“The lyric…came to be seen as the expression of powerful feeling, dealing at once with everyday life and transcendent values, giving concrete expression to the most inward feelings of the individual subject…. Contemporary theorists, though, have come to treat lyric less as expression of the poet’s feelings and more as associative and imaginative work on language—an experimenting with linguistic connections and formulations that makes poetry a disruption of culture rather than the main repository of its values.”

---Jonathan Culler (73).

The Planet on the Table

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.  
They were of a remembered time  
Or of something seen that he had liked.

Other makings of the sun  
Were waste and welter  
And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and the sun were one  
And his poems, although makings of his self,  
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.  
What mattered was that they should bear  
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
In the poverty of their words,  
Of the planet of which they were part.

--Wallace Stevens
“A lyric, then, is a minutely organized whole that represents—by its imagination, its
diction, its syntax, its structural units—one or more emotions…. Lyric is … defined,
structurally, by its concentric or radial tendencies, its aversion to a simply linear
movement, its relative lack of interest in plot or character, and—most conspicuously—its
intense interest in presenting linguistic drama.”

--Helen Vendler

Required texts:

Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*
*Norton Shorter Anthology of Poetry*
Photocopied classical and other ancient poems (handout)
Northrop Frye, “The Rhythm of Association: Lyric” (handout)

You must bring ALL of your books and handouts to EVERY CLASS.

Course Description:

The history of poetry does not consist of political events, wars, and economic
struggle (although these inform and influence poetry in many ways), but of the responses
of individuals to the circumstances of their private lives and the consequent response of
poetry to poetry. Poetry has a history as long as human culture itself; but, while certainly
shadowed by every possible social and personal consideration, that history evolves
through formal and linguistic gestures repeated, contested, revised, and challenged. To
study the history of poetry is to learn how poets have shaped their work in the shadow of
their predecessor poets, and why strong poetry (as Harold Bloom calls it) cannot be
written without responding to (and often willfully distorting, misrepresenting, or
misreading) predecessor poetry. Furthermore, poetry has evolved through the repetition,
refinement, and ongoing critique of its own forms. Lyric, narrative, and dramatic forms
have reshaped themselves in response to the history of the form and the shifting needs of
poets.

We will examine the aesthetic, formal, and psychological relationships among
poets and will trace the evolution of poetic form—particularly forms of lyric poetry—
from the Classical era to the present to understand how poets revive and recirculate
ancient poetic ideas while rethinking the role of poetry in their private and public lives.
We will examine the critical process and consider what sorts of critical questions will
best illuminate the ways in which these poems work internally and interact with each
other, the reader, and the world.

We will begin by considering how the lyric or meditative poem, like all forms of
literature, functions as a kind of discourse. The lyric poem’s address is inward, the
overheard conversation consists of the poet talking to him or herself. To understand how
this works, and why this is significant, we must first understand what discourse is and
something of how it work, so through Culler’s book we will study theory as a general
concept, then literary theory, and then will progress to theories of lyric and the poetics of
the lyric. We will read a good many poems, and you will write several brief papers demonstrating your understanding of the readings and discussions.

**Some questions we might explore (and that you might keep in mind for your term paper):**

What is a lyric structure? Lyric form?
How is a lyric poem different from a narrative or dramatic poem?
What kinds of lyric poems are there?
How does a lyric written for music differ from one written to be spoken or read silently?
What is the effect of the lyric on the reader?
How does the reader enact the poem?
How have lyric poems changed over the centuries? What characteristics have they retained?
What poetic strategies contribute to the concinnity of the early modern English lyric?
Are dramatic monologues lyric poems or narrative poems?
Are certain forms exclusively lyric (sonnet for instance)? Exclusively narrative (blank verse, for instance)?

**Course Requirements:**

1. **Summary papers on critical readings.**
   These will be about 500 words long and will consist of a brief summary of the thesis and main points of the essay (or chapter) assigned, followed by a brief critique, offering your opinion of the value of this work to your own intellectual endeavors. I will check these off (using a + or – system), and each will count as 5% of your final grade. You may think of + as an A, – as a C, and an unadorned check as meaning “good,” or B. No check means poor, and you should do it over. Please note that I expect these brief papers to be carefully written, grammatical, and devoid of silly spelling errors.

2. **A journal with an entry (anything from a sentence to a paragraph) for every poem you read for this course.** You will bring this journal to class and be prepared to read your entries as part of the class discussion.

3. **A proposal for a term paper, one that includes a list of critical questions you believe will best elucidate the work you have chosen to discuss.**

4. **A term paper (at least 10 pages) on any aspect of the lyric, using poems of your choice.** This will count as 30% of your final grade. This paper will draw upon appropriate secondary sources (no internet sources allowed, except material obtained through one of the library’s resources, such as Academic Premiere Search), including the course readings. It will have a clearly stated thesis, and will be sensibly argued. It will use MLA in text citation and a works cited page.

The rest of your grade will be based on your journal and your participation.
Class Participation

You will read the assigned reading, bring your books to class, and be prepared to discuss the assignment. If I ask you a question about the reading I expect a thoughtful response. If I call on you more than twice and you fail to respond because you haven’t prepared the assignment I expect you to drop the course, since you aren’t really taking it.

General grading standards:

Essays are graded on ideas, organization, and writing.

A = personal and original thought, good thesis, good title, concise and orderly exposition, writing that is expressive (of you), and evocative (of the text). Few if any grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.

B = adequate thought, satisfactory expression, a thesis, a title, visible effort at both expressive and evocative writing. Relatively few mechanical errors.

C = mere repetition of ideas derived from class, no clear thesis, uninformative title, less than concise or orderly expression, flat writing, more than a few mechanical errors.


F = impossible

Some essay-writing help:

Criticism is the story of your experience in reading a particular work or works and determining its significance and how it functions.

Criticism is about the significance or impact of literary works, not necessarily about their meaning. Explication is only one aspect of criticism.

All literature is itself intertextual—it was created under the pressure of other literary works—so all criticism is intertextual, even if it fails to mention works other than the primary ones under discussion.

However, before discussing a poem, story, or novel, be sure you understand its literal meaning before leaping to its metaphorical meaning.

Brainstorm on paper to discover your thesis, which is simply the point you wish to make. You may not know what this point is until you discover it in the midst of your rough draft.
Once you’ve drafted your essay, go back and revise your opening pages. This is where most of the confusion and muddle occurs, so be ruthless in pruning it out and getting to the point as soon as you gracefully can.

Be sure that everything in your paper is related in some way to your central argument. Use topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph to help you and your reader keep on track.

Don’t quote excessively, but quote enough to prove your point.

Lead into quotations, and fully discuss every quotation. Don’t say, “here’s a quote…” and then drop it. And don’t use “quote” as a noun. The word is “quotation.” Don’t jump to something else after a quotation, but finish discussing what you’ve brought up.

Don’t open with silly truisms such as “Robert Frost was a famous poet.” Don’t summarize the writer’s life. Don’t discuss the life of the writer at all unless it is directly related to your critical argument.

Don’t tell anecdotes about yourself unless they are directly related to the point you’re making in your essay. Feel free to write in the first person, but don’t overdo the subjectivity. If you’re going to inform the reader that you enjoy your chosen writer’s work, be specific about it and explain exactly what you like about it.

After your brainstorming first draft, decide what your thesis (point) is, then identify sections of your draft, then draw an algorithm and fit those sections into it. By dividing your draft into blocks you can easily see how to arrange them to build an orderly argument and structure.

Secondary sources: avoid anonymous internet sites. They’re mostly error-filled trash. Respect and use real critics who have names and publish books. Find out who the best critics are and use them wisely. The good critics are worth arguing with; the bad ones have no ideas worth contesting.

**Learning Outcomes:**

You will understand the textual and rhetorical strategies of the genre of lyric.
You will improve your critical vocabulary and write evidence-based essays that effectively incorporate sources.
You will gain some sense of the history of lyric poetry from the Classical period to the present.
You will better understand how poetics can help us understand the forms of literature and how hermeneutics can help us understand the significance of literature.
You will better understand how literary history works.
You will read with an awareness of the relationship between content and form.

**Some Common Grammatical Issues**
1. Its and it’s:
   - its = possessive of it
   - it’s = it is
   “The dog bit its own tail.” “It’s time to get drunk.”

2. Then and than.
   - then = at that time, or next in order of time, next in a series
   - than = in comparison with, instead of
   I’d rather be a cat than a dog
   I went to the river, and then threw myself in.

3. Dangling participles.
   Remember that a modifying phrase opening a sentence and using ing must modify
   the subject of the sentence, Therefore:

   “Driving fast, the highway suddenly curved to the left.”
   WRONG! The highway was not driving fast; a person was.

   Therefore correct to:
   “As I drove fast, the highway suddenly curved to the left.”

4. Lie and lay.
   *Lie* is an intransitive verb. It does NOT connect a subject to an object. Therefore:
   “I lie down to sleep.” Or “I am lying down for a while.” Or past tense: “I lay
   down to sleep.”

   *Lay* is a transitive verb. It connects a subject to an object. Therefore:
   “The chicken lays an egg.” Or past tense: “The chicken laid an egg.”

5. Apostrophes
   Apostrophes are for possessives and contractions. Never form plurals with
   apostrophes. There are NO EXCEPTIONS. The plural of TV, for instances, is
   TVs, not TV’s.

   Please remember, however, that possessives (except for the possessive form of it
   [see above discussion of *its* and *it’s*]) require apostrophes.

6. Hopefully.
   “Hopefully” is an adverb meaning “in a manner full of hope.” It does not mean “I
   hope that.” Therefore:

   “Hopefully we’ll find a McDonalds soon” is WRONG.
   A correct version might read, “I hope we’ll find a McDonalds soon.”
“Anxious for reconciliation, the man looked hopefully at his estranged lover” is CORRECT.

7. Your and you’re.

  *Your* is the possessive of you.
  *You’re* is a contraction of *you are*.

Therefore: “Oops, I backed into your car.” And, “You’re a jerk.”

8. A lot. “A lot” is TWO words. Don’t write “alot.”

9. The verb *to be* and other weak verbs and the passive voice.

  *Is*, *are*, *make*, and the like are weak verbs. While necessary, overuse of them can deflate your writing. Similarly, the **passive voice**, often accompanied by *is*, generates indecisive, feeble sentences.

Examples:

“Mistakes were made.” (evasive use of the passive voice: who made the mistakes?)
A stronger and more honest way of saying it: **I made mistakes.**

“The dog is heard barking.” (awkward and evasive use of the passive voice)
**Sally hears the dog barking.**

“John is fishing for trout.” (Nothing wrong with this, but…..)
**John fishes for trout.** (Better: stronger verb.)

“The moon is rising”
**The moon rises.**

“Men are sitting by the road.”
**Men sit by the road.**

“He made the argument that men are uglier than women.” (weak use of *made*)
Better: **He argued that men are uglier than women.**

“I made the decision to go downtown.” (weak and wordy)
**I decided to go downtown.**
Attendance:

You are expected to come to class. There is no penalty for up to three missed classes; after that you will lose half a grade for each absence, regardless of the reason. So hoard our absences carefully and save them for when you really need to use them. There are no excused absences other than those listed in the official college policy. Use your three allowed absences wisely.

Classroom Conduct:

I expect you to treat everyone in the class, even the professor, with courtesy and respect.

Disabilities:

Students with disabilities should identify themselves so that I can help arrange any special accommodations required.

Course Schedule:

Aug. 26 Course introduction

Aug. 28: Read classical poetry handout and Culler, Chapter 1.

Sept. 2: Read Frye handout and write a summary paper. Read Ezra Pound’s poems in the Norton anthology.


Sept. 9: Read Milton. “Lycidas” and Culler, Chapter 2.

Sept. 11: Read Radiant Lyre, 39-55. Write a summary paper. Read the poems of John Donne and Andrew Marvell in Norton.

Sept. 16: Continuation of discussion of Donne and Marvell. Read also the lyric poems of William Blake (pp. 440-449).

Sept. 18: Read Culler, chapter 3. Read Shakespeare sonnets in Norton.


Sept. 25: Read Radiant Lyre 56-65. Read Thomas Wyatt poems. We will attend the English Adjunct reading today during class time, but will catch up on the reading at the next meeting.
Sept. 30: Read Culler, chapter 4. In Norton, read Thomas Campion, Wordsworth Lucy Poems (471-473), and George Meredith poems.

Oct. 2: Read *Radiant Lyre*, 66-85. Review Catullus poems (handout), and read in Norton the poems of Robert Herrick and Anne Carson.


Oct. 16: We will attend Judith Vollmer’s reading during class time.


Oct. 28: Read *Radiant Lyre*, 142-147. **Write a summary paper**. Read Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” and Stevens, “”The Idea of Order at Key West.”


Nov. 4: Read *Radiant Lyre*, 167-174. No summary paper required. Read Culler, Chapter 5. Read also Shelley, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and Emerson, “The Snow-Storm” and reread “Ode (Inscribed to W. H. Channing).”

Nov. 6: Read Culler, chapter 6. Read all of Emily Dickinson’s poems.


Nov. 18: Read T. S. Eliot’s poems and decide which aspects of the lyric best describe them. Consider also how the work of poets like John Donne echo in these poems.

Nov. 20: Read *Radiant Lyre*, 197-205 **Write a summary paper**. Read all of Yeats’ poems. Bring in a written thesis statement for your term paper. Remember that a thesis is
a point you wish to argue. It must be significant, not simply some obvious truism, and it must be something that needs to be argued. If you don’t have a thesis you can’t construct an argument, and if you can’t construct an argument you can’t write an essay.

Nov. 25: Read Radiant Lyre, 225-232. No summary paper required. Read John Berryman’s poems.

Dec. 2: Read Radiant Lyre, 235-246. Write a summary paper. Read Robert Lowell’s poems and decide which aspects of the lyric best describe them.

Dec. 4: Choose from the anthology a poem we haven’t discussed and present it to the class. Term paper due today.

Please note that you must send me an electronic copy and keep a copy of your term paper in your English Major portfolio. This should be an electronic file in which you store copies of specific assignments for program evaluation at the end of your senior year. The purpose of this portfolio is to assess the effectiveness of the English major, not to assess you.