

USCDornsife

Department of  
English

## GESM 120 Poetry and Protest

Units: 4

Spring 2016 - Tues/Thurs 3:30–4:50pm

Location VKC 200

Instructor Dr. Beatrice Sanford Russell

Office Taper Hall 410

Office Hours

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### Course Description

“Poetry makes nothing happen,” W. H. Auden wrote in 1939 (in a poem, of course). Auden's line argues that poems are not political tools, not levers to move things in the world. And yet how can we square this argument with the many cases of poets who have been censored, banished, or killed for their poems? Poetry, whether written for political ends or not, has long been treated by politicians as a powerful threat to the state. In this course we discuss the relation between poetry and politics as we read poems that were written in crisis: in wartime, from prison, amidst revolution or unrest, or under other kinds of oppression. Among the questions we will ask: how have poets historically imagined their relation to political life? How are political emotions such as frustration, anger, or fear central to poetry? If poetry does threaten political stability, how does it threaten it? Is poetry politically effective even when it seems irrelevant to politics, since in this irrelevance it can imagine a different, better world?

We will focus these questions through the concept of *protest*, understood not just as dissent but also in its wider senses as an act of witnessing or a formal declaration. At first glance poetry and protest might seem to occupy different parts of life: one seems decorous, highbrow, and subtle, while the other seems noisy, public, and prone to sloganeering. But historically these domains—of poetry and of protest—have often seemed much closer. Over the semester we will explore this history, and also discover ways in which poetry and protest remain close-knit today, whether in rap lyrics by Kendrick Lamar, in Ralph Fiennes' 2011 remaking of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, or in Claudia Rankine's tour-de-force 2014 poem, *Citizen: An American Lyric*.



Johari Osayi Idusuyi reading Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* at a Donald Trump rally

## Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Revise a thesis statement until it is focused in scope, specific in language, and responsive to counter-arguments.
- Read actively by underlining key words and images, noting moments of ambiguity, and writing comments and questions in the margins.
- Write a short analysis of an unfamiliar poem in terms of imagery, tone, and voice.
- Analyze the rhetorical strategies of contemporary protest movements using concepts such as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.
- Interpret texts in relation to their political contexts, applying the concepts of negative critique and intersectionality.

This course fulfills the guidelines for GE-B, Humanistic Inquiry.

## Course Books and Readings

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855; Dover, 2007)

Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (1965; Harper, 2005)

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

Eliza Griswold and Seamus Murphy, *I Am the Beggar of the World: Landays from Contemporary Afghanistan*

Assigned texts not in the course books will be posted to Blackboard.

## Description of Assignments and Grading Breakdown

You will write **two short analyses**, one considering how a poem uses imagery, voice, and tone, and another considering the rhetorical or imagistic strategies of a contemporary protest or protest movement. You will publish a **paragraph to Wikipedia** on the political context of one of the poems on the syllabus.

You will take a **midterm exam** in which you will be asked to evaluate unfamiliar poems in terms of imagery, tone, and voice, and in which you will highlight and discuss words and images you would want to research in order to investigate a poem's political context.

You will write a **final paper** of 2500–3000 words (about seven to ten pages), prompts to be announced. As part of your grade, mini-assignments towards the final paper will be due in the last few weeks of the course, including a thesis statement and a revised thesis statement, an outline, and a first paragraph.

The reading assigned for this class is relatively minimal in terms of pages, and so I expect students to come to class having carefully read all poems three times: the first time to get a basic comprehension, the second time to underline key words or images that interest or perplex you, and the third time to note questions and comments in the margins. **Pop quizzes** (between three and six throughout the semester) will evaluate your levels of engagement with the assigned reading.

Finally, you will be graded on **participation**, which includes engaging in class discussions (speaking and actively listening), coming to class with readings printed out, and being prepared to respond to assigned questions.

Assignment	Points
Analysis 1	60
Analysis 2	60
Wikipedia Paragraph	60
Pop Quizzes	120
Participation	150
Midterm Exam	200
Final Essay	350

## Assignment Submission Policy

Written work should be turned in via Blackboard before the beginning of class on the day it is due, and a printed-out copy should be brought to class.

## Additional Policies

**Attendance.** You are expected to attend each class. Legitimate absences (e.g. for sickness or emergency) must be cleared with me beforehand in order to avoid impacting your grade. Each unexcused absence beyond the first will lower your final grade by one third of a letter grade (e.g. a “B” would become a “B-”). You are also expected to be on time for each class. Multiple instances of tardiness will be counted as absences.

**Technology.** In general I do not allow the use of laptops in class; I expect you to bring your own printed-out copies of readings. If you rely on laptops because of a disability, please clear the use of a laptop with me.

## Schedule of Readings

	Topics	Readings and Homework	Due
<b>Week 1</b> 1/12	<b>Introduction.</b> Why poetry? Why protest?	Charles Bernstein, “A Poem Is Not a Weapon” (handout) W. H. Auden, “Epitaph on a Tyrant” (handout) Louise Glück, frontispiece to <i>Vita Nova</i> (handout)	
1/14	Critique	Plato, from <i>The Republic</i> Book 3 Walter Raleigh, “The Lie” Jonathan Swift, “A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General” William Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper” (I); “The Chimney Sweeper” (II) Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias” Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “A Curse for a Nation” Frances E. W. Harper, “Learning to Read” Anne Spencer, “Letter to my Sister”	
<b>Week 2</b> 1/19	Negative Critique.	Philip Sidney, from <i>An Apology for Poetry</i> John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale” Emily Dickinson, “I dwell in Possibility—” William Butler Yeats, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” Jean Toomer, “Storm Ending” Dylan Thomas, “A Refusal To Mourn The Death, By Fire, Of A Child In London” Karl Shapiro, “On Reading Keats in Wartime” Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till”	
1/21	Imagery, Tone, Voice	William Blake, <i>Visions of the Daughters of Albion</i>	
<b>Week 3</b> 1/26		William Blake, <i>Visions of the Daughters of Albion</i> , cont’d.	
1/28		Walt Whitman, <i>Song of Myself</i> , sections 1 - 17	
<b>Week 4</b> 2/2		Walt Whitman, <i>Song of Myself</i> , sections 18 - 33	
2/4		Walt Whitman, <i>Song of Myself</i> , sections 34 - 52	Analysis 1

<b>Week 5</b> 2/9	<b>Political Contexts.</b> Prison.	Thomas Wyatt, "Epigram Written in Prison" Walter Raleigh, "My Body in the Walls Captived" Richard Lovelace, "To Althea, from Prison" Ernest Jones, "The Silent Cell" William Butler Yeats, "On a Political Prisoner" Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy" Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"	
2/11	Revolt.	John Milton, <i>Paradise Lost</i> , "The Verse," Book I	
<b>Week 6</b> 2/16		John Milton, <i>Paradise Lost</i> , Book II	
2/18		<i>Hamilton</i> , Act One	
<b>Week 7</b> 2/23		<i>Hamilton</i> , Act Two	
2/25		MIDTERM EXAM	Midterm
<b>Week 8</b> 3/1	Brutality.	Percy Bysshe Shelley, <i>The Masque of Anarchy</i>	
3/3		<i>Coriolanus</i> (2011). There will be a showing to watch the movie together as a class, time TBA. Or watch on your own using Blackboard link, if you can't make it.	
<b>Week 9</b> 3/8	War.	Eliza Griswold and Seamus Murphy, <i>I Am the Beggar of the World</i>	
3/10		Eliza Griswold and Seamus Murphy, <i>I Am the Beggar of the World</i> , cont'd.	Wikipedia para.
<b>Week 10</b>	SPRING BREAK		
<b>Week 11</b> 3/22	<b>Identity and Intersectionality.</b>	Countee Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel" Louise Bogan, "Medusa" Adrienne Rich, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" Lucille Clifton, "homage to my hips" Thom Gunn, "The Man with Night Sweats" Sharon Olds, "The Fear of Oneself" Mark Doty, "Tiara" Missy Elliott, "WTF (Where They From)"	
3/24	Feminism.	Charlotte Mew, "The Farmer's Bride" Edna St. Vincent Millay, "I, being born a woman and distressed" Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room" Anne Sexton, "In Celebration of My Uterus" Adrienne Rich, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" Gwendolyn Brooks, "the mother" Joan Larkin, "'Vagina' Sonnet" Patricia Lockwood, "Rape Joke"	
<b>Week 12</b> 3/29		Sylvia Plath, <i>Ariel</i> , "Morning Song" through "The Detective"	
3/31		Sylvia Plath, <i>Ariel</i> , "Ariel" through "Getting There"	
<b>Week 12</b> 4/5		Sylvia Plath, <i>Ariel</i> , "Medusa" through "Wintering"	

4/7	Race.	Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream" Claude McKay, "America" Langston Hughes, "I, Too" Audre Lorde, "Power" Rita Dove, "Parsley" Harryette Mullen, "Elliptical" 2Pac, "Changes" Talib Kweli, "Get By"	Analysis 2
<b>Week 13</b> 4/12		Claudia Rankine, <i>Citizen</i> , parts 1 – 2	
4/14		Claudia Rankine, <i>Citizen</i> , parts 3 – 4	Thesis
<b>Week 14</b> 4/19		Claudia Rankine, <i>Citizen</i> , parts 5 - 7	
4/21		Kendrick Lamar, <i>To Pimp a Butterfly</i>	Revised Thesis
<b>Week 15</b> 4/26	<b>Reflections</b>	Dylan Thomas, "The Hand That Signed the Paper" Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" Carolyn Forché, "The Colonel" Eavan Boland, "The Dolls Museum in Dublin" Brigit Pegeen Kelly, "Song" Jorie Graham, "What the End Is For" Joel Brouwer, "Lines from the Reports of the Investigative Committees"	Outline
4/28		Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" Percy Bysshe Shelley, from <i>A Defence of Poetry</i> William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939" Richard Wilbur, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" Margaret Walker, "For My People" Kanye West, "Lost in the World"; "Who Will Survive in America"	First Paragraph
<b>5/10</b>		<b>FINAL ESSAY</b> due via Blackboard by May 10, 4pm	FINAL

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards*

<https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity*

<http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety*  
<http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>

This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

### **Support Systems**

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* [http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.