

**SYLLABUS**  
**MENG 6710 Seminar in American Literature:**  
**Contemporary American Poets**

Instructor: Dr. James Young  
Office: Elizabeth Hall 459  
Phone: 626-7902  
E-Mail: Jyoung@Weber.Edu

Classroom: EH 317  
Time: Monday 5:30 to 8:10

**Texts:**

J. D. McClatchy. *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. Vintage Press 2003  
Bill Moyers. *Fooling with Words*. Perennial. 1999.  
Jane Hirshfield. *Nine Gates*. Harper Collins Pub. 1997.  
William Stafford. *Writing the Australian Crawl*. Un of Michigan Press. 1978.  
Robin Behn. *The Practice of Poetry*. Harper Paperback. 1992.

**Description of Course:**

MENG 6240 is a master's level course designed to introduce you to a few of the major contemporary American poets: Stanley Kunitz, Sharon Olds, William Stafford, Jane Hirshfield, Li-Young Lee, Billy Collins, and Joy Harjo.

The works that I have chosen are some of my favorite poets and are representative of the large and varied range of American poetry in the twentieth century. The poems that we will study are rich and diverse and will take us to places both common and extraordinary. They will help us see, explore, and examine the great questions of human existence: happiness, destiny, conflict, love, death, despair, courage, and the search for meaning and purpose in life.

To know these works of literature intimately is to know the American landscape and the fashioning of the contemporary American spirit.

**Course Outcomes:**

1. To increase a student's enjoyment and understanding of poetry
2. To help students learn how to vividly recreate and enter into the worlds that are presented to them in contemporary American poetry.
3. To conduct classroom discussions that engages the student in closely examining the language and structure of poetry.
4. To develop a student's analytical skills and critical thinking through reading, discussion, and written assignments about contemporary American poetry.
5. To understand how American writers express their social, moral, and cultural concerns and their intellectual and psychological insights in a work of literature.
6. To see how the insights and experiences provided for us in American poetry can broaden our understanding of the American experience and our own personal lives.

## Attendance Policy:

It is very important that you attend each class session. You are allowed only one absence during the semester for illnesses or to take care of personal matters. One absence is equivalent to three in a regular class that meets three times a week. More than two absences will seriously affect your grade. A person with four absences will be asked to drop the class.

If you are late to class, please put your name on a slip of paper with the day's date and hand it to me after class, so I can give you credit for attendance on that day. Whenever you are absent, please ask a classmate for the assignment so that you can come prepared for the work of the day.

## Evaluation:

Grades will be based on the quality of your reading and writing, regular attendance, completion of all reading and writing assignments, class participation, and class projects.

Each student will choose a specific “contracted” amount of work to earn a designated grade. The student can inform the instructor either at the beginning of the term or at the mid-term (8<sup>th</sup>) week what contract he or she has chosen. The contracted grade assumes competent, quality work on each part of the contracted assignments. If a contracted assignment is less than graduate school quality, the student will be asked to rework and resubmit the work before credit is given or accept a lower assessment than the contracted grade. (The contracted grades measure achievements in Course Outcomes 2, 4, 5, and 6, and MENG Program Learning Outcomes 1, 2, 5, and 6).

## Grade Contracts:

1. To contract for a “B-” grade:
  - A. Each student must have regular attendance.
  - B. Participate in class discussions.
  - C. Complete all the reading assignments when they are due.
  - D. Submit for evaluation a Reading Response Journal that contains all the daily class writing assignments and all the homework assignments. (The Journal is described in detail later in the syllabus).
  
2. To contract for a “B” grade:
  - A. Each student must complete all of the above requirements for a “B-” grade in addition to presenting a Mid-Term Project. [The Mid-Term Projects are described in detail later in the syllabus.]
  - B. Options for the Mid-Term Projects:
    - 1) Present to the class a 10 minute PowerPoint Presentation on a major American Poet from the Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry.
    - 2) Present 4 to 6 new poems that you have written this semester.
    - 3) Present a reading of poems from several contemporary American poets around a theme like, love, courage, disappointment, growing up, etc.

3. To contract for a “B+” grade:
  - A. Each student must complete all of the above requirements in addition to the following:
  - B. Extended Reading Assignment: Present to the Instructor in a 15 minute personal interview your response and analysis of any American poet’s life and works by reading biographical accounts and being prepared to give an assessment of the value of the poet’s work as expressed in several major poems.
4. To Contract for an “A” grade.
  - A. Each student must complete all of the above requirements (except requirement 3 for the B+ grade) in addition to the following:
  - B. Write a 10 to 15-page research paper analyzing major themes and motifs at work in the poems of any Contemporary American Poet. Your job as a researcher is to discover what other critics have said about this poet and combine their views with your own discoveries to help your reader come to appreciate and understand the poets work. Even though the primary focus of the paper is analytical, in order to make the writing livelier, you may add interesting insights about the poet’s life and influences and explore your own personal responses and connections to the poetry.
  - C. Give a 10-minute presentation of your research paper. Because our time for reporting on research is limited, you will not be able to read your paper to the class (reading a 10 page paper takes 20 minutes of class time.) Instead, I would like you to follow these guidelines for class presentation of research: 1) Read the introduction of your paper, 2) Summarize your major findings (you can occasionally read paragraphs from the body of your paper to make your points), 3) Read your conclusion and 4) Answer any questions raised by me or your fellow classmates.

## **Reading Response Journals:**

Students write quite a lot in MENG 6240 to help them clarify their response to the literature they are reading and to assist them in understanding the structure and meaning of these American poets. All students should keep these writings in a reading response journal which becomes a history of your interactions with various literary texts. Samples of your journal will be collected periodically, and you will often be asked to read responses from your journal to both small groups and sometimes to the entire class. Journals will be taken up for evaluation during the last week of the semester. [The Reading Response Journal measures Course Objectives 2, 4, 5, 7 and MENG Program Learning Outcomes 1, 2, and 3]. Journal entries may take a variety of forms:

Journal entries may take a variety of forms:

1. Describe personal connections between your life and the poems we are studying.
2. Determine and articulate the main themes expressed in the poem.
3. Research and discover interesting relations between the poet’s life and his or her poems.
4. Survey, summarize and comment on professional literary criticism about the poet or

- poem being studied. What are academic critics saying? What aspects of the poem are they exploring and what are they discovering?
5. Raise questions about the text that you would like to discuss in class and reflect on possible answers.
  6. Do a “**Close Reading**” of a poem by commenting on the author’s style and how he or she structures the poem. Do any one or several of the following suggestions:
    - a. Summarize the major movements of the poem answering questions like where are we in the poem, who is speaking to us, and what is being said?
    - b. Work through both the literal and symbolic meanings of the poem.
    - c. Analyze the poet’s attitude and tone in the poem. Is the poet serious, humorous, sad, playful, or ironic?
    - d. Is the poet making an argument? What is it?
    - e. Many poems hinge on conflict or major oppositions of ideas and feeling. Can you sort out the oppositions? For example, a poet might play with the ideas of life and death by using such words "ashes," "dust" and "decay" as opposed to "green," "spring," "bud," "life" and "new." Once you have identified the major oppositions then ask yourself, “What does the poet have to say about these conflicts?”
      - a. Often poems will have turning points within the poem. Can you identify when these happen and articulate what is changing? Look for changes in tone, focus, narrator, structure, voice, patterns. Ask: “What has changed and what does the change mean?” The pivotal moment might be as small as the word *but* or *yet*. Such words often act like hinges within a poem to swing the poem in a whole new direction.
      - b. Can you connect the poem’s enactment or meaning with something in your life? Describe how the poem intersects with your life in a personal reflection.
      - c. Find patterns of related words or images (metaphors, similes and allusions) by rereading the poem watching for unusual words and images that evoke particular feelings or moods, words that form patterns of repetition, contradictions or tensions that contribute to the meaning of the poem.
      - d. Analyze the poem for specific historical, political, economic, social, or religious references. How does the culture of the time contribute to the personalities and events of the poem?

### **Mid-Term Projects:** Choose one of the following options:

1. Present to the class a 10 minute PowerPoint Presentation on a major American Poet from the Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry that we have not studied in class. The presentation could contain any of the following:
  - a. A brief biography of the poet’s life and works.
  - b. Pictures of family, friends, and associates
  - c. Sound recordings of the poet reading or being interview.
  - d. The presenter should project and read three to five of the poet’s best poems, discussing style, and structure and most important themes at work in the poems.

- e. A discussion of the significance and value of the poet's work.
  - f. Personal reflections of how and why the poems interest the presenter. How does it connect to his or her life?
2. Write 4 to 6 new poems that you have written in response to our class. Read and share them with the class. Before you read each poem you might preface it by explaining the occasion or circumstance that prompted the writing and hint at what you were trying to express in the poem. This usually helps orient the listener, helping him or her appreciate the full impact and meaning of your poem. The poem ultimately expresses itself, but a little help in understanding the context or direction that the poem will take usually assist the reader in bring the poem to life. Try to determine if the poems have any thing in common and how they relate to the major themes, ideas, concerns, or movements of your life.
  3. Dramatically read a series of poems that you have chosen from a series of American poets, explaining what they mean to you and why they are significant. You might group the poems according to themes: love, courage, disappointment, growing up, etc. or you might read a series of poems by one poet, explaining how the poems express important concerns in the life of the writer or in your own life.

## Books on Poetry and Writing

- Behn, Robin and Twicfhell, Chase, eds. *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*. Harper Collins, 1992.
- Boisseau, Michelle and Wallace, Robert. *Writing Poems*. Harper Collins, 1992
- Boland, Eavan. *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. W.W. Norton. 1995
- Comley, Nancy; Scholes, Robert; and Ulmer Gregory. *Text Book: An Introduction to Literary Language*. St Martins Press, 1988.
- Praise and Dispraise: *Poetry and Politics, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Penguin, 1988.
- Drake, Barbara. *Writing Poetry*. Harcourt Brace & Company 1994.
- Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*. Random House, 1965.
- Gioia, Dana. *Can Poetry Matter?* Graywolf Press, 1992.
- Gluck, Louise. *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry*. The Ecco Press, 1994.
- Goldberg, Natalie. *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*. Bantam Books, 1990.
- Hass, Robert. *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*. The Ecco Press, 1984.
- Hirshfield, Jane. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. HarperCollins, 1997.
- Kowitz, Steve. *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*. Tilbury House, 1995.
- Kuusisto, Stephen; Tall, Deborah; and Weiss, Davi, eds. *The Poet's Notebook: Excerpts from the Notebooks of Contemporary American Poets*. W. W. Norton, 1995.
- Mayes, Frances. *The Discovery of Poetry*. Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- McDowell, Robert, ed. *Poetry After Modernism*. Story Line Press, 1991.
- Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. Delacorte Press, 1997.
- Pinsky, Robert. *Poetry and the World*. The Ecco Press, 1988.
- Pinsky, Robert. *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions*. Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Rukeyser, Murial. *The Life of Poetry*. Paris Prows, 1996.

## Class Assignments:

Specific reading and writing assignments will be given out at the end of each class session. **Always** do the reading and writing before class and come prepared to share your reactions to the assignments.

## *Tentative Schedule*

---

Week	Date	Description
Week One		Introduction to Cont. Am. Poetry
Week Two		Fooling with Words
Week Three		Fooling with Words
Week Four		William Stafford's Writing the Australian Crawl
Week Five		William Stafford's Writing the Australian Crawl
Week Six		Jane Hirshfield's Nine Gates
Week Seven		Jane Hirshfield's Nine Gates
Week Eight		Mid-Term Projects
Week Nine		Stanley Kunitz
Week Ten		Sharon Olds
Week Eleven		Billy Collins
Week Twelve		Li-Young Lee
Week Thirteen		Joy Harjo
Week Fourteen		Poetry Festival
Week Fifteen		Presentation of Research Papers

## MENG Program Learning Outcomes:

- Learning Outcome 1: Gather, analyze, and communicate information effectively as well as think creatively and critically.
- Learning Outcome 2: Cultivated skills in close reading, critical thinking, logical argument from evidence presented, creative expression, and persuasive writing.
- Learning Outcome 3: Apply various theoretical perspectives and literary terminology to interpretations of literary texts to showcase an understanding of theoretical perspectives.

- Learning Outcome 4: Acknowledge and articulate the significance of key primary text(s) in one specific literary genre, period, culture or style.
- Learning Outcome 5: Demonstrate knowledge of an interaction with current scholarly criticism.
- Learning Outcome 6: Ability to employ academic conventions and protocols for written or multimodal presentations, including the application of appropriate conventions, citation formats and style manuals.

## **Weber State University Policy for Students:**

As specified in PPM 6-22 IV D, cheating and plagiarism violate the Student Code. Plagiarism is “the unacknowledged (uncited) use of any other person’s or group’s ideas or work.” Students found guilty of cheating or plagiarism are subject to failure of a specific assignment, or, in more serious cases, failure of the entire course.

**Core Beliefs:** According to PPM 6-22 IV, students are to “determine, before the last day to drop courses without penalty, when course requirements conflict with a student's core beliefs. If there is such a conflict, the student should consider dropping the class. A student who finds this solution impracticable may request a resolution from the instructor. This policy does not oblige the instructor to grant the request, except in those cases when a denial would be arbitrary and capricious or illegal. This request must be made to the instructor in writing and the student must deliver a copy of the request to the office of the department head. The student's request must articulate the burden the requirement would place on the student's beliefs.”

**Disability Accommodation:** PPM 3-34 notes: “When students seek accommodation in a regularly scheduled course, they have the responsibility to make such requests at the Center for Students with Disabilities before the beginning of the quarter [semester] in which the accommodation is being requested. When a student fails to make such arrangements, interim accommodations can be made by the instructor, pending the determination of the request for a permanent accommodation.”

**Emergency Closure:** If for any reason the university is forced to close for an extended period of time, we will conduct our class . . . . [via e-mail and WSU Canvas].