickinson, 183
"I'm Nobody," Dickinson, 191
"Insomnia at the Solstice," Kenyon (handout)

"Constructing a Self," 171-86

1/30: Personae
"My Last Duchess," Browning, 162
"Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot, 193

"Persona," 186-88

2/4:
"Ellen West," Bidart, 325
"Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," Yeats, 186

2/6: Poems as Persuasion: The Carpe Diem Poem
"To His Coy Mistress," Marvell, 470
"To the Virgins," Herrick, 91
"The Passionate Shepherd," Marlowe, 83
"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," Ralegh, 84

"Poems as Pleasure," 67-89

2/11: Apostrophe and Elegy: The Absent "You"
"Western Wind," 317
"Ode to the West Wind," Shelley, 522
"Daddy," Plath, 20
"Do Not Go Gentle," Thomas, 19
"The Mother," Brooks, 349

"Describing Poems," 101-28

Poetry and/as Music

2/13: Poems about Music and Song
"The Cuckoo Song," 11
"My Papa's Waltz," Roethke, 95
"The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens, 546
"Ode to a Nightingale," Keats, 134
"The Solitary Reaper," Wordsworth, 92

"The Play of Language," 145-59
in class: recordings of poem readings

2/18--no class

2/20: Poetic Forms: The Ballad
"La Belle Dame Sans Merci," 60
"Because I could not stop for Death," Dickinson, 62
"There's a certain Slant," Dickinson, 405
"The Tyger," Blake, 343
"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," Wordsworth, 237
in class: recordings of poem readings and ballads set to music

"On Prosody," 593-602

2/25: Poetic Forms: The Sonnet
Sonnet 18, Shakespeare, 521
Sonnet 116, Shakespeare, 521
Sonnet 130, Shakespeare, 91
"Batter My Heart," Donne, 160
"Ozymandias," Shelley, 524
"No Worst, There is None," Hopkins, 444
in class: recordings of poem readings

"On Prosody," 602-606
"Structural Principles: The Example of the Sonnet," Fussell (handout)

2/27: due: explication two
"Taking Notice," Hacker (handouts)
"The Broken Home," Merrill, 473
"Dulce Et Decorum Est," Owen, 245
"Frederick Douglass," Hayden, 437
in class: recordings of poem readings

Poems about Poetry
due: paper one

3/4:
"Ars Poetica," MacLeish, 466
"In My Craft," Thomas, 562
"Epilogue," Lowell, 288
"Poetry," Moore, 483
"Nightgown," Merrill (handout)

"Attitudes, Values, Judgments," 283-92

3/6: Midterm

3/11-3/13: Spring break--no class

II. A HISTORICAL SURVEY

3/18 Donne
"Death Be Not Proud," 407
"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," 57
"The Sun Rising," 407
"Batter My Heart," 160
"The Relic" (handout)
3/20 Keats
"When I Have Fears," 17
"Ode to a Nightingale," 134
"Ode on a Grecian Urn," 259
"To Autumn," 161
"This Living Hand," 452

due: imitation two

3/25 Whitman
"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard," 260

"Free Verse," 606-8

3/27 Dickinson
"After Great Pain," 401
"Because I could not stop for Death," 62
"I like a look of Agony," 402
"My Life had stood," 402
"I heard a Fly buzz," 183
"Wild Nights," 405

4/1 Yeats
"The Lake Isle of Innisfree," 588
"Sailing to Byzantium," 589
"Among School Children," 586
"Leda and the Swan," 589
"The Second Coming," 590

4/3 Yeats--ctd.

4/8 Bishop
"At the Fishhouses," 335
"The Fish," 337
"One Art," 167
"Poem," 339
"In the Waiting Room" (handout)

due: reading review

4/10 Lowell
"Sailing Home from Rapallo," 464
"For the Union Dead," 270
"Skunk Hour," 44
"Epilogue," 288

4/15 Plath
"The Colossus" (handout)
"Daddy," 20
"Lady Lazarus," 493
"Morning Song," 496
"Edge," 493

4/17 Heaney
"Clearances" (handout)
Punishment," 439
"Mid-Term Break," 174
[others to be handed out in class]
4/22: Gluck
due: paper 2
"Mock Orange," 304
"The White Lilies," 426
"The Untrustworthy Speaker" (handout)
[others to be handed out in class]

4/24: Poetic Elegies and Tributes
Hughes, "I, Too," 446
Rich, "Spirit of Place" and "I Am in Danger--Sir--" (handouts)
Kinnell, "The Deconstruction of Emily Dickinson" (handout)
Ginsberg, "In a Supermarket in California" (handout)
Olds, "The Language of the Brag" (handout)

4/29: Review

5/8, Test

Final favorite poems reading: TBA during finals week