



Independent Learning

ENGLISH 304

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

Syllabus Preview

Instructor: Pam Hardman
Credits: 5 Quarter Credits
Lessons: 11 Assignments
Exams: No Exam
Prereq: ENG 202 or 203
Format: Self-paced independent learning with instructor guidance
Note: WWU English majors/minors may apply up to 10 credits earned through distance learning to their major/minor course of study.

The following pages are an excerpt from the full course syllabus. Western Washington University reserves the right to cancel courses and change instructors, course requirements and textbooks at any time. Check with the Independent Learning office regarding course availability.

Independent Learning

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ENGLISH 304

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

ABOUT THE COURSE:

“If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”
(Emily Dickinson)

“A poem makes your toenails twinkle.” (Dylan Thomas)

Welcome to English 304, Critical Introduction to Poetry. This is a course in reading and interpreting poetry, not in writing poetry, and most of your written work will have you analyzing poems (although you will write one original poem). In addition to strengthening your interpretive skills, my main goal in the course is for you to learn to enjoy and “play” with poetry more. I feel that reading poetry is much more like eating a delicious meal than it is like solving a math equation. There is no one answer or meaning to any poem; the experience of reading it is complex and appeals to various senses. Your emotional, “gut” response to a poem is an important starting point for any interpretation.

Still, there are some good tools, terms, and concepts you can use to enhance your understanding and enjoyment of a poem. While your emotional response is a crucial starting point, in discussing and exploring this response it’s useful to have some vocabulary and skills about the technical aspects. Imagine again eating a delicious meal: your first reaction is of course “gut level” and powerful. But if you want to describe the meal to others, or understand how the cook made it, or learn to make it yourself, or discover other foods you may also like, you’d need to think analytically about the meal and use language to respond to it. You’d think, write, and talk about what the elements in the meal were, how they were put together, where they come from, how they were cooked, how one ingredient affects another, etc. In the end, you have an understanding of the meal consisting partly of “gut level” response and pleasure, but combined with more reasoned, articulate discussion. This is the kind of response I hope you learn to have to poetry, and the course is geared towards giving you the necessary tools and skills to help you understand and express your deep and complex reactions to delicious poems.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Hunter, J. Paul, et. al., eds., The Norton Introduction to Poetry, 8th edition (2002) (be sure you get the 8th edition), W. W. Norton and Company (referred to as NIP in the syllabus). ISBN 9780005546918.

Birenbaum, Harvey, The Happy Critic: A Serious but Not Solemn Guide to Thinking and Writing About Literature, 1996, Mayfield Publishing Company (referred to as HC in the syllabus). ISBN 9781559347068.

OVERVIEW OF READING AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

Before starting into the first lesson, you should carefully read through the whole course packet, so you understand the types of reading and writing you'll be doing.

Reading assignments:

You will have much challenging but interesting reading to do in this course. Each lesson asks you to read pages from NIP, sometimes HC, and any supplemental material I give you. You'll read many poems for each lesson. Most poems need more than one reading for you to get much from them, so try to pick several poems out of each reading assignment and re-read them several times.

Writing Assignments:

You'll be doing a variety of types of writing in this course, in order to strengthen your abilities to write in different contexts and to understand the complexities of a poem.

It is very important that you get feedback from me on each assignment before proceeding to the next one. Consequently, you will **not** be able to turn in more than two lessons at a time; you need to wait until I return each assignment, with comments, before turning in the next. You should pace your work in the course so you have adequate time to turn in all assignments before the end of your nine-month period.

All lessons, including rough drafts, exercises, response papers and final drafts, must be typed and double-spaced. (The following writing assignments are explained more fully in the individual lessons.)

GRADING:

One intuitive response (10%): This is a loosely structured writing aimed at helping you articulate as many reactions and observations to a poem as possible.

Six exercise/activity sets (5% each, total 30%): These are designed to help you understand certain concepts and practice particular skills useful in understanding poems: speaker, tone, situation, words, figures of speech, imagery, meter, rhyme, structure.

One paraphrase/description (10%): This assignment asks you to give a literal paraphrase of what happens in a particular poem, without interpretation.

Worksheet (15%): Before you write the interpretive paper and an original poem, you'll do an assignment that helps you pull together and practice the skills you've learned in previous lessons.

One interpretive essay (25% total): This will be a 5-6 page essay (paper) interpreting a poem of your choice. It should pull together many of the skills and ideas you gain through the course. Your final paper grade will be based on at least one rough draft and a final draft, and a reflective memo discussing your interpretive process. You must give me a rough draft of the paper, and wait until I comment on it and return it to you before turning in your final version.

One original poem (10%): You'll create your own poem based on what you've learned from the course. In addition to the poem, you need to turn in an explanation of why and how you created your poem.

To determine your final grade I'll add up your points from all assignments and assign a course grade as follows:

A	=	93-100	C	=	73-76
A-	=	90-92	C-	=	70-72
B+	=	87-89	D+	=	67-69
B	=	83-86	D	=	63-66
B-	=	80-82	D-	=	60-62
C+	=	77-79	F	=	Below 60

Students taking the course pass/fail must have a cumulative total of 60 points (D-) in order to pass.

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR:

Pam Hardman received her B.A. in English from Oberlin College, her M.A. in English from the University of Toronto, and is currently finishing her Ph.D. in English from Brown University. She has been teaching in the Western Washington University English Department since 1993. She teaches courses in 19th and 20th Century American Literature and Culture, Women's Literature, Women's Studies, Critical and Cultural Theory, and Beginning Linguistics.