

English 395
Writing and/as Activism
M/W, 12:50-2:00
Fall 2006

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Office Hours: Mon., 2-3:30; Tues., 8:30-10:00;
Wed., 2-3, Thurs., 1-2, and by appointment.

Course Description

To what extent can, or should, writing (and also reading) function as a kind of activism? Can written work change minds and hearts? Should it be designed to do so? Can writing be more than a hobby--but also more than a vocation? That is, can the acts of writing and reading be seen as moral acts, as part of living a fully engaged life? In this course we will examine these and other questions as we read, discuss, and emulate both factual/documentary and imaginative works (ranging from op-ed pieces and documentaries to song lyrics and novels).

Goals and Structure

Writing and/as Activism, a special-topics course, will be an interesting hybrid: both a Learning in Common Moral Life (U2) course and a writing course. For the Moral Life component of the course, students will consider two “theoretical frameworks” for reflection upon a moral life (in this case, the frameworks of (a) factual/documentary works and (b) imaginative works of poetry and fiction); they will use these frameworks to explore two contemporary issues: (a) poverty and economic justice and (b) responses to war. These explorations will come from students’ reading of a range of historical and contemporary works, attention to guest speakers, viewing of relevant documentaries, and consideration of relevant music, and from assignments including journal responses, reports, and midterm and final exams.

For the writing component of the course, students will also write several “non-academic” (in the traditional sense) assignments: an opinion piece or personal essay, a poem or song lyric, and a short story or mixed-genre work (e.g., a blend of fiction and nonfiction, poetry and fiction, and/or written and visual or musical work). English Track 3 (Writing) majors who are taking the course as a major requirement will be expected to go further with revision and refinement of these works, and to submit all of them in a portfolio at the course’s end.

In addition to works of literary and journalistic nonfiction, poetry, and fiction, we will read and discuss several writers and philosophers who deal with ethics and its relationship to art (more specifically, in this case, to writing), including Plato, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, and others. Through the entire semester, and in completing *all* the assignments referred to above, our work as a class will return to this list of fundamental questions:

What is a moral life?
Should we try to be moral? Why or why not?

What is activism?
Can or should activism be linked with morality?

Does reading matter? If so, in what ways?
Who should read?
What should they/we read?

Does writing matter? If so, in what ways?
Who should write?
What should they/we write?

Can reading and writing be moral acts?
Can reading and writing be forms of activism?

As we delve more deeply into questions of ethics and aesthetics and as we consider the wide-ranging works of a number of poets and writers, our answers to these questions will, I hope, grow deeper. And also perhaps clearer.

Required Texts and Materials

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001; originally published 1941).
 Brian Turner, *Here, Bullet* (Alice James Books, 2005).
 Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notes on Poetry and Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2003; originally published 1993).
 Carolyn Forché, *The Angel of History* (Harper Perennial, 1995).
 Benjamin Kunkel, *Indecision* (Random House, 2006).

Plus handouts and other materials provided by instructor and materials placed on reserve in Reeves Library.

Attendance Policy, and a Note on Plagiarism

We will meet twice a week (sometimes only once a week) for fifteen weeks; that isn't much time together when you consider all we have to do. If you are serious about writing and about this course, you will show up on time, every time. More than two absences (excused or unexcused) will automatically lower your final grade by one-third. Your grade will drop an additional one-third for any additional unexcused absence (anything other than a medical excuse or a required activity for another course).

I would hope that it goes without saying that any work you submit for this course must be your own; to plagiarize in an upper-level writing course is to convey a shocking

disrespect for writers and their work. Refer to the College's policy on academic honesty (available in the Student Handbook, both print and online) for any needed clarification.

Blackboard Postings and Journal Entries

Pre-class Blackboard postings are to be brief (probably a few sentences at most) thoughts or questions in response to that Monday's assigned reading, posted at that week's forum on our course Discussion Board. These are due by 12 AM on Monday (that is, by midnight the Sunday before). These will be used to guide our class discussions through the week.

Post-class or post-workshop journal entries (minimum one page, or 250-300 words) should be responses to the reading, film or speaker, discussion, and/or workshop session we've read/viewed/heard/ participated in that week. These should be thoughtful critical responses (no rants, please), and they may be e-mailed to me or delivered as hard copies, by 2 PM on the Friday they're due. I will read these and assign them a plus, check, or minus.

Evaluation

Pre-class Blackboard postings (Min. 5 required by 9/18, 10/16, 10/30, 11/20, 11/27) and post-class and post-workshop journal entries (Min. 10 required by 9/1, 9/8, 9/15, 9/29, 10/13, 10/20, 11/3 11/17, 12/1, 12/8)	20%
Opinion piece or personal essay plus workshop participation	10%
Poem or song lyric plus workshop participation	10%
Short story or multi-genre piece (min. 8 pages) plus workshop participation	15%
*Note that English Track 3 (Writing) majors will be required to submit more fully refined versions of the above, in portfolio form, including one work selected for submission to <i>The Comenian</i> , <i>The Manuscript</i> , or another publication, at the course's end. Also included in the portfolio should be an introduction describing the revision process and choices. Failure to meet this requirement will result in a lowering of the final grade by a minimum of one letter grade.	
Report (see guidelines)	15%
Midterm essay exam (Addressing questions on p. 2 and drawing on a minimum of one writer and one philosophical discussion on ethics and aesthetics discussed in class)	15%

Final exam

(Addressing questions on p. 2, distinctions between factual/documentary and imaginative work, and a minimum of three writers) 15%

Schedule**Week 1**

Mon. 8/28 Introduction to course; brief overview of Agee and Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; handouts: Rilke, Wright

Wed. 8/30 Agee & Evans, Preface plus pp. 1-42
For following week: reading of op/ed pages of *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Morning Call*, *Express Times* (one newspaper per day for whole week; minimum of two readings of *NY Times*).

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 9/1.

Week 2

Mon. 9/4 No class.

Wed. 9/6 Handouts: Olson, Saunders, Bauchner, Shipler, Kunkel.
Guest speaker(s).

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM on Friday, 9/8.

Week 3

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Mon., 9/11.

Mon. 9/11 Agee & Evans, pp. 43-98
Documentary excerpts (*Country Boys*, *When the Levees Broke*)

Wed. 9/13 Discussion
Reports

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 9/15.

Week 4

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Mon. 9/18.

Mon. 9/18 Handouts: Plato and Murdoch; poems by Williams and Paley.
Lecture: Background on ethics and aesthetics (drawing largely on Noel Carroll's "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" in the Jan. 2000 issue of *Ethics*, available at www.jstor.org).
Writing prompts for op-ed piece or personal essay.

Wed. 9/20 Reports

Week 5

Mon. 9/25 and Wed. 9/27 Workshop: Op-ed piece or personal essay
 Post-workshop journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 9/29.

Note: Attendance at the Dodge Poetry Festival, held in Waterloo Village, NJ Sept. 28, 29, 30, and Oct. 1, is recommended (though not required); poet Brian Turner (whose book *Here, Bullet* we will read for class on Monday 10/16) is scheduled to read on Thursday night, Sept. 28; a bus will be available from Moravian on Friday, Sept. 29. See www.dodgepoetryfestival.org for more details.

Week 6

Mon. 10/2 The role of music; guest speaker.
 Review

Wed. 10/4 Midterm exam

Week 7

Mon. 10/9 No class.

Wed. 10/11 Rich, VI (As if your life depended on it) and X (The hermit's
 scream); Handouts: Whitman, Owen.
 Documentary: *Voices in Wartime*

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 10/13.

Week 8

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Mon. 10/16

Mon. 10/16 Turner (all).
 Handouts: Merton, Quaker testimonies.

Wed. 10/18 Handout: Browning.
 Reports

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 10/20.

Week 9

Mon. 10/23 Guest speakers: Ann and Preston Browning.

Wed. 10/25 Reports
 Lecture on art and literature after the Holocaust (drawing on Carol
 Becker's "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art" in
*The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, & Social
 Responsibility* and Carolyn Forché's Preface to *Against
 Forgetting*).

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 10/27.

Weekend of 10/27-10/29: Required attendance at MCTC performance of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Week 10

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Mon. 10/30.

Mon. 10/30 Rich, XII (Someone is writing a poem) and XXV (To invent what we desire); Handout: Rukeyser (ch. 1 of *The Life of Poetry*).

Wed. 11/1 Forché, *The Angel of History* (all).
Lannan Foundation Video on Carolyn Forché

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 11/3.

Week 11

Mon. 11/6 Reports
Writing prompts, exercises for poem or lyric.

Wed. 11/8 Guest speaker; possible film.

Week 12

Mon. 11/13 and Wed. 11/15 Workshop: Poem or song lyric.
Guest speaker: Poet and Moravian alum Jeffrey Ethan Wright.

Post-workshop journal entry required by 2 PM 11/17.

Week 13

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Mon. 11/20

Mon. 11/20 Agee & Evans, pp. 195-224; Handout: Nussbaum; Kunkel, part 1 (pages to be assigned).

Wed. 11/22 No class.

Week 14

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Mon. 11/27.

Mon. 11/27 Agee & Evans, pp. 255-278, 309-313, 381-394; Kunkel, part 2 (pages to be assigned); handout: Haymaker.

Wed. 11/29 Kunkel, part 3 (pages to be assigned).
Discussion of the question of genre.
The voice that works: writing prompts for short story or multi-genre work.

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 12/1.

Week 15

Mon. 12/4 and Wed. 12/6 Workshop: Short story or multi-genre work.
Post-workshop journal entry required by 2 PM Fri. 12/8.

Week 16

Mon. 12/11 Questions/review
 Course evaluations
 English Track 3 (Writing) portfolios due.
 Readings/performances of final works.

Finals Week

Final exam.