

WRI 211: Creative Writing: Poetry
Waking Up the Muse

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The Muse

How can I live with this burden
And yet they call it the Muse.
They say: "You and she are in a meadow..."
They say: "The divine babble..."
More savagely than fever she attacks you,
Then for a whole year, not a syllable.

-Anna Akhmatova (Summer 1959)
trans. Judith Hemschemeyer

We may want to believe that writing poetry means waiting until we are possessed by the Muse and need only transcribe her dictation. Yes, we all know those divine moments of inspiration when a line of poetry strikes us like lightning. Or we know those more subtle moments when we find poetry right in our midst, as Akhmatova describes this: "in the abyss of whispers and ringing / rises one triumphant sound." But the poet who only waits for the Muse will too often be lonely. Poets learn instead that a poem is both *mystical* and *made*. And here's the unexpected part: often while at work on the making, you'll be struck by mystery. Dedicating yourself to the craft of poetry can awaken the Muse.

This class presents a crash course in poetic structures in which your writing will, hopefully with some frequency, transcend the premise of each exercise.

In our remaining 7 weeks, we'll have 3 types of meetings:

- Craft Topic Study [Tuesdays]: Discussion of a topic of poetic craft and model poems
- 10/Speed Workshop [Thursdays]: A pointed & fast workshop of exercise poems from 10 of you
- Sunday Workshop [well, on Sunday]: A workshop of chosen poems from $\frac{1}{2}$ of the class at a time

I'll propose and negotiate class meeting times with you during our first meeting.

Course Requirements:

Your full participation in each class is a central requirement of the course. This entails different kinds of preparation for each meeting:

Craft Topic Study

In advance of each Craft Topic class, read and study the model poems and any additional handouts on the topic. In class, contribute to the discussion. Often this means articulating subtle distinctions in the choices made by different poets. This can be challenging and often requires you to rehearse concepts that may be new to you; and it may require you to invent new vocabularies to describe the effects you are witnessing as a reader. In many ways these discussions are practice in reading critically as a writer that will prepare you to write your Craft Annotations.

Each craft topic prompts that week's **exercise poem**. Exercise poems are **due no later than dawn the following Monday** (email is okay; .doc preferred).

10/Speed Workshop

In 10/Speed Workshop we look quickly at exercise poems. Your first responsibility toward this session of the workshop is to submit your exercise poem on time—by dawn Monday so I can distribute workshop packets on Tuesday.

You'll take that packet home and read them all, although every week a group of 5 students will have a "bye" and won't have their poems discussed in workshop. For each of the 15 poems, find the one line (or, at most, two lines) where you think the poem excels—where the poet accomplishes the craft with flair, where its language is rich, where you see signs of what the poem might aspire toward in revision, where you see the poet's best work. Then, find one place that doesn't match that level of accomplishment but for which you have some ideas that might help it improve. Mark each of these places on the page and explain your choices in the margin. These notes will enable us to move right into speedy but effective workshop commentary; and, in the case of those who have a bye, your written marginalia will offer some of the same kind of feedback we'll give in workshop.

Sunday Workshop

In Sunday Workshop we look at work that you have chosen for feedback. Poems for Sunday Workshop are **due in class on Tuesdays** or by email to me by the end of the day. You are welcome to submit a poem that has been part of a 10/Speed Workshop, either with or without further revision. You are also welcome to submit poems that have not come out of any exercise.

Sunday Workshop gives us a chance for more feedback on each poem by extending our meeting time and by dividing the class to workshop only half of the poems per session. Still, for **each** of the 15 poems, write a **critical response** in the form of a note to the author; make a duplicate copy of this note that you'll give to me. In addition, make **annotations on the actual poem**—detailed notations, arrows to indicate restructuring, or any suggestions that are difficult to translate into the prose of a note. You'll return these pages to every poet in class, even those who aren't discussed in workshop.

Additional Requirements:

Craft Annotations

A Craft Annotation is a short, critical essay in which I ask you to pursue a single aspect of craft in a single poem. You might track the way Ginsberg turns his lines, explain how Moore's stanzas function to build a poem, or explore the way Wright's final image resonates back through the poem. Further details will be provided in a handout in class. An annotation is obsessive, focused, and short (2 pages). It is *not* literary analysis; it addresses craft not theme.

You'll write 2 annotations. The 1st is due November 27th; the 2nd is due December 11th.

Portfolio

As the culmination of the semester, you'll submit a final portfolio. In this portfolio you'll collect seven poems in a titled manuscript. These poems may be those you wrote at *any time* during the semester. In addition to these poems, compile an **Appendix** which collects (at least) 2 drafts of each of the included poems. Finally, lead the Portfolio with a 3-5 page (double-spaced) **Preface**, an essay which tells me the ways in which these poems demonstrate your development as a poet this semester. You might narrate the evolution of some of the drafts; you might talk about exercises that were valuable (or those that were not); you might discuss which poems or poets of our study you found most transformative to your work—and maybe those you find yourself rejecting. You are welcome to creatively interpret the content of this essay, but consider your primary goal: to communicate to me what you think you have learned in the class.

Course Outcomes & Assessment:

Through this course you will become a critical reader of poetry from the perspective of a writer and focus your criticism to identify individual writing tactics (craft). You'll demonstrate an understanding of this craft by engaging in class discussions, by drafting prose arguments that reflect these new understandings, and by creating poems which employ this craft. The course will also teach and involve you in the process of revision. You'll demonstrate your understanding by participating in all aspects of the process: writing in response to exercises; offering generous criticism to others as well as self-criticism; employing this feedback in thoughtful and purposeful revision of your work.

Your final portfolio becomes a primary means of assessment in this class. We'll work together to establish the hallmarks of poetry based on our study of individual aspects of craft. Having identified these characteristics, you'll marshal and receive workshop critique designed to help strengthen these aspects. In the revision reflected in your portfolio, you need not placate the workshop but should still aim to achieve these craft goals. Portfolios will be viewed in terms of your engagement in the revision process and your employment of the craft we studied. In addition I will judge the attainment of each piece as a poem and the accomplishment of the whole manuscript. Your Preface is a significant piece in this assessment as it directs my attention to the ways in which you believe your portfolio represents your learning.

Essential Policies & Details

Attendance

Both our discussions and our workshops *require* your presence as we work in a collaborative and accumulative mode. Attendance (which means attendance with preparation) is mandatory. Missed work (including in-class writing and workshops) cannot be made up.

Late Work

With the tight logistics of our schedule, I can't accept late work. Keep your eye on the calendar to be sure you turn in materials on time, and talk to me if you are having trouble with a particular exercise or anticipate a conflict with the schedule.

Academic Integrity

You will engage closely with the work of published authors and exchange many ideas collaboratively with other students. Still, all writing you submit for this course is assumed to be your own. If you are concerned that what you write might owe more than inspiration to another source, acknowledge that debt (we poets often use a note like, *After Ovid*). Willfully presenting the work of others as your own is a serious issue for which the College issues penalties.

Accommodation

Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact Deborah Braden, Educational Access Coordinator (Dodge House, ext. 3791, dbraden@warren-wilson.edu), as soon as possible to ensure that appropriate accommodations can be implemented in a timely fashion.