

English 4315/5315, Contemporary American Poetry  
Dr. Wayne B. Stengel

Office: Irby 317 F

Office Hours: MWF: 12-12:50; TTh: 4:00-5:00, or by  
appt.

Fall 2011

Text: The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Edition, Vols. I & II.

Welcome to Contemporary American Poetry! This will be a comprehensive overview of fifteen to twenty American poets who have made a lasting impact on the content, form, structure, music or theory of the possibilities for American verse since World War II. Some will be poets you have read, or are familiar with. Others are poets, more obscure to both of us, who write verse, beautiful or mysterious, that has found its way into other poets, students, and anthologists' imaginations and has increasingly begun to challenge and influence ways in which poetry might be written in America. Beginning with Robert Penn Warren and Theodore Roethke in Volume One, the course will continue with Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wilbur, A. R. Ammons, Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, and James Wright in Volume Two, and conclude with selections from Ann Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Lucille Clifton, Sharon Olds, Louise Glück, and Rita Dove in this same volume. If time permits, we may cross the ocean, and look ever so briefly at the major poets in the British Isles in roughly parallel years—Dylan Thomas, W. H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, and Seamus Heaney, to discover how the enterprise of writing contemporary verse in English has many congruities and resemblances despite the shadow and colorations of poetic nationality. Modern American verse has many adherents, critics, enthusiasts, detractors and translators in cultures, countries, and civilizations around the globe, so our ability to read, discuss, hear, analyze, and attempt interpretation of the writers in this course will effectively chart the development of a major genre in the American idiom from the second World War through the cold war into a post-industrialist society, then past 9/11 into the age of international terrorism and global economic free fall. As a frequent and always curious reader of modern poetry, I am delighted to teach a course which so explores the role of the range of American poetry's linguistic awareness of its own vernacular, its limitations, and of worlds beyond its boundaries.

Course Objectives:

To enable each student to read, assess, and understand difficult texts from a wide variety of American poetic perspectives.

To ask each student to think reflectively and to write meaningfully about individual poems and their relationships to other works, poetic movements, and ideals/aspirations for poetic expression within American culture.

To develop high-order critical thinking and writing skills: good powers of argument, discrimination, persuasion, and rhetorical reasoning powers using the poetry read and analyzed as the basis for logical, precise articulation of the issues, phenomena and effects explored in the poems.

To make students aware of the considerable power and authority of American verse—as well as the self-conscious limitations of American poetry in the last sixty-five years or American letters.

### Requirements for Success in the Course

Excellent attendance, minimal tardiness, careful attention to the texts at hand. Parking cell phones, i-phones, lap tops, blackberries, and any other electronic mediation at the door.

A good attitude, willingness to learn, openness to a wide variety of materials, texts, and ideologies that, initially, may seem strange, provocative, or “different.”

Hard work, consistent performance on homework, quizzes, and paper writing throughout the semester, to include asking questions about assignments or concepts presented in class that are difficult, contradictory, or hard to grasp.

Being an engaged class participant, asking questions or trying to answer those I ask you.

Relaxing, enjoying the class. Showing me you are learning and getting ideas, information, some understanding of the literature and some conception of the cultural matrix from which the poetry came.

Your grade in this course will come from four sources. (1) Three relatively short explication papers (two pages each) in which you will thoroughly, fully assess line-by-line the possible meanings and interpretations of three individual poems chosen throughout the semester, paying good attention to the sounds, rhythms, diction, metrical effects, and prosody of each poem. Then I will ask each writer to step back from this microscopic examination of the sub-atomic properties of her poem for a larger, more macroscopic view of the poet’s purposes, goals, ambitions, and tonal effects in attempting to create a small little universe on the page. If this sounds terrifying, it shouldn’t be. Many of you, I suspect, could do passably well on these three explication des texts at just this moment. The important thing is that your work shows improvement and progress over the course of these three essays and the poems assigned. There are many ways to achieve well on any one of my assignments, and I never expect my students to move in lockstep or produce similar, indisputable results on something as complicated and interpretive as poetry explication. (2) A series of announced, open-book quizzes on aspects, words, possible interpretations, and meanings in the poems assigned for that classroom session. (3) A final exam, constituting a longer essay (five pages) completed outside of class on two or three of the poems we have read this semester, their relationships, affinities, and differences. A second part of the final examination will ask you to compare/contrast the poems you have written on out of class with two or three poems analyzed during the semester but presented in an examination context at this time. (4) A class participation grade based on each student’s attendance, participation, engagement, and interest displayed in reading and asking questions about these works. All of my classes are highly dependent on your ability, with eagerness, and civility, to question, interpret, or challenge what your fellow students, or instructor, is saying. There are many ways to get a good class participation grade. They all begin with regular, highly consistent class attendance. I fully expect this class to be enjoyable, interesting, and stimulating. Before it can possess any of those qualities, we must observe a few simple rules.

Week of August 30: Robert Penn Warren, p. 751; Theodore Roethke, p. 853.

September 6: Roethke

September 13: Elizabeth Bishop, p. 15.

September 20: Robert Lowell, p. 119;

September 27: Richard Wilbur, p. 196.

October 4: Allen Ginsberg, p. 334.

October 11: James Wright, p. 414.

October 18: A. R. Ammons, p. 288.

October 25: John Ashbery, p. 384 : Gwendolyn Brooks, p. 140.

November 1: Gwendolyn Brooks

November 8: Anne Sexton, p 431; Sylvia Plath, p. 593.

November 15: Adrienne Rich, p.456.

November 22: Sharon Olds, p. 806.

November 29: Lucille Clifton, p. 659..

December 6: Rita Dove, p. 975; Louise Gluck, p. 818.

December 13: FINAL EXAMINATION; FINAL PAPER DUE

The University of Central Arkansas affirms its commitment to academic integrity and expects all members of the university community to accept shared responsibility for maintaining academic integrity. Students in this course are subject to the provision of the university Academic Integrity Policy, approved by the Board of Trustees as Board policy No. 709 on February 10, 2010, and published in the Student Handbook. Penalties for academic misconduct in this course may include a failing grade on an assignment, a failing grade in the course, or any other course-related sanction the instructor determines to be appropriate. Continued enrollment in this course affirms a student's acceptance of this university policy.

The University of Central Arkansas adheres to the requirement of the American with Disabilities Act. If you need an accommodation under this Act due to a disability, please contact the UCA Office of Disability Services, 450-3613.

This instructor advises all students to familiarize themselves with all policies in the Student Handbook, particularly those relating to the University Sexual Harassment Policy and all Academic Policies.

