

LITR 3371: Creative Writing: The Lyric Essay
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 Office Hours: Mon. & Wed. 12 – 3

The Lyric Essay

Course Description and Objectives:

The lyric essay is one of the most exciting forms of creative nonfiction, one that resonates with the twenty-first century's need for new ways of representing our lived experience. Immediate, malleable, complicated, poetic, challenging, and ingenious, write its inventors Deborah Tall and John D'Agata, the lyric essay also gives writers a “fresh way to make music of the world.” Expanding on prior experience in traditional forms of essay and memoir, members of this writing workshop will follow those “byways” in pursuit of the expressive possibilities a genre so flexible and fresh might rightly promise. The lyric essay, as the name suggests, partakes of poetry, and its practitioners generate meaning using the resources of poetry: segmentation, juxtaposition, and an effaced narrative presence.

This course, much like the lyric essay's brief history, will be a site of experimentation. We'll interrogate the notion that “lyric essay often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically” by investigating the arrangement of fragments in other contexts: archaeologists, for example, rarely have anything *but* fragments to work with, and to enter a gallery or a museum exhibit is to enter a site that, too, works “mosaically.” This is the premise behind a class visit to the Tacoma Art Museum and the on-campus Scandinavian Cultural Center.

By responding to weekly writing prompts and developing two of these into longer essays, by semester's end students will have acquired a strong sense of the genre's possibilities and challenges. Moreover, by engaging closely with a rapidly evolving form, students will complete the course equipped with a nuanced understanding of how genre boundaries evolve and influence our reading and writing practice.

Required Texts:

We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay: Special Double Issue of the *Seneca Review* (Fall 2014 & Spring 2015) on the lyric essay
 Eula Biss's *Notes From No Man's Land*; Lia Purpura's *On Looking*; Course Reader

Required Writing:

Five **micro-essays** (responses to five of prompts, 25%)
 Two **long lyric essays** – open topic (graded when submitted for workshop, 40%)
Craft analysis drawing on your reading of and about the lyric essay as a genre (10%)
 Revision of one long lyric essay, with revision rationale (10%)

Other Requirements:

Presentations: Students will choose a craft analysis from the list, examine its sources, interrogate its argument, relate it to the essays (published or not) that we've already read, and present their findings to the class (5%).

Class **participation** is central to student learning, and will be evaluated rigorously (10%).

Week 1: Introductory Lyric Essays

In class we will discuss the formal features of the four lyric essays assigned. By identifying what makes these distinct from most other essays we've read, we'll arrive at an understanding of what we mean when we say "lyric essay." We'll discuss the expressive possibilities of this form.

Read: "Bathing" by Kathryn Winograd; "Soundtrack" by Lisa Groen Braner
"Indian Education" by Sherman Alexie; "The Pain Scale" by Eula Biss

Write: Write micro-essay 1, which employs a structure like that of "Soundtrack" or "Indian Education," numbering sections according to grades or years. Reflect on the effect of imitating this structure.

Week 2: *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*

Read: "Goodbye to All That" by Joan Didion; "Before" and "New York" by Eula Biss

Write: Just as Biss rewrites Didion in a style that allows meaning to arise implicitly, through juxtaposition and other devices more typical of lyric poetry, you, too, should choose a traditional essay you know well, take its title, and write a lyric micro-essay of your own.

Week 3: *Notes from No Man's Land*

Read: "The Midwest" and "After" by Eula Biss

Write: Submit Lyric Essay 1

conferences to discuss first lyric essay

Week 4: Workshop Essay 1 (Workshops 1-6)

Read: "Triptych of My Aunt Linda, Poet in Her Own Right, Frightened of Bicycles" by Julie Marie Wade and "How to Love a Woman with No Legs" by Natalie Diaz.

Week 5: Workshop Essay 1 (Workshops 7-11)

Read: "Son of Mr. Green Jeans: An Essay on Fatherhood, Alphabetically Arranged" D. Moore.

Write: Micro-essay 3, about a family member, alphabetically arranged.

Week 6: Workshop Essay 1 (Workshops 12-16)

Read: Read up, using any source, on the words "lyric" and "essay." What are their origins? How do the words and their roots compare with what you've been given as examples of "lyric essays"? In class, students will compare their findings and discuss the term's meaning.

conferences to discuss workshop 1 and lyric essay 2

Week 7: Hermit Crab Essays

Read: "The Hermit Crab Essay" in Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's *Tell It Slant*.

"Mr. Plimpton's Revenge" by Dinty Moore (a Google map essay)

"The Friendship Tarot" by Nancy Willard; "Emily Applies for a Job" by Chelsey Clammer; "Eviction Notice" by Ryan Oberhelman

Write: Micro-essay 4, a hermit crab essay

Week 8: Collection

Students will collect physical items related to the topic of their second lyric essay. They will bring the items to class and pick one item to write about in a number of different ways. Students will pool their knowledge about one another's objects of interest, and at home, continue to research the history of the item. The structure of the second lyric essay may emerge in a way that involves the history of the item and a present-day story of their relationship to it.

Read: Self-directed reading this week – read widely, as your project requires.

Write: Draft lyric essay 2.

Week 9: Shoring the fragments

It is by now clear that Tall and D'Agata are accurate when they say that “the lyric essay often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically - its import visible only when one stands back and sees it whole.” The parts of all the essays we’ve read so far can easily be understood as fragments. This week, we will more keenly examine the idea of a *fragment*, asking *fragment of what whole* – are the lyric essay’s segments parts of whole essays that have failed to be born?

This week, we’ll examine archaeological exhibitions which arrange fragments of irrecoverable wholes. How are the salvaged relics like and unlike the segments of a lyric essay? How is the process of curating antiquities like and unlike the process of arranging the segments of a lyric essay? How does the experience of observing an exhibit at the Tacoma Museum of Art, or the Scandinavian Cultural Center, compare to the experience of observing an online exhibit?

Read: Tall and D'Agata’s 1997 “manifesto” that defined the lyric essay (*Seneca Review* website). Excerpt from “Fragments and Ruins” in *History and Value* by Frank Kermode.

We will follow Kermode’s attempt to trace back to its origin – back through Romanticism and the Renaissance – the practice of writing a text and claiming it is a fragment. We’ll begin to rethink *narrative* and *storytelling* as we consider Kermode’s idea that “It is because we cannot in the end deal with mere offcuts that we treat history as we do. It is an imaginary whole and we invent fictive parts.”

Write: Draft lyric essay 2.

Week 10-12: Workshop Essay 2 & Read *On Looking*

Week 13: The Lyric Essay and Pain

Many lyric essays deal with pain, grief and the unspeakable or unrepresentable – for example the suicide in “Spires” and the death of an unnamed “she” in “Falling Houses.” The plight of the smallest woman in the world; Winograd’s unspeakable rape. This week, we turn to theoretical texts to investigate why the lyric essay might be favored when the subject is trauma or pain.

Read: excerpt from Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*. APA definitions of trauma, PTSD, and acting out. “On a Scale from 1 to 10: Life Writing and Lyrical Pain” by Susannah Mintz

Write: Micro-essay 5, an essay of unrepresentable pain.

Week 14: Presentations on craft analysis

Read: Every class member is responsible for choosing one craft analysis from the list, or in consultation with the instructor. Students should briefly explain the craft analysis’s thesis, and then go well beyond this by providing a critique of the essay based on what we’ve learned so far. Just as importantly, you *must* investigate sources the craft analysis alludes to. For example, Brian Lennon’s essay “Lyric Negation” is only five pages long, but should take as long to prepare as a twenty page essay because Lennon’s references to Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno need to be understood.

Week 15: Walking

In the last week, we’ll look at the traditional essay – before the lyric – and think about how we see essays differently after spending a semester studying the lyric essay. One class period this week will be spent walking outside.

Read: William Hazlitt’s “On Going a Journey.” Henry David Thoreau’s “Walking”

Conferences on revisions and craft analysis

Exam Week: Craft analysis and revision with rationale are due.

Assignments

1. Revision Rationale

The first step to a successful revision project is choosing the most suitable piece of nonfiction. It may seem reasonable to choose your strongest piece, but it might actually be harder to revise something you're happy with than something you know needs work. Rather than the essay that makes you proudest, choose the one you're still itching to work on, the one you have the most ideas about. Then, brainstorm. Focus on experimenting with re-ordering, deleting and adding rather than polishing language. Your grade will depend less on sentence-level revisions of syntax and diction (though this is important), and more on macro-level revision. In your **400 – 600** word rationale, please explain the *aesthetic and structural principles* behind your choices. You can refer to workshop discussion, but that isn't required. Most of all I want to know how you re-envisioned and re-organized your lyric essay, and why.

Very often, workshop discussions revolve around what the work is most “**about,**” where it's headed, and this is something the rationales should most certainly address. During revision, did your sense of what the work was about change? Did a stronger awareness of your themes or “kernel of truth” guide decisions of what to add and what to take out? Remember that sometimes the most learning happens when we are **struggling** with a problem and not really solving it. Is there a problem (ethical or aesthetic) in the work that you are still unable to solve? Your rationale should address questions of form. How has your evolving understanding of the lyric essay influenced your choices in revision?

Given this course's emphasis on experimentation, I would like you to address the ways you experimented during revision, and suggest how your lyric essay might allow readers to participate in the sense of experimentation. Do you come to discoveries or realizations during your writing process, or do they happen first, and then you write about them? How did you move away from the kind of certainty that leads to a lack of tension and uninteresting prose? Did you need to do more research? Take research out? Please also tell me what more research can you imagine doing as you continue to revise the essay in the future.

I encourage you to draw comparisons between your work and the essays we've read in class (this may feel weird or presumptuous, but do it anyway). You may use (but not overuse) the first person, and employ a semi-formal tone. I will grade you chiefly on the quality of your answers to the above questions—how well your revisions *work* is *equally* important, but not more important than the depth your thinking. By Monday, Dec. 9th please bring me a hard copy of your rationale, original draft, and revision **with highlighting and notes to show me what's different.**

2. Craft analysis

Craft analyses are important exercises for writers. Reading creative work *like a writer* means figuring out what an author has done *on the page* to achieve her effects, and a craft analysis hones your *ability to read like a writer*. Some effects we've discussed in class are: bringing the reader to feel certain emotions about certain characters or certain situations, brought the reader to a certain realization/epiphany, enabled the reader to absorb a wealth of information and *make meaning* of it, or made it possible for the reader to get a sense of what it feels like to see through the lens of a traumatized brain. After you've fully articulated the effects achieved, you must use your craft knowledge to determine *how* they were achieved. For this course, your craft analysis must draw on the reading we have done about the lyric essay in order to account for the effects achieved. Try to use at least three secondary sources, and choose a diverse three. Cite these according to MLA guidelines. Grades will depend on the depth of your thinking, the astuteness of your observations, and the grace with which you weave them together into a *coherent* essay, a *cogent* argument. The clarity and grace of your writing will also play a role, albeit a secondary one.