

**Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction & Poetry (Spring 2012)**  
**Section 017**  
**MW 9:30am-10:45am**

Jeannie Vanasco

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office hours M/W 11:15 am - 12:30 pm, or by appointment  
Bobst Library Lounge (70 Washington Square South)

**COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

“Make it new.”  
- Ezra Pound

That celebrated directive, the motto of Modernism, Ezra Pound’s “Make it new,” is a translation of Confucius who borrowed it from Emperor T’ang who inscribed on his bathtub “Every day make it new.” I want you to take existing poems and stories *by other writers* and make these works new. How? By making them your own. How? By imitating their styles.

We may want to regard an author’s style as a palpable, individual thing, but writing reveals that style is a nebulous aggregation of other influences. Allen Ginsberg openly credited his influences: everyone from William Shakespeare to Wavy Gravy. His drafts from his time as a young poet include imitations he made of William Carlos Williams, William Blake, even the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets John Donne and Andrew Marvell. Ginsberg began writing *Howl* by imitating Williams’ stepped triadic form. In the middle of typing the poem, a new style emerged, with long, incantatory lines (influenced by Walt Whitman) and imaginative leaps and fractured syntax (influenced by American Modernist giants such as Hart Crane). Ginsberg shows that by imitating the styles of other writers, as well as resisting them, a writer develops his or her own style.

That said, you will not write *only* imitations. Sometimes you will imitate one aspect of a writer’s work. Sometimes you will erase a writer’s work into your own work. Sometimes you will write without my attaching any stipulation. Sometimes you will write without my asking (I hope!). This class is about generating new material. I do not expect you to write brilliant first drafts. I expect you to save your drafts along the way.

**I have not divided the semester into fiction and poetry.** I want you to look at fiction alongside poetry and see how they incorporate the same elements of craft. You will read poems that sound “prosaic” and stories that sound “poetic.” You will write poems and turn them into stories. You will write stories and turn them into poems. We will talk about what makes a poem “a poem” and a story “a story.” The semester will be devoted to reading, writing, and collecting your favorite words from the dictionary. **We will not workshop until the second half of the semester.** I want you to read and write as much as possible before then. The assigned reading will lighten significantly during the second half of the semester. Why? I want you to spend the second half of the semester revising your work and helping one another revise their work. Modernists such as Pound understood that in order to be a great writer, one must first be a great reader.

Reading, writing, *and* revising are synonyms in this course.

**REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING**

Participation/Attendance	10%
Reading Responses	15%
Dictionary Work	10%
Writing Exercises	15%
Apprenticeship Project	20%
Final Writing Project	30%

Please Note: I will not accept late work. Why? Because I want you to feel comfortable sharing work that you may think is unfinished. Include your drafts. Number them. Maybe your first draft contains a brilliant line or image that you failed to realize was brilliant at the time. I want to see the transformations that happened along the way. The writer James Thurber once said, “My wife took a look at the first version of something I was doing not long ago and said, ‘Goddamn it, Thurber, that’s high-school stuff.’ I had to tell her to wait until the seventh draft, it’ll work out all right.”

### Plagiarism

NYU has a policy about plagiarism, which is for us to interpret.

### Attendance

You must inform me as early as possible if you will miss class due to a university-approved reason (i.e. athletics, theatre, etc) or medical reason. Similarly, you should inform me in advance if you will miss class to observe a religious holiday. Two unexcused absences result in the drop of a full letter grade, in which case you may redeem yourself with a time-consuming extra credit assignment.

### Tardiness

Of course, you should come to class on time. If you do arrive late, please come in as quietly as possible and begin work quickly. (*After class, YOU must make sure that I change my attendance record to reflect that you attended.*) If you are more than 15 minutes late, it will count as an absence *for the entire class session*. In such a case, however, you may enter the class and receive credit for in-class work that you complete during the remaining class time.

### Special Dispensations

If you have a learning disability, hardship, or other special dispensation approved by the Office of Student Affairs, please meet with me to discuss your requirements as early in the term as possible.

### Format for Assignments

1. All assignments must be typed or word-processed in 12-point Times New Roman font. Stories and response papers must be double-spaced.
2. Put your name, assignment, my name (Jeannie Vanasco), and the due date in the top left corner of all assignments to be turned in:  
Example:  
Jorge Luis Borges  
Poem in the Point-of-View of a Historical Figure as a Child [or Third Page of a Ten-Page Story, Apprenticeship Project Erasure, etc.]  
Jeannie Vanasco  
3/30/12
3. Please number the lines of your poems, on the right hand side, at every 5<sup>th</sup> line. This will help us in discussing the poems.
- 4) All assignments must include your drafts. Drafts do not need to be typed but they must be numbered.

## **WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE**

The following are general guidelines on how best to go about critiquing a poem or story:

What is the work about?

What about the work is effective? Why or how?

What about the work is awkward or weak? Try to figure out why. How might it be made stronger?

How would you describe the speaking voice? What is this voice’s attitude, or tone, toward the subject?

Does the voice strike a casual note or is it more formal?

What words or phrases strike you as particularly effective?

What seems ill-chosen? How would you describe the diction?

Are any areas vague or imprecise? Does any part confuse you?

What tropes has the author used? (similes, metaphors, etc...)

Pick one line that you think is the strongest. Why did you pick this line?

Pick one line that you think is the weakest. Why did you pick this line?

On the day your story or poem is workshopped, DO NOT go home after class and try to incorporate *all* the commentary into a revision of the work. The inevitable result will be inoffensive, unexceptional, and rather dull.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Available at the University Bookstore:

- 1) *Pictorial Webster's: A Visual Dictionary of Curiosities* by John M. Carrera
- 2) *Voyager* by Srikanth Reddy
- 3) *Writing Fiction* by Janet Burroway
- 4) *An Introduction to Poetry* (Thirteenth Ed.) by X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia

Available at New University Copy, 11 Waverly Place):

- 5) Course Reader

Also (available at a bookstore, the library, or Amazon):

- 6) One volume of poems by a contemporary poet (of your choice, approved by me) for the apprenticeship project.

### **Reading Responses**

Every Friday, you will email me your response to one of the poems or stories we read. Do not base your opinion upon published criticism or book reviews. If you dislike a story or poem we read, tell me why, but also tell me one thing you do like about the story or poem (the description of the flying carpet on page 4, for example, the metaphor of escaped wolves on page 8). Do not worry about printing your responses or attaching them to your emails as word files. I likely will use your reading responses to begin class discussion. Your responses are crucial. This is a discussion-based course; it is not a lecture course. What we learn will be driven primarily by the questions, comments, ideas, and energies that you bring to our discussions. Some students can't always formulate their best thoughts and questions in the rapid back-and-forth of a group discussion, especially not at 9:30 am. The responses will help keep discussion going. I want to create an environment where all students feel free to say what they think, ask questions, object, criticize, request clarification, return to a previous subject, respond to someone else's response, etc.

### **Dictionary Work**

Every so often, you will read any one page in *Pictorial Webster's*. You will try to find the connection, or lack thereof, between images next to one another. Maybe you can make a panther and a pantograph co-exist in a poem. Maybe not, but it's worth a try. Write your connections in your journal. I will collect your journals before spring break and also near the end of the semester (I will return these to you before the end of the semester). Your journal must be legible. It may contain fragments, snatches of dialogue, ideas for poems, characters, stories, anything related to writing. Staple any relevant loose papers (newspaper articles, for example) to your journal.

### **The Apprenticeship Project**

Imitation isn't only the sincerest form of flattery; it's also the best way to learn the craft. For this class, I want you to choose a contemporary poet (I will provide you with a list of suggestions--you may also suggest your own). To complete the project you will need to do the following:

1. Buy and read a single book of poems by your poet (as opposed to a "Collected" or "Selected" edition).
2. Write a 3-4 page report on your poet's poetry. I do not want this to include biographical information; instead, this bit of prose will investigate one volume written by the poet for its patterns.

What does the poet do often? What kinds of diction does the poet frequently employ? Are there certain types of poems that the poet does not excel at writing (love poems, ekphrastic poems, persona poems, etc)? Please do not bore yourself by reading academic criticism or book reviews. I only want to know what you think.

3. Write one poem that imitates your writer's work. (We will discuss the difference between imitation and parody.)

4. Erase words from one poem or a grouping of any number of poems by your poet in order to write your own poem.

I encourage you to come to office hours to discuss your apprenticeship project. If my office hours conflict with your class schedule, we can arrange for a different time to meet.

## **The Final Project**

I want you to write one story and three poems--no stipulations attached. You will workshop your story and poems and have an opportunity to revise them before submitting them to me at our last class. You may expand any of your writing exercises into your final project (for example, you may revise your imitation or erasure into one of your final poems--the erasure does not need to remain an erasure; the imitation does not need to remain an imitation). Think of "revising" as a synonym for "writing."

## **Opportunities for Extra Credit**

Should you for some reason need extra credit, you may:

1. Read one story or poetry collection by one of the writers or poets you read in the course packet (options include Karen Russell's *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, Steven Millhauser's *The Knife Thrower*, Lorrie Moore's *Birds of America*, Delmore Schwartz's *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, Thom Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats*, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*) and write a five-page critical paper, focusing on the arc of the collection and how it ties together.

2. Erase one story you read this semester into a poem (no less than 25 lines).

3. Turn one poem you wrote this semester into a story (between five and ten pages).

4. Write a five-page critical paper about one issue of a literary magazine of your choice (examples: *Tin House*, *A Public Space*, *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Boston Review*, *McSweeney's*--talk to me if you need help selecting one). Note: The magazine does not have to be hyper-current. Plenty of wonderful now-defunct literary magazines exist (*Parnassus*, for example). You can purchase new magazines from a bookstore or Amazon, or borrow a new or old issue from the library (the NYPL has many available) or me.

Depending upon the final product, you may raise your grade by one full letter.

## **SCHEDULE**

### **WEEK 1 - Writer's Block, Plagiarism, and Creativity**

**1/23**

Introduce yourself. Discuss syllabus. Discuss what makes a poem "a poem" and a story "a story." Discuss plagiarism.

Assignment for next class:

1) Read (in the course packet): Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*; Shelley's letters to William Godwin, Thomas Love Peacock, and Leigh Hunt; Shelley's preface to *Prometheus Unbound*; Shelley's "Ozymandias"

- 2) Read (in *Pictorial Webster's*): "Sourcebook for Creativity" and "Hypothesis of Memory and Thought as Repeated and Compared Pattern" (pp 458-470)
- 3) Erase words from the official plagiarism policy (as printed in the university handbook) into a poem about anything *except plagiarism*. Print one copy of your plagiarism poem for me and bring it to our next class.
- 4) OED assignment

**1/25**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Donald Barthelme's "The School," Denis Johnson's "Emergency," Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," Robert Frost's "The Silken Tent," James Merrill's "The Broken Home," Gwendolyn Brooks' "Kitchenette Building"
- 2) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter One
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.
- 4) Underline your favorite sentences in "The School," "Girl," and "Emergency." Choose one of these sentences and include it in a poem you write. Then rewrite the poem with the sentence removed. See if you can incorporate one of your OED words in the second (or optional third) draft. Please print for me one copy of each draft and bring them to class Monday.

## **WEEK 2 - The Sentence and the Line, Diction**

**1/30**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Grace Paley's "Wants," György Dragomán's "Jump," Barry Hannah's "Bats Out of Hell Division," Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," Thom Gunn's "All Night, Legs Pointed East," Marianne Moore's "Poetry," and W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939"
- 2) Underline your favorite sentences in "Wants," "Jump," and "Bats Out of Hell Division"
- 3) Read (in *Writing Fiction*): pp. 74-88, 325-336
- 4) Write the third page of a ten-page story. Imitate the voice of the narrator in "Wants," "Jump," or "Bats Out of Hell Division." Please print one copy for me and bring it to our next class.
- 5) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.

**2/1**

Today you will select your apprenticeship poet.

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Mark Richard's "This Is Us, Excellent," Karen Russell's "Haunting Olivia," Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," Robert Lowell's "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," Frank Bidart's "Ellen West"
- 2) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Two
- 3) Read (in *Writing Fiction*): pp. 118-128, 157-180
- 4) OED assignment
- 5) Write a poem in the point-of-view of a historical figure *as a child*. Incorporate prose (use the structure of "Ellen West" as a model; use the child narrators of "Haunting Olivia," "This Is Us, Excellent," "My Papa's Waltz," "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," and "In the Waiting Room" as inspiration). Please hand in your draft Monday and your second draft Wednesday. Your subsequent drafts (at least one) I want you to hand in before our final class.

## **WEEK 3 - Character, Dialogue, and Point of View**

**2/6**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Amy Hempel's "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried," Chris Mazza's "Is This Sexual Harrassment Yet?," Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers," Frank O'Hara's "Autobiographia Literaria," Denis Johnson's "The Incognito Lounge," Matthea Harvey's "First Person Fabulous"
- 2) Read (in *Writing Fiction*): pp. 254-267, 287-298
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.
- 4) Writing Assignment: TK

**2/8**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," Angela Carter's "The Fall River Axe Murders," Flannery O'Connor's "The River," Flannery O'Connor's "Writing Short Stories," Richard Hugo's "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," Matthea Harvey's "Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form"
- 2) Read (in *Writing Fiction*): pp. 30-48, 67
- 3) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Three
- 4) OED assignment
- 5) Write a poem imitating the form of "Is This Sexual Harassment Yet?" Print one copy for me and bring it to our next class.

## **WEEK 4 - Plot**

**2/13**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," Robert Lowell's "To Delmore Schwartz," Andre Dubus' "Killings," Daniil Kharms' "Encounter, An"
- 2) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment
- 3) Write a scene with two characters in conflict over a setting: One wants to go and one wants to stay. You may write the scene from any point of view. You may only include two sentences of dialogue. Optional Challenge: the setting must be familiar to your readers (supermarket, classroom, movie theater) but unfamiliar to at least one of your characters.

**2/15**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Flannery O'Connor "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," John Koethe's "Falling Water," Vijay Seshadri's "The Long Meadow," Blaise Cendrars' "The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France," Tu Fu's "Leaving the City," Georg Trakl's "On the Marshy Pastures"
- 2) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Four
- 3) Read (in *Writing Fiction*): 198-208
- 4) OED assignment.
- 5) Writing Assignment: Take your writing assignment from week 2 and turn it into the first page of a ten-page story. Write the first five pages.

## **WEEK 5 - Setting and Atmosphere**

2/20 NO CLASS (PRESIDENTS' DAY)

**2/22**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Deborah Eisenberg's "Days," James Schuyler's "The Morning of the Poem," David Berman's "The Charm of 5:30," Czeslaw Milosz's "A Song on the End of the World"
- 2) Read (in *Writing Fiction*): pp 198-217

- 3) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Five
- 4) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.
- 5) Write the first draft of your apprenticeship poem. Bring one copy to our next class.

## **WEEK 6 - Time**

**2/27**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): John Edgar Wideman's "Weight," Edwidge Danticat's "Seven," Wang Wei's "Offhand Poem," Wislawa Szymborska's "Museum," Tomas Tranströmer's "After a Death"
- 2) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Six
- 3) OED assignment
- 4) Write a sonnet that travels backward in time until you reach the volta. Then make it move forward in time. Do not use the word "time." Print one copy for me and bring it to our next class.

**2/29**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Raymond Carver's first draft of "A Small Good Thing" and the edited version, Elizabeth Bishop's drafts of "One Art"
- 2) Read (in Srikanth Reddy): the first two sections
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.
- 4) Write a second draft of your apprenticeship poem. Email this to me no later than noon on Friday along with your response to this week's reading.

## **WEEK 7 - Revision**

**3/5**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in Srikanth Reddy): the last section
- 2) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Seven
- 3) Read (in the course packet): Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man"
- 4) OED assignment.

**3/7**

Turn in your apprenticeship project (include drafts of only the imitation poem).

Turn in your journals (I will return these to you after spring break).

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Macro and Minor Revision Checklists
- 2) Read (in *Writing Fiction*): pp. 395-409
- 3) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapters Eight and Nine

\*\*\* Come prepared to have one short story and three poems workshopped after spring break. These may be revisions or expansions of any of your writing assignments thus far. \*\*\*

## **WEEK 8**

3/12 NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

3/14 NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)

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## WEEK 9

### 3/19 Workshop

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Ovid's I, 8 ("There is, if you're in the market for an over-the-hill playgirl"), Catullus' 3 ("Mourn, Cupids all, every Venus, and whatever") and 8 ("Wretched Catullus, stop this stupid tomfool stuff"), an excerpt from Juvenal's *Satires* ("Must I *always* be stuck in the audience at these poetry readings")
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) OED assignment

### 3/21 Workshop

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Thomas James' "Mummy of a Lady Named Jemutesonekh XXI Dynasty," Sylvia Plath's "Fever 103," Emily Dickinson's "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.
- 4) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Ten

## WEEK 10

### 3/26 Workshop

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in course packet): Philip Larkin's "Aubade" and "High Windows," Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.

### 3/28 Workshop

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Italo Calvino's "A Sign in Space" and "The Dinosaurs," John Berryman's "Dream Song 1" and "Dream Song 4"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) OED assignment.
- 4) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Eleven

## WEEK 11

### 4/2 Workshop

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in course packet): Lorrie Moore's "Willing," Julio Cortazar's "Axolotl," D.A. Powell's "corydon & alexis, redux"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) OED assignment.

### 4/4 Workshop

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Seamus Heaney's "Clearances," Adam Zagajewski's "Mysticism for Beginners," George Saunders' "Isabelle"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.
- 4) Read (in *Introduction to Poetry*): Chapter Twelve

## **WEEK 12**

### **4/9 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Steven Millhauser's "Flying Carpets," Victor Pelevin's "The Life and Adventures of Shed No. XII"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.

### **4/11 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): William Carlos Williams' "To Elsie," Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) OED assignment.

## **WEEK 13**

### **4/16 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel" and "The Circular Ruins," William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 2," "Sonnet 68," and "Sonnet 116"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) OED assignment.

### **4/18 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Yannis Ritsos' "Miniature" and Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Pied Beauty"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment.

## **WEEK 14**

### **4/23 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Anton Chekhov's "Anyuta" and "An Unpleasant Business"
- 2) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 3) *Pictorial Webster's* assignment

### **4/25 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read and respond to your classmates' work.
- 2) Hand in your journals (I will return these to you at our last class)

**WEEK 15**  
**4/30 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read and respond to your classmates' work.

**5/2 Workshop**

Assignment for next class:

- 1) Read (in the course packet): Nazim Hikmet's "Things I Didn't Know I Loved"

**WEEK 16**  
**5/7 (Last Class)**

Hand in your final writing project.