

Word Magic: Poets, Bards and Storytellers

Summer Quarter: 2003

The Evergreen State College

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Meeting Times: Tuesday and Thursday 6-10 p.m., First Session

Location: Longhouse Cedar Room

If I am a poet who is charged with speaking the truth (and I believe that the word poet is synonymous with truth-teller), what do I have to say about all of this?

--Joy Harjo, "A Postcolonial Tale," *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*

Description:

Words of Power, Power of Words: What makes a poem, story, or song memorable? How do poets, songwriters, and storytellers use words used to encode memory and meaning? What are their methods for invoking the senses, emotions, and imagination? How do they use images, sounds, rhythms, patterns, and the voice? We will draw on examples from many cultures and historical time-periods, from African griots, Celtic bards, and Native storytellers, to contemporary poets and slam artists, as we explore the relationship between the spoken and written word. How does this understanding connect us to the origins of language, poetry, story, and myth? How does this knowledge enrich our language today? What is the influence of technology and the media in shaping the spoken and written word? How is the current renaissance in the spoken word arts (storytelling, poetry slams and hip-hop, improvisational theatre, poetry readings, and therapeutic writing) shaping and influencing culture, society, education, psychology, public policy, and the arts? What can we do to become better writers, poets, and storytellers? This class is ideal for writers, educators, and those seeking endorsements for the MIT Program.

Activities will be designed for both beginning and advanced students, and will encourage both collaborative and self-motivated learning. Participants will be involved in a number of workshops and improvisational activities to develop and revise both poems and stories. We will integrate a number of diverse cultural and philosophic views as we explore how language shapes human perception. Participants will be encouraged to be well-rounded learners--using the strengths they bring, and developing new strengths in creative artistic expression as well as critical and theoretical understanding. We will develop both theory and practice as we explore the fields of literature, mythology, folklore, ethno-poetics, the performance arts, and the poetic tradition.

Life will go on as long as there is someone to sing, to dance, to tell stories and to listen.

--Chief Oren Lyons

Course objectives:

The challenge of this topic, exploring the intersection between the spoken word and the literary arts, is particularly valuable for the Summer Curriculum. Combining the Arts, Culture, Literature, and writing in context, we will focus on a number of practical, theoretical, and artistic issues that face working poets, storytellers, song-writers, and those going into the fields of communication or education. It meets requirements in literature and language arts for students going into the MIT program.

This course will:

- 1) look deeply into the history of language and communication,
- 2) explore the evolution of culture and society through the language arts,

- 3) recognize the influence of the spoken word, writing, and emerging technologies on language and our modern lives,
- 4) recognize the power of poetry, literature, and myth to promote personal, communal, and cultural transformation,
- 5) explore the fields of ethnopoetics and folklore to discover how pattern, form, memory, and meaning work in traditional stories, epics, myths, narratives, poems, ballads, proverbs, riddles, and songs,
- 6) explore classic and contemporary poetic forms, songs, and storytelling traditions to learn how poets, storytellers, and songwriters work with the senses, image, emotion, words, sound, rhythm, and voice, and invoke the poetic imagination.
- 7) create a positive environment in which to develop skills and proficiencies as storytellers and poets, performers and writers.
- 8) develop critical reading and thinking skills by probing diverse articles on poetic theory and practice, as well as reading and listening to a variety of narratives, stories, songs, and poems from writers and anthologies that represent both traditional and contemporary literatures and storytelling traditions.
- 9) identify and support contemporary poets, storytellers, educators, psychologists, young people, schools, and organizations --both in our communities and on line -- who are active in the performance and healing arts.
- 10) connect our understanding in the arts to contemporary issues in psychology, communications theory, language development, arts education.

Their story, yours and mine --- it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.

--William Carlos Williams

Required Texts:

Mellon, Nancy, Storytelling and the Art of Imagination. ISBN: 0938756664

Nims, John Frederick and David Mason. Western Wind, An Introduction To Poetry ISBN: 0-07-303180-1

Supplementary texts may include:

Abrahms, David, The Spell of the Sensuous

Addonizio, Kim and Dorianne Laux. The Poets Companion.

Behn, Robin, and Chase Twichell. The Practice of Poetry. ISBN: 0-06-27324-X

Graves, Robert. The White Goddess.

Helm-Mead, Erica. The Moon In The Well.

Hirshfield, Jane. The Nine Gates.

Kane, Sean. The Wisdom of the Mythtellers

Mellon, Mancy. The Art Of Storytelling.

Oliver, Mary. A Poetry Handbook

Ong, Walter. Orality and Literacy.

Paschen, Elise, and Rebecca Presson Mosby. Poetry Speaks.

Rothenberg, Jerome. Shaking The Pumpkin.

_____. Technicians Of The Sacred.

In addition, we will create a rich and culturally diverse class anthology that explores a variety of texts for workshops and seminar discussions that include: poems, stories, myths, epics, songs, ballads, proverbs, riddles, and selections from medieval manuscripts. Texts will also explore issues in orality and literacy, communications theory, poetic theory and practice, ethnopoetics, psychology, and education. Supplementary materials will range from texts to performances, recordings, and videos.

People think in terms of stories. They understand the world in terms of stories that they have already understood. New events or problems are understood by reference to old previously understood stories and explained to others by the use of stories. We understand personal problems and relationships between people through stories that typify those situations. We also understand just about everything else this way as well. Scientists have prototypical scientific success and failure stories that they use to help them with new problems. Historians have their favorite stories in terms of which they understand and explain the world. Stories are very basic to the human thinking process.

--Roger Schank

Expectations:

- Faithful attendance and full participation at meetings, workshops, films, and seminars.
- Assigned reading and writing responses turned in on time.
- Maintaining a portfolio and journal of class handouts, notes, papers, research, and cumulative work for the class. These will be reviewed at the final evaluation conference.
- Successful completion of individual and group projects, presentations, workshops, or assignments.

Course Equivalencies: Students can receive a total of four quarter hours credit for college level work in the following areas: literature, writing, performance arts.

Eight Credit Option: You can earn credits in folklore, mythology, or other area, depending on the focus of your research paper/project.

Assignments

Four Credits:

-Reading Responses: Assigned reading response papers turned in promptly at the beginning of seminar (1-2 pages, typed). These papers will allow you to: 1) comment upon the readings, lectures, workshops, and films, and 2) summarize, reflect upon, and integrate program topics, themes, and issues. (See handout, "Guidelines for Reading Responses.")

-Complete all weekly storytelling and writing workshops and assignments.

-A final performance of a story that you will research and develop during the class.

-Creative Writing: A final draft, edited and revised during in-class writing workshops of a song(s), poem(s), short story, or other creative piece of writing. You will also give an oral presentation/recitation of this work at the end of the class (See handout for details).

Eight Credits: Each student will develop a substantial research paper or project, exploring the role of poetry and storytelling in a specialized area of study (folklore, mythology, the arts and society, psychology, education, anthropology, etc. You might also focus on a particular topic or art form—i.e. Irish Poetic Traditions from 1600-1900, Irish Storytelling, The roots of Hip-Hop, Slam, Rap or Reggae, Native American Storytelling traditions of the Pacific Northwest, etc.) Each student will meet with the instructor to work out the details and focus of their work. Along with their research paper or project, they will create a bibliography of readings and resources. All students must give a final presentation of their work.

Class Portfolio

Each student is required to keep a class portfolio throughout the class. This will be reviewed in week three, and turned in at the end of the class for evaluation. Include your name and a table of contents. **Record the topic and date of each item** in your portfolio. Each section should be arranged chronologically. The portfolio must be kept in a loose-leaf three ring binder with dividers and should contain the following:

Note: Date and chronologically order each entry.

- 1) Table of contents, course syllabus, and all class handouts
- 2) Class notes: lectures, speakers, and film notes.
- 3) Reading responses and copies of the assignment for required texts. Follow format on reading response handout. (A section of reading notes is strongly recommended.)
- 4) Seminar notes
- 5) Storytelling Workshops: In-class workshops (date each entry), planning and research notes.
- 6) Writing Workshops: In-class writing workshops and notes (date each entry), final drafts, early drafts, and editing workshop notes for your creative writing and poems.
- 7) Planning and research notes for individual or group stories/presentations.
- 8) Self and Faculty evaluations (Three signed copies on official forms at the end of the class.)