

American Poetry Since Whitman

Summer Semester 2025 Course Outline

Course Lecturer: Stephan Delbos, MFA, PhD

This course surveys American poetry from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, emphasizing stylistic continuities and disruptions, transnational influences, and the impact of technology, sociology and politics on the choices poets make with words. Beginning with Walt Whitman, the course examines many of the most significant movements and moments in American poetry and illuminates its continuous evolution between 1850 and 2025. Upon completion of the course, students will have a more comprehensive understanding of American poetry and, hopefully, a deeper appreciation of it.

Requirements

Attendance and class participation

Weekly short responses to readings

Class presentation

Final essay

Optional 2nd essay for a ZK

Attendance: You are required to attend all class meetings on time.

Class presentation: Each student is required to deliver a five-minute presentation on a specific topic, poem, or poet.

Final essay: Students will write a final essay of 2,000 words on one of the poets or topics we've covered in class. The subject will be discussed with the teacher in advance. Primary and secondary sources are required. The essay must be typed in Times New Roman 12-point font and double-spaced. Title the essay, number the pages, and staple them together in the top left corner. Late papers will not be accepted without a legitimate excuse. In addition, students wanting to produce a second graded essay for a ZK may do so: required length: 2,000-3,000 words; subjects to be discussed with the teacher. All essays must follow departmental essay guidelines.

School Policies

Course lecturers will fail any piece of work that they feel shows clear signs of having been plagiarized.

Contact details

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Course Schedule

Week 1: Songs of Myself: 19th Century Roots and Routes

Selected Readings: Walt Whitman; Mercy Warren; Paul Laurence Dunbar; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Emily Dickinson; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Discussion: Syllabus review; class expectations; lecture on the roots and routes of modern American poetry; free verse and received forms

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 2: Against My Ruin: Mid-period Modernism

Selected Readings: Ezra Pound; T. S. Eliot; Robert Frost; Hilda Doolittle; Amy Lowell

Discussion: What is/was Modernism?

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 3: If We Must Die: Black Modernism in Harlem

Selected Readings: Claude McKay; Langston Hughes; Gwendolyn Bennett

Discussion: The African American experience as substance for Modernist poetry

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 4: To Brooklyn Bridge: Modernism Strikes Back

Selected Readings: Marianne Moore; Kenneth Patchen; Kenneth Rexroth; Hart Crane; Kenneth Fearing

Discussion: The outliers of modernism

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 5: *The New American Poetry* and Cold War Nationalism

Selected Readings: Frank O'Hara; Charles Olson; Robert Duncan; William Carlos Williams; Elizabeth Bishop; Sylvia Plath; Barbara Guest; Helen Adam; Madeline Gleason

Discussion: What was the New American Poetry?

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 6: Reassessing the Cold War Canon

Selected Readings: Margaret Atwood; Robert Lowell; Gregory Corso; Thomas McGrath; Dudley Fitts; Amiri Baraka; Robert Creeley; Donald Hall

Discussion: How were poets affected by the Cold War?

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 7: Beats, Squares and Rod McKuen

Selected Readings: Allen Ginsberg; Lawrence Ferlinghetti; Ted Jones; Jack Spicer; Stephen Jonas; John Wieners; Rod McKuen

Discussion: Post-war rebellion in American poetry

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 8: A Girl is a Girl is a Girl: "Feminist" Poetics

Selected Readings: Eileen Miles; Denise Levertov; Adrienne Rich; Susan Howe; Audre Lorde; Rita Dove; Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Discussion: Poets of second-wave and third-wave feminism

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 9: "I HATE SPEECH": Language Poetry and the Post-Avant

Selected Readings: Lyn Hejinian; Ron Silliman; Charles Bernstein; Carla Harryman; David Bromige

Discussion: What is Language Poetry?

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 10: Thinkers or Readers: Conceptual Poetry and Uncreative Writing

Reading: Kenneth Goldsmith; Vanessa Place

Discussion: Uncreativity and textual appropriation

Homework: Read and prepare for discussion/presentation

Week 11: New Formalisms; Gnosticisms

Selected Readings: James Merrill; Nathaniel Mackey; Fred Moten; Peter Gizzi

Discussion: Spirits and forms at the turn of the twenty-first century

Homework: Write final essay proposal

Week 12: “you are in desperate need of yourself”: Social Media and Identity Poetics

Selected Readings: Rupi Kaur; Maggie Smith; Patricia Lockwood; Atticus; Ilya Kaminsky; Danez Smith

Discussion: Digital songs of digital selves: Poetry in the 2020s

Homework: Finish final essay, which is due two weeks after the final class