

The Short Story: Study Through Imitation

Wesleyan GLSP Summer 2015

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Course Description:

Part literature seminar and part writing workshop, this course borrows a method commonly practiced by developing artists: that is to study form and develop skills by imitating the work of masters. Our task will be to read the work of master writers of the short story (including Hemingway, O'Connor, Carver, Chopin, O'Brien, and Oates) with an eye toward writing your own pieces that mimic their key elements of structure, language, narrative form, or point of view.

Our objective will not be to create perfect replicas of the works we read, but rather to use imitation to leverage our study of great short stories and heighten our appreciation of the talents of great short story writers. (For instance, students might be asked to rewrite a scene in a story by one writer in the style of a different writer, write a "missing scene" that would fit into an existing story, or generate an alternate ending to a story.) The culmination of the course will be for each participant to extend beyond the models and create their own original short story.

Required Texts:

- What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (Raymond Carver)
- 40 Short Stories: A Portable Anthology (Beverly Lawn, ed.)
- On Writing Short Stories (Tom Bailey, ed.)

Course Requirements:

In-Class Writing—10%

Toward the end of each class, I'll present writing prompts that are intended to situate you toward the writing you need to do for the next class. Sometimes the questions will be very specific (even "off kilter") and at other times quite general (even free ranging). I don't expect for your writing in these in-class assignments to be perfect or polished; on the contrary, I'm hoping that you'll be playful in your approach, idiosyncratic in your thinking, and fairly messy in your process. The in-class work is meant to spark ideas that may launch the writing challenge immediately ahead of you.

Short Studies*—20%

For each of the first four class meetings, you'll be asked to hand in "short-studies"—i.e., 1-2 page writings mimicking a specific quality of the writing style of one of the authors to be discussed.

Extended Study*—10%

In the third week of class, you'll be asked to hand in a 3-5 page piece influenced by the writing of any of the authors we've studied to that point in the course.

Final Essay/Original Piece*—20%

At the end of the course, you'll be asked to submit a 7-10 page paper that is either a literary analysis or a fiction piece influenced by (but not necessarily modeled after) the stories we've read throughout the course. Those writing literary analyses may either extend one of their earlier studies or offer an analysis of the method of studying literature through imitation; those writing fiction may offer a piece that is completely original or one based on the framework of a story from the course.

*Written Analyses—40%

The Extended Study, the Original Piece, and each of the Short Studies will be accompanied by a one-page analysis that explains the process and articulates the creative objectives for each piece of writing.

Class Participation—10%

In order to respond creatively to the stories we'll read for this class, you'll have to forge your own relationship with the material and articulate your perspectives for the benefit of your classmates. So you should come to every class prepared, ready to engage in the work at hand, and willing to participate in discussion.

Criterion for Assessment:

Your success for this class will depend less on your ability to perfectly mimic the qualities of the short stories we read than it does on thoughtfulness and thoroughness you bring to your consideration of the stories we read. So although the course is meant to encourage you try the craft of fiction writing, the main intent is for the act of writing to propel you into a deeper consideration the elements of the short story in general and the genius of these authors in particular. In short, while achievement in craft will be acknowledged, it's rigor of analysis that will be most highly rewarded.

Course Schedule:

Please note that while the reading load might seem relatively light for this course, the ability to model the stories we read requires thorough study of each text. It's recommended that you read each story at least three times in order to take a full measure of its narrative scale, structural stamp, and dramatic impact.

Class 1—Reading Like a Writer: Structure

Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"

Class 2—Short Story as List

Francine Prose, "What Makes a Short Story" (OWSS: pp 3-11)

Tim O'Brien, "The Things They Carried" (Handout)

Susan Minot, "Lust" (OWSS 415-21)

➔ Short Study and Analysis due

Class 3—Observing Short Stories

Joyce Carol Oates "Reading as a Writer" (OWSS pp12-25)

Anton Chekov "The Lady with the Pet Dog" (OWSS 147-158)

Ernest Hemingway "Hills Like White Elephants" (OWSS pp 180-4)

Tobias Wolff "Bullet in the Brain" (OWSS pp 422-6)

➔ Short Study and Analysis due

Class 4—Pacing

Katherine Anne Porter, “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall”

Tobias Wolff, “Bullet in the Brain”

↳ Short Study and Analysis due

Class 5—Plot

Willa Cather, “Paul’s Case”

Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”

↳ Short Study and Analysis due

Class 6—Compression

Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”

Ernest Hemingway, “Indian Camp”

Class 7—Dialog

Joyce Carol Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”

John Steinbeck, “The Chrysanthemums”

↳ Extend Study and Analysis due

Class 8—Style

Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (collection)

Class 9—Writing Workshop

Class 10—Class Reading

↳ Literary Analysis/Original Piece due