Course Objective

Though you may enter this course as a lover of literature, we will be reading as writers: opening the face of the clock to examine the gears beneath. We will examine our emotional (and mental and physical) reaction to works of fiction and poetry, discussing not what we felt—this isn’t a book club—but why we might have felt it. We will investigate, through the work of established authors, what makes a work of fiction or poetry effective: what mechanics the writer is using not only to create a reaction in the reader, but to create a universe that feels whole, complete, believable. We will discuss the intersection of a piece of writing as a work of art, a source of entertainment, and a commodity. Through in- and out-of-class writing assignments, with and without prompts, we will explore established modes of fiction and poetry, as well as strike out on our own.

In class

Weekly reading and writing assignments will be shared and discussed in class, as a group. We will alternate between workshop and craft classes each week. In workshop, we will discuss fiction and poetry submitted by our classmates. In craft, we will read published fiction and poetry. We’ll do a week of craft, then a week of workshop, then we’ll switch again. Please bring a pen, a notebook, and the week’s reading material to the table.

The Craft of Fiction and Poetry

We will analyze the work of published authors, considering the rules and tools widely taught in creative writing programs. Our analyses of these works will be informed by an awareness that these rules and tools, often taught as dogma, were invented and are reinforced by a particular tradition, which canonizes only particular voices. So, we’ll also be looking at some authors who break those rules. Some readings may be accompanied by a very short writing assignment. Among others, we will read and discuss the work of: Toni Morrison; Jamaica Kincaid; Clarice Lispector; Carson McCullers; Ottessa Moshfegh; David Foster Wallace; Cormac McCarthy; Alice Munro; T.S. Eliot; W.H. Auden; Lucie Brock-Broido; Tracy K. Smith; Angel Nafis; Elizabeth Bishop; Mary Oliver; and Patricia Smith. It’s possible you’ll have to purchase two or three books, but most readings will be made available through a PDF that I’ll expect you to print, mark up, and bring to class.

Workshop

We’ll use the methods learned in craft to analyze each other’s work, with the objective of improvement. Revised pieces will be due at the end of the semester as part of a final portfolio.
Fiction submissions can be anywhere from 10-20 pages. Poetry submissions have a minimum of two poems and a maximum of five pages. You must bring a hard copy for every student (and for me) into class one week before your turn to workshop. Fiction should be in Times New Roman font, 12-point, double-spaced (poetry is not subject to these rules). Please include page numbers and your name in the header on every page of anything you submit.

Both writer and reader benefit from the workshop, and it’s for this reason that line edits are part of your assignment as a reader: editing someone else’s work helps your writing as much as theirs. Sometimes we only realize we’re making a mistake in our own work when we spot the same mistake somewhere else.

All students will submit both fiction and poetry to be workshopped by their classmates. Students are expected to come to workshop with detailed line edits and a substantive, 250-page letter for the student being workshopped—I’ll explain more about this process in class. (You’ll bring two copies of the letter to class; one for its recipient, one for me.) Each student will be workshopped four times, twice for fiction and twice for poetry. It is important that you come to workshop with a detailed response to the work being discussed, both in your head and on paper.

Sharing your creative work takes courage and vulnerability, and we will treat each other with the respect earned by this courageous act! We critique because we are invested in the success of the piece—this is the spirit in which your thoughts should be shared. Everyone has something to teach, and everyone has something to learn.

The most important resource this class provides is a community of writers. You will be a contributing member of that community. Actively participating in class is just as important as printing and handing over a detailed and thoughtful letter. Same goes for craft weeks: we are a small group, so everyone’s voice is essential to discussion. Please come to class enthusiastically prepared—i.e., you’ve read the material and you have something to say about it. Failure to do so will have a negative impact on your final grade.

**Portfolio**

At the end of the semester, you’ll submit:

- one revised poem
- one revised short story
- a two-page letter discussing your revision process and how it related to the discussion of your pieces in workshop

Revisions are expected to be major structural changes to the piece. Your revisions should go beyond, say, simply changing the phrasing of particular lines (and well beyond spelling and grammar edits). Please submit a cover page with your portfolio.
Office Hours
You’ll be expected to meet with me at least twice during the course of the semester, preferably once after your first workshop, and once before submitting you submit your portfolio. This way we can chart the progress of your work and discuss what you are getting out of this class. Additional meetings are encouraged! I would love to meet with you and talk about writing.

Policies
Attendance: Participation is a huge part of this class; see Grading section. Absences will be excused at my discretion on a case-by-case basis—usually only in case of (documented) emergency. The first unexcused absence will lower your grade by half a letter (A becomes A-); additional absences will lower your grade by a full letter. One instance of tardiness will be excused; any additional instance will reduce your final grade by half a letter.

Technology and food: No laptops, phones, or tablets will be allowed in class. No electronics and nothing with a screen. Food will not be permitted in class. Beverages are allowed.

Plagiarism: NYU rules apply here. Plagiarism of any kind will be reported to the University.

Grading:

40% In-class participation: Come to class with considered opinions on the work being discussed, and actively engage with the thoughts and opinions of other students.

40% Writing assignments: Submit original fiction and poetry by the agreed upon date. On the day of a fellow student’s workshop, bring to class a 250-word response letter (with an extra copy for me) and line edits. Assignments will be graded based on timeliness and demonstrated effort.

20% Portfolio: see Portfolio section above. Like other writing assignments, your portfolio will be graded on timeliness and demonstrated effort.