first year preceptorial: filling the emptiness

Winter 2013, Prof. Tarik Wareh (Classics Dept.)

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Lamont House 203: office hours Tue 2 p.m. & Fri. 2 p.m.
Drop by anytime, or make an appointment!

This preceptorial aims to help introduce you to Union College as a place where a love affair with books, ideas, and the liberal arts is possible. Our collective goal is to read, think, and write with greater care and commitment. Are you up for complicating and deepening your insights into yourselves and your world?

http://www.union.edu/offices/preceptorial/ will tell you what the college thinks you should get out of this course. In a nutshell, we ought to get better at discussing ideas, at finding complexity and multiple arguable interpretations in what we read, at defending an ambitious yet nuanced thesis based on sustained analysis of the evidence in our texts, and at strengthening our ideas through revision and rethinking.

Our theme is “filling the emptiness.” Our readings focus on the search for meaning in American life: in young people’s friendships, travel, and difficult position between cynicism and romanticism (Kerouac’s Visions of Cody and Rapp’s The Metal Children); in charismatic religion (Covington’s Salvation on Sand Mountain); in Walt Whitman’s vision of America (Leaves of Grass); in a broader picture of nineteenth-century American attitudes towards death (Whitman, Dickinson, The Sacred Harp); and in selected short stories and essays in cultural criticism. We also spend a week on selections from the Iliad, the great epic that looks urgently for meaning where it is most desperately absent: in the brutal violence of the battlefield. (The French philosopher Simone Weil is our guide to appreciating the contrast between the poet’s humane and tragic sensitivity and the pitiless suffering of the poem’s story.)

Our classroom is a workshop! We will not make enough progress as readers, critics, and writers just by handing in a few essays and getting a professor’s grades and comments on them. Therefore an important goal of this course is to use our time together to practice and advance our arguments about the texts. For our daily discussions, students will contribute questions that lead us to examine and explain and interpret what we have read and will take turns having their ideas “workshopped” by the class as a whole. This is always meant as a constructive and no-fear exercise: boldly testing out, discussing, and developing our interpretations. I always welcome your feedback about your experience of these discussions and the rest of the course!
Required books in the order we will use them:

- Howe & Howe (eds.), *Short Shorts*, Bantam, ISBN 0553274406
- Negri (ed.), *Great Short Short Stories*, Dover, ISBN 0486440982
- Rapp, *The Metal Children*, Faber and Faber, ISBN 0865479240

The other readings (short stories, essays, *Iliad* selections) will generally be distributed via Moodle/Nexus (http://nexus.union.edu/). I want close reading of the texts’ details to be part of every day’s discussion, so I require you to print these readings and bring them to class.

Schedule of readings and assignments

M 1/7 Introduction to the course
  Ideas about why we read & why we write (Virginia Woolf, Kurt Vonnegut)
  Close reading & interpretation (sample paper on Ruskin’s “The Work of Iron”)
F 1/11 Whitman, “As They Draw to a Close,” “You Tides of Ceaseless Swell,” “Then Last of All” (pp. 368-9, 378-9)

Paper #1 due (600-900 words, double spaced, include word count at end, bring printed and stapled to class). Carefully paraphrase the last of these three poems, covering clearly everything it says. There is no verb (you’ll have to suggest what to understand for the predicate), so this is a difficult, complex, and uncertain task that will require a theory of what the poem is saying backed up by an argument. Show that you understand multiple possibilities of meaning but can give reasons that support the ones you suggest. Come to a clear position about the meaning of all of the following: hill, “you,” tides, law, “me,” brain, voice, and song. Analyze the relationship between these terms according to the poem.
M 1/14  Whitman, “Song of Myself,” sections 1-8, 11, 15-17 (pp. 24-36)
Recommended reading: The 1855 Preface (pp. 493-509)

W 1/16  Whitman, “Song of Myself,” sections 18-21, 31, 46-52 (pp. 37-69)

F 1/18  Kerouac, Visions of Cody, pp. 1-43

M 1/21  Kerouac, Visions of Cody, pp. 45-85
Thesis development exercise

W 1/23  Kerouac, Visions of Cody, pp. 85-116

F 1/25  Paper #2 due (800-1100 words). Develop an argument based on detailed claims about the meaning of specific quoted words and phrases. The paper must clearly include (1) close reading and interpretation of key poems/passages/ideas from Leaves of Grass; (2) close reading and interpretation of key passages/ideas from Visions of Cody; (3) an interesting theory of how the two works’ ideas are related to each other (what are the consequences of key differences; how does reading one cause you to understand what is present & absent in the other in a new light; what Whitman and Kerouac would have done differently with each other’s subjects and material; etc.).

In-class drawing exercise #1

M 1/28  Dickinson etc. poetry packet

W 1/30  Introduction to The Sacred Harp

F 2/1  Revisiting Whitman on Death
“Death” in Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia and related poems

M 2/4  Berry, “Faustian Economics” and “Is Life a Miracle?”

W 2/6  Old-Fashioned Singing School #1

F 2/8  Rapp, The Metal Children, pp. ix-xiii and 1-37

M 2/11  Rapp, The Metal Children, pp. 37-67

W 2/13  Rapp, The Metal Children, pp. 68-102

F 2/15  O’Connor, “Good Country People”

M 2/18  Paper #3 due (1500-1900 words): The anatomy of American (un)happiness
In-class drawing exercise #2
F 2/22  Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force”; Iliad selections (Book 4, Book 6 to p. 77)
M 2/25  short story TBA by Anne Enright  lecture location TBA
W 2/27  follow-up discussion on Anne Enright / Old-Fashioned Singing School #2
F 3/1   Iliad selections (Books 6, 1, 16, 20)
M 3/4   Iliad selections (Books 21, 22, 24)
W 3/6   Covington, prologue and chapters 1-2
F 3/8   Covington, chapters 3-5
M 3/11  Covington, chapters 6-7
W 3/13  Covington, chapters 8-9
F 3/15  Covington, chapters 10-11 and afterword
Tu 3/19  Paper #4 due at 12:00 p.m. (2000-2400 words): The struggle for meaning in a world out of joint

**General criteria for work in this course**

Your written and oral work is graded on

1. the overall originality and interest of the claims your papers and presentations advance;
2. how your papers and presentations argue for these claims—the detailed analysis and interpretation of the text’s specific language and ideas;
3. the effectiveness with which your papers and presentations communicate their ideas and arguments clearly, in a good style, and with correct mechanics and usage.
Discussion leader assignment

**Good readers are good writers.** Yes, the preceptorial is a writing class (among other things). Our goal, however, isn’t just polished communication. More importantly, we want to achieve better readings and interpretations, better arguments to support the most ambitious possible claims and insights into the texts (and, beyond that, into our world and into ourselves). If there is one skill the course aims to develop in you, it is to patiently analyze and argue over the details of the text until you arrive at an original understanding of it that satisfies you.

To that end, you will twice present in class an evidence-based response to the day’s reading that helps us all appreciate it (and think more carefully about it) both as a work of art and as an idea about our human world.

**Interpret the evidence!** This is the key. “Evidence” means you should be *constantly* bringing in the text’s specific words, images, and concepts. Your goal is to show that you have done the work necessary to understand these better and differently than others who didn’t do that work. Be specific: What insight have you gained? What details have different significance for you now, and why? How does your way of looking at things change your approach to and understanding of the work as a whole? Choose points that may lack total certainty, but which are *interesting* to support through an interpretive argument.

Ideally, you might address the text’s

1. **style:** How do your selected passages work as literary art? How does the text use the expressive resources of language, imagery, rhetoric, etc., so that the style of the work becomes part of what it has to say?
2. **thought:** What concepts are complex or puzzling and require careful analysis? Are their contradictions, unusual values, etc., that drive the work?
3. **relevance:** What in the work gains new meaning when placed alongside our own experience of the world? What in the text has the power to address our own crises and problems, or reads more interestingly when we bring what we know about ourselves to it?

**You are graded on how far** you push the evidence to gain an original interpretation *in your in-class presentation*.

You may, optionally, hand in a paragraph arguing one of your best points, if you wish to receive more of my feedback about your ideas and writing (including mechanics and style).
Short short story thesis-and-argument exercise

Once during the term, you will give a presentation on one of the short short stories, as follows:

1. Choose one of the short short stories that has not been chosen previously.

2. Notify the entire class by email at least 72 hours in advance that they should add your selection to the assigned reading for your day, and bring the relevant book.

3. Develop the strongest and most ambitious thesis possible concerning the techniques through which the writer has created the story’s effects and meanings.

4. Support your thesis with specific interpretation of specific language in the story. In class, guide us clearly to show how you get from your raw data to your (non-obvious and interesting) final conclusions.

5. Be prepared to help the class (and the day’s discussion leaders) make connections between your points and the syllabus readings & our course’s general issues.

6. Remember that the point is to help grease the wheels so that we are making creative but evidence-supported claims about our daily readings—this is what will lead to better papers!

Grading is based on the following components:

20% discussion leader assignment (10% + 10%)
15% short short story assignment
65% papers (10% + 10% + 20% + 25%)

-1% a day on which you do not have a printed copy of the day’s reading with you

Late policy. All assignments must be turned in on time. No work will be accepted more than seven days after the original due date. Late work is penalized by 1/3 of a letter grade for each day late. The presentation assignments are essential to our class plan and cannot be accepted late.

Gentle reminder. Come to class on time with the reading (including printouts of anything distributed online), and do not leave during the 65 minutes. All electronic devices should be switched off and stowed away in your bags.
Your honor code! Union College recognizes the need to create an environment of mutual trust as part of its educational mission. Responsible participation in an academic community requires respect for and acknowledgement of the thoughts and work of others, whether expressed in the present or in some distant time and place.

Matriculation at the College is taken to signify implicit agreement with the Academic Honor Code, available at http://honorcode.union.edu. It is each student’s responsibility to ensure that submitted work is his or her own and does not involve any form of academic misconduct. Students are expected to ask their course instructors for clarification regarding, but not limited to, collaboration, citations, and plagiarism. Ignorance is not an excuse for breaching academic integrity.

You are encouraged to affix an Honor Code Affirmation to your work submitted by grading. (Perhaps you can use your growing writing skills to improve on the recommended text, “I affirm that I have carried out my academic endeavors with full academic honesty.” [Signed, Jane Doe]). However, such a written affirmation is merely a reminder, and the Honor Code is always binding on all work done at Union College.

If you have ever consulted any unassigned work (including standard internet sources, the introductions to our textbooks, etc.!), you must completely cite everything your ideas might owe to the ideas of others, so that your reader or hearer (1) can never mistake an idea that owes something to someone else as your own original work, (2) can always trace anything owed to another’s ideas to the specific page you consulted. Bear in mind that your selection of which passages to write about (not only what you say about them) falls under the category of your work’s “ideas.” While you should discuss your readings and ideas with classmates, your graded work must be the product of your own effort, not collaboration.

Statement on disabilities. It is Union College policy to make accommodations for individuals with disabilities. If you have any disability or special concern, please let me know what your needs are in order that they may be accommodated. All discussions will remain confidential to the extent permissible by law. Students with disabilities needing academic accommodations must also: (1) register with and provide documentation to the Dean of Students Office; (2) bring a letter to the instructor from the Dean of Students Office indicating what academic accommodations you require. This must be done within the first two weeks of the term. For more information about services available to Union College students with disabilities, please contact the Dean of Students Office: Shelly Shinebarger, Director of Student Support Services, Dean of Students Office, shinebas@union.edu, (518) 388-6116.

I am a member of Union’s Faculty & Staff LGBTQ Ally Program and a “safe space” promoter.