

**THE LYRIC ESSAY
ENGLISH 6300.01, SPECIAL TOPICS IN WRITING
SUMMER 2014**

“The lyric essay happens when I’ve forgotten to get dressed. When I’m disheveled. When I’m not wearing any shoes.” ~ Brenda Miller

“The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.” ~ Deborah Tall and John D’Agata

Professor: Dr. Gary L. McDowell

Class Meeting Time and Place: IHSB 242, T 6:00-9:30pm

E-mail: gary.mcdowell@belmont.edu (best way to reach me)

Office: Wheeler Humanities Building 206A, though it’s in flux...

Office Hours: T: 4:00-6:00pm. And, as always, by appointment.

Required Texts and Materials

- T Fleischmann. *Syzygy, Beauty*. Sarabande Books, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-936747-26-9.
- Karen Green. *Bough Down*. Siglio, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-938221-01-9.
- Brian Lennon. *City: An Essay*. The University of Georgia Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8203-4103-3.
- Lia Purpura. *On Looking: Essays*. Sarabande Books, 2006. ISBN: 1-932511-39-3.
- Margot Singer and Nicole Walker. *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*. Bloomsbury Books, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-4411-2329-9.
- Joni Tevis. *The Wet Collection: A Field Guide to Iridescence and Memory*. Milkweed Editions, 2007. ISBN: 978-1-57131-316-4.
- A notebook for daily free-writing exercises, notes, and journaling, etc.

Course Description

Not a poem, not a narrative, not an idea-driven essay, but *something* other. Outside and/or inside this post-structuralist definition exists a genre of writing contemporarily vital to our literature. Braided through image, language, story, rhythm, and mimetic technique, the lyric essay expands upon its forbearers (Creative Nonfiction and New Journalism) popularized in the 1960s and 1970s by the likes of Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe. The lyric essay, however, has pushed beyond even those gorgeously textured, vibrantly alive texts to include new levels of perception and insight, music and poetry. In this workshop-style class, we will read contemporarily to discover the lyric essay (writers will include, among others, Lia Purpura, Joni Tevis, T Fleischmann, Karen Green, Brian Lennon, and Brenda Miller) and then write our own lyric essays in conversation with our readings.

Course Objectives

1. to refine your ability to move efficiently and effectively through the writing process
2. to develop and master style in lyric essay writing
3. to improve perception and accuracy in reading
4. to participate in class discussions with organized and supported opinions
5. to learn how to write your own stories/facts/obsessions convincingly and in stylized, developed prose

Common Assignment Instructions

ENG 6300 Common Assignment: Significant Piece of Writing

Students will produce texts that involve multiple drafts, feedback from peers, and revision; students will develop an original idea while participating as writers producing professional work in a field of study.

Assessment Rubric Points

- Production of pieces written with an understanding of purpose, audience, and voice;
- Creation of well-developed, sustained pieces of writing, using multiple drafts and taking into account critical feedback from peers and/or professor;
- Demonstration of expertise in professional research, including both print and digital resources;
- Appropriate usage and application of independent, professional research in written work;
- Professional execution of a sustained, independent written project that demonstrates the significant development of an original idea.

Please note that you will need to provide me with an electronic copy of the common assignment (your final lyric essay project) (with your name removed from the document) for assessment purposes at the end of the semester.

Work Due

This course will be out of **1000 points**. Here's the breakdown:

Lyric Essay(s) Portfolio: **500 points** (This will be due at the end of the semester during our final exam time. Details will emerge about how to build this project throughout the semester. Your drafts, your

workshops, your improvement over the course of the semester all factor into my assessment). I'm looking for **20-25 pages** of essays; it can be either a stand-alone lyric essay or a part of a series/project you construct throughout the semester.

Reading Responses: **280 points (70 points each)** (you will need to hand in a two-page (about 500 words) formal reading response to **FOUR** of the books we read throughout the semester...details below)

Participation and Preparation: **220 points** (being actively involved in class and meeting attendance requirements make up this portion of your grade)

Reading Responses

You must write a two-page single-spaced reading response to FOUR of the FIVE main lyric essay texts assigned this semester (Tevis, Purpura, Lennon, Green, and Fleischmann). They are due in class on the same day we discuss the reading and cannot be turned in after that time (unless pre-arranged with me). Your responses can be somewhat informal, but I will be grading them for their writing (although you should strive to make them lively and interesting to read) as well as on whether you've engaged with the text. You can offer your opinions about the text from any number of angles: critical, theoretical, artistic, aesthetic, etc. You can raise questions about the readings that you'd like to discuss in class. You can also evaluate the writing itself, addressing the same kinds of questions you might expect we'd cover in our discussions of your own work. You can make connections between the text you're writing on with another text we've already read. Really, these are simply spaces for you to explore the readings we're doing, chances

for you to come to class with your thoughts already written so that you can help make our discussions all the more lively and enlightening.

Due dates for reading responses: 6/17: Purpura; 6/24: Lennon; 7/1: Tevis; 7/8: Fleischmann; 7/29: Green.

Grading Scale

A: 93-100, A-: 90-92, B+: 87-89, B: 83-86, B-: 80-82, C+: 77-79, C: 73-76, C-: 70-72, D+: 67-69, D: 63-66, D-: 60-62, F: 59 and below

Attendance and Late Work Policies

- **Attendance:** Attendance in this class is mandatory. Class time will be devoted to actively building writing skills by writing and revising, discussing, and critiquing your own writing and the writing of others. Such activities simply cannot be “made up” satisfactorily by getting the notes from a peer or by meeting with me. I realize, however, that sickness or emergencies can occur; should you need to miss class, please be sure to contact me, **preferably beforehand**, to discuss what might be done to assist you with getting on track. And know that though things can't be made up satisfactorily by meeting with me after an absence, I would *love* to meet with you anytime to discuss the goings-on of class. After two absences, your grade will be lowered by a letter grade for each additional missed class. Also, if you miss more than 3 classes, you will be unable to pass the class.
- **Tardiness:** Every second tardy (more than **five** minutes late) counts as an absence.
- **Late Work:** Late work is absolutely unacceptable.

Classroom Etiquette and Civility

In this class you will be expected to write, read, and think creatively and critically. To that end, an open dialogue will be encouraged. All thoughtful, respectful, and constructive contributions will be welcome. I do, however, expect all of you to respect your classmates. No racist, sexist, or homophobic language will be tolerated. The class will be an open discussion, but I expect our classroom to be a safe place to examine and discuss our writing and the writing of others.

As a general rule, please respect the class by turning off or setting to silent your cell phones or other electronic devices before entering the classroom and leaving them off for the duration of class time. If there should be a circumstance that requires you to have your phone on, please let me know before class.

University Honor Code

The Belmont community values personal integrity and academic honesty as the foundation of university life and the cornerstone of a premiere educational experience. Our community believes trust among its members is essential for both scholarship and effective interactions and operations of the University. As members of the Belmont community, students, faculty, staff, and administrators are all responsible for ensuring that their experiences will be free of behaviors, which compromise this value. In order to uphold academic integrity, the University has adopted an Honor System. Students and faculty will work together to establish the optimal conditions for honorable academic work. Following is the Student Honor Pledge that guides academic behavior:

“I will not give or receive aid during examinations; I will not give or receive false or impermissible aid in course work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other type of work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of my grade; I will not engage in any form of academic fraud. Furthermore, I will uphold my responsibility to see to it that others abide by the spirit and letter of this Honor Pledge.”

Accommodation of Disabilities

In compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, Belmont University will provide reasonable accommodation of all medically documented disabilities. If you have a disability and would like the university to provide reasonable accommodations of the disability during this course, please notify Tammye Whitaker, Director of Counseling & Developmental Support in the Office of Student Affairs (460-6785) as soon as possible.

Schedule (Subject to Change):

1.

Tuesday, June 3: To Do: Introduction to class. Discuss readings from emailed packet and Chapters 1, 3, and 9 from *Bending Genre*. What exactly is a “lyric essay” anyway?! Talk about obsessions, about “lyricism of the fact,” about “to essay.” Writing exercises. Share our email addresses!

Homework: Read Chapters 12, 20, 23, 24, and 26 from *Bending Genre*.

2.

Tuesday, June 10: To Do: Discuss *Bending Genre*. Start planning, in earnest, our own projects. Writing exercises geared toward trying to figure out our own obsessions, our own projects. How do you “write” a lyric essay?

Homework: Read Lia Purpura’s *On Looking*. Write 2-3 pages of your “essay” for next week and email them to everyone by noon Sunday, June 15th.

3.

Tuesday, June 17: To Do: Discuss Purpura. Discuss our opening pages in group (each week we’ll feature one or two writers and then break up in groups to discuss everyone else) and small group workshop. (Katherine and Brittney).

Homework: Read Brian Lennon’s *City: An Essay*. Write 2-3 more pages of your “essay” for next week and email them to everyone by noon Sunday, June 22nd.

4.

Tuesday, June 24: To Do: Discuss Lennon. Discuss our pages in group and small group workshop. (Tara and Rachel).

Homework: Read Joni Tevis’s *The Wet Collection*. Write 4-5 more pages of your “essay” and email them to everyone by noon Sunday, June 29th.

5.

Tuesday, July 1: To Do: Discuss Tevis. Discuss our pages in group and small group workshop. (Kylie and Amanda).

Homework: Read T Fleischmann's *Syzygy, Beauty*. Write 4-5 more pages of your "essay" and email them to everyone by noon Sunday, July 6th.

6.

Tuesday, July 8: To Do: Discuss Fleischmann. Discuss our pages in group and small group workshop. (Alan).

Homework: Read handout of random lyric essays. Write 2-3 more pages and email them to everyone by noon Sunday July 13th.

7.

Tuesday, July 15: To Do: Discuss handout. Discuss our pages in group and small group workshop. (Katherine and Brittney).

Homework: Read handout of random lyric essays. Write 4-5 more pages and email them to everyone by noon Sunday July 20th.

8.

Tuesday, July 22: To Do: Discuss handout. Discuss our pages in group and small group workshop. (Tara and Rachel).

Homework: Read Karen Green's *Bough Down*. Write 4-5 more pages and email them to everyone by noon Sunday July 27th.

9.

Tuesday, July 29: To Do: Discuss Green. Discuss our pages in group and small group workshop. (Amanda and Alan). Writing time, revision time, discussion time.

Homework: Keep writing!!

10.

Tuesday, August 5: To Do: Discuss our pages in group and small group workshop. (Kylie). Writing time, revision time, discussion time.

Homework: Finish your project!

FINAL EXAM: Projects are due by noon on Wednesday, August 6th.