



Poetry in America: The City from Whitman to Hip Hop

SYLLABUS | Fall 2019

Course Team

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Course Overview

In this course, we will consider American poets whose themes, forms, and voices have given expression to visions of the city since 1850. Beginning with Walt Whitman, the great poet of nineteenth-century New York, we will explore the diverse and ever-changing environment of the modern city—from Chicago to Washington, DC, from San Francisco to Detroit—through the eyes of such poets as Carl Sandburg, Emma Lazarus, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Langston Hughes, Marianne Moore, Frank O'Hara, Gwendolyn Brooks, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Hayden, and Robert Pinsky, as well as contemporary hip hop and spoken word artists.

This course is especially designed for high school students and their teachers. In addition to learning about American culture and literature through poetry, students will develop skills as readers and writers that will prepare them for college and beyond.

Course Objectives

Poetry in America courses are anchored in five approaches to close reading literary texts:

1. **Making Observations**, with a focus on such skills as gathering and drawing conclusions from textual evidence; noticing patterns; tracing the development of central ideas and themes; detecting shifts in voice, tone, and point of view; and drawing comparisons across texts.
2. **Understanding Structure and Form**, with a focus on analyzing structural features and patterns, such as the relation of structural sub-units (the sentence, the stanza) to one another and to the whole; and the impact of formal choice (rhymed couplet or free verse, sonnet or limerick, lyric or narrative) on a given text.
3. **Situating Texts in History**, with a focus on analyzing the relation of authors and texts to particular cultural, historical, and geographical contexts.
4. **Enjoying Language**, with a focus on cultivating the pleasure and fun of poetry in the classroom, and on analyzing the function of such elements as figurative language, word choice, sound, and imagery within a literary text.
5. **Making Claims**, drawing on evidence from these other reading strategies to support a focused and original argument about a literary text.

Course Experience

Poetry in America courses features a combination of video tutorials and conversations, archival images and texts, expeditions to historic literary sites, sample classroom visits, and practical exercises designed to support skills development. In this course, you will:

- Learn and practice the course's four approaches to reading a poem, which can also be applied to reading literary texts more broadly (see Course Objectives). The course encourages skill practice through weekly analytical writing assignments.
- Build community through interactive video seminars focused around particular poems, themes, or reading or writing skills.
- Learn about the dynamic role of cities in American poetry.
- Experience the power of place through video excursions to the actual sites where our poets lived and wrote. Together we will read Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" while riding across the East River, consider Frank O'Hara's "Steps" in Midtown Manhattan, and compare Carl Sandburg's Chicago of 1914 with Gwendolyn Brooks' Chicago of the 1950s.

Assignments & Grading

Note: Assignments and due dates listed in the syllabus are subject to change.

Requirements for Undergraduate & Graduate Credit

All students will complete the following assignments on a weekly basis:

- **Readings:** Students are responsible for reading and annotating the poems assigned in each week. Poems will be made available as individual PDFs and as a Required Reading Packet for each unit.
- **Videos:** Each week will also feature a series of videos, including tutorials by Professor New, conversations with guest discussants, and classroom footage. Students are responsible for keeping up with the video content as well as the readings.
- **Analytical Writing:** Students will complete, or respond to, analytical writing assignments each week via Yellowdig. Writing prompts are designed to target Course Objectives and to aid students in the development of close reading and analytical writing skills across the semester.
- **Weekly Quizzes:** Quizzes assess students' familiarity with the course content (readings, course prose, and videos) of each unit.

In addition to the weekly assignments listed above, students pursuing credit will complete a **Diagnostic Writing Assignment** and a **Final Essay**.

Students pursuing undergraduate or graduate credit will receive a letter grade upon completion of the course. Grading is based on weekly assignments (Analytical Writing on Yellowdig and Quizzes), participation (Diagnostic Essay, attendance in live video sessions, and completion of required surveys or quizzes), and the Final Essay.

Grading Breakdown for Undergraduate and Graduate Credit

40%	Yellowdig Writing Exercises (posts due by every Friday at 7:59pm ET; 20% Participation Score; 20% Content Score)
20%	Weekly Quizzes for each Unit (due by every Friday 7:59pm ET)
10%	Completion Based Participation: Diagnostic Assignment, Zoom Workshops or Make-Up Assignment, End-of-course Survey
30%	Essay

Non-credit / Professional Development

Students enrolled in the course for Professional Development (non-credit option) must complete Weekly Discussion Posts, required surveys, and the Weekly Quizzes; they must also attend at least one of the live sessions (Zoom Seminar), or complete the make-up work, to receive their certificate. Professional Development students who meet the requirements and earn an overall score of 75% or greater will receive a certificate.

Grading Breakdown for Non-credit/Professional Development

75%	Yellowdig Writing Exercises (37.5% Participation Score; 37.5% Content Score)
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- 5% Completion-based Grades (required surveys + Zoom Sessions)
- 20% Weekly Quizzes

COURSE POLICIES

HES Academic Integrity Policies

You are responsible for understanding Harvard Extension School policies on academic integrity

(www.extension.harvard.edu/resources-policies/student-conduct/academic-integrity)

and how to use sources responsibly. Not knowing the rules, misunderstanding the rules, running out of time, submitting "the wrong draft", or being overwhelmed with multiple demands are not acceptable excuses. There are no excuses for failure to uphold academic integrity. To support your learning about academic citation rules, please visit the Harvard Extension School Tips to Avoid Plagiarism

(www.extension.harvard.edu/resources-policies/resources/tips-avoid-plagiarism),

where you'll find links to the Harvard Guide to Using Sources and two, free, online 15-minute tutorials to test your knowledge of academic citation policy. The tutorials are anonymous open-learning tools.

Note on Accessibility

The Extension School is committed to providing an accessible academic community. The Disability Services Office offers a variety of accommodations and services to students with documented disabilities. For more information please visit

(www.extension.harvard.edu/resources-policies/resources/disability-services-accessibility)

Course Readings

Note: Readings listed in the syllabus are subject to change.

Each week, students will read a selection of poems centered on a particular theme or set of themes. Using this course's approaches to analyzing literary texts, students will strengthen their analytical and interpretive skills as they annotate and discuss these works closely.

PART 1 | What is the Poetry of the City? Whitman & His Legacy

WEEK 1

UNIT 1 | Orientation (9/4-9/13)

This first week will serve as an orientation to Poetry in America: The City from Whitman to Hip Hop, providing a course overview and an introduction to its four guiding approaches to the close reading of literary texts.

Readings:

Maya Angelou, "Awaking in New York"

Recommended Readings Covered in Introductory Videos:

C.K. Williams, "Tar"

Walt Whitman's selection from "Song of Myself" (Section 6)

Rita Dove, "My Mother Enters the Workforce"

WEEK 2 *[Delayed one week]***UNIT 2 | Whitman and the City: Making Observations & Identifying Structure & Form (9/20-9/27)**

With special attention to the poetry of Walt Whitman, we explore the development of the city from the 19th century to the present, and the legacy of Whitman's form in contemporary poems.

Readings:

Walt Whitman, selections from "Song of Myself" (Sections 8, 12, 15, and 26)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Village Blacksmith"

Sheryl St. Germain, "Going Home: New Orleans"

Allen Ginsberg, "Sunflower Sutra"

Martín Espada, "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100"

WEEK 3**UNIT 3 | Selves & Strangers: Situating Texts in History & Enjoying Language (9/27-10/4)**

With Whitman's poem "To A Stranger" as a springboard, we zero in on more intimate encounters within crowds, and explore the relationship between the private and public, and the self within a society. As writers, we focus on enjoying language, situating texts in history, and building claims based on evidence.

Readings:

Walt Whitman, selections from "Song of Myself" (Sections 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and 10)

Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric"

Walt Whitman, "To a Stranger"

William Carlos Williams, "To A Poor Old Woman"

Gwendolyn Brooks, "Still do I keep my look, my identity"

Claude McKay, "Harlem Dancer"

James Wright, "Hook"

=>Diagnostic Essay Due (10/4 8pm ET)

WEEK 4**UNIT 4 | The City in Motion: Putting it All Together (10/4-10/11)**

This week, we'll look at the city as a dynamic space defined by speed, physical motion, and the technologies that make those energetic motions possible. We'll see how transportation in the city and the spaces it defines changes as we move deeper into the 20th century, and as we move across the country: from New York Modernists to San Francisco Beats. We'll review the writing skills we've begun developing and continue to develop claims through key concepts.

Representative Readings:

Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"
Claude McKay, "Subway Wind"
William Carlos Williams, "[Rapid Transit]"
Robert Creeley, "I Know a Man"
Gregory Corso, "Last Night I Drove a Car"

PART 2 | Social Mobility and Social Justice in the City, 1880-2000

WEEK 5

UNIT 5 | Immigration (10/11-10/18)

Beginning with Emma Lazarus's sonnet "The New Colossus," we explore poetry about experiences of immigration from the turn into the 20th century to the present.

Representative Readings:

Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus"
Marilyn Chin, "Urban Love Poem"
Tracy K. Smith, "The United States Welcomes You"
Eavan Boland, "The Emigrant Irish"
Claude McKay, "The Tropics in New York"
Duy Doan, "Bridge Ghosts"
Tracy K. Smith, "The United States Welcomes You"
Cecily Parks, "The Rio Grande"
Juan Felipe Herrera, "Exiles"

WEEK 6

UNIT 6 | The Great Migration (10/18-10/25)

Our focus this week is on the legacy of another form of migration, one that continues to define American cities and American poetry: the movement of African Americans from the rural south to urban areas across the 20th century.

Representative Readings:

Langston Hughes, "One Way Ticket"
Kevin Young, "Thataway"
Tyhembra Jess, "Negro Migration"
Langston Hughes, "Harlem"
Gwendolyn Brooks, "kitchenette building"

WEEK 7

UNIT 7 | Working in the City (10/25-11/1)

The history of American cities is tied to the history of American industry and labor. We'll look at poems that intimately document the lives of workers and changes in the American workforce.

Representative Readings:

Carlo Sandburg, "Chicago"
Carl Sandburg, "Skyscraper"
Martín Espada, "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper"
Robert Pinsky, "Shirt"
Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays"

WEEK 8

UNIT 8 | Counterculture and Protest (11/1-11/8)

This week explores mid-to-late twentieth-century poetry of counterculture and protest, situating these poems in the context of movements for Civil Rights, the Vietnam War controversy, and the Women's Movement.

Representative Readings:

Allen Ginsberg, "Hum Bom!"
Yusef Komunyakaa, "Facing It"
Robert Lowell, "July in Washington"
Sylvia Plath, "The Applicant"
Eileen Myles "An American Poem"

PART 3 | Making It New: The Poet As Artist and Innovator

Part 3 of the course expands our study of poetry from analysis of form and content to exploration of poetic process.

WEEK 9

UNIT 9 | Playing in the City (11/8-11/15)

We've looked at cities as serious spaces: of cultural transformation through labor and protest. But they are also important centers of play and pleasure. We'll study poems of leisure and spectatorship of many kinds (from window-shopping to matinée movie-viewing to cheering for a team). Our writing focus in this final part will combine the critical skills we've built with more creative prompts.

Representative Readings:

Hart Crane, "Chaplinesque"
Amy Lowell, "Red Slippers"
Ed Hirsch, "Fast Break"

WEEK 10

UNIT 10 | Coming of Age in the City (11/15-11/22)

This week's poems engage with youth culture and adolescence, and they directly address the moments of transition and emotional epiphanies that lead to personal and artistic revelations.

Representative Readings:

Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Four Sonnets"
Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"
Mark Doty, "This Your Home Now"

Thanksgiving Break (11/25-11/29)

No new readings or videos. No work due in Canvas.

WEEK 11

UNIT 11 | Spoken Word and Hip Hop (11/29-12/6)

This week, we will continue to explore poetic innovation and performance with particular attention to both hip-hop and spoken word poetry.

Representative Readings:

Eric B. & Rakim, "Lyrics of Fury"
Fugees, "Zealots"
Kendrick Lamar, "How Much a Dollar Cost"
Nas, "It Ain't Hard to Tell"

WEEK 12

UNIT 12 | Studio Week: It's Your Turn! (12/6-12/13)

Contemporary poets discuss their writing processes, often through reading and analyzing their own work. Our guests also consider audience and how they think about performance. In addition, this week will give us the chance to draw on the inspiration from our guest artists in finding our own poetic voices.

Representative Readings:

National Student Poet, Performances
Clint Smith, "Counting Descent"
Natalia Zukerman, "Your Little Day"

=>Final Essay Due (Wednesday 12/11 at 8pm ET)

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