

Making sense of poetry

Credit / award	Non-accredited		
Start date	10 January 2019	End date	7 February 2019
Day and time	Thursdays, 19:00 – 21:00	No of meetings	5
Venue	Madingley Hall, Madingley, Cambridge, CB23 8AQ		
Tutor	Dr Stephen Logan	Course code	1819NWR001

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Tutor biography

'Steve Logan is a musician and poet, who works also as a psychotherapist and lecturer in English. As lecturer, he has held senior appointments in Oxford, Cardiff and Cambridge, where he is currently Principal Supervisor in English at Clare College. Previously, he was Director of Studies in English at Selwyn and at St. Edmund's. His B.A. and D. Phil. are from St. John's College, Oxford. He has written several books of poetry, a scholarly book on Wordsworth, several book chapters on C. S. Lewis and has co-edited Peter Lomas, *Natural Psychotherapy*. He has published widely in the national press. In the last four years he has released four solo albums and is currently working on a fifth. He has featured in a TV documentary about his music (www.stevelogan.co.uk)'

Course syllabus

The various kinds of knowledge that were formerly common among the relatively small sections of the populace who were literate at all, have declined. What makes this such an important point to recognize is that, because these kinds of knowledge – of classical literature, the Bible, the more obvious technicalities of poetry – were once common to most educated people, they were common also to most writers. If modern readers lack them – and, even more importantly, if they are unaware of lacking them – they are likely to be reading their predecessors inaccurately.

If Wordsworth were to watch a modern TV programme, it is likely that he would misunderstand it in all sorts of ways through lack of familiarity with the conventions that inform it. Similarly, if modern readers are unfamiliar with the conventions governing the use of metre, rhyme, sound-effects and verse-form, for example, they would be likely, in all sorts of subtle ways, to misconstrue a poem by Wordsworth. Modern children don't have to study the conventions of TV in order to internalize them. TV is so near the centre of contemporary Western culture that early exposure to it means its conventions are assimilated for the most part unconsciously. To a lesser extent this would have been true of the way that the educated minority used to assimilate literary conventions. And it remains true of the ways that we now learn how to listen to songs and how to read newspaper articles. But the traditional forms of literature are no longer at the centre of our culture, though a much larger proportion of Westerners than ever before now enjoy some form of higher education. So, in order to understand literary conventions, it is now necessary to study them.

Yet the problem of our being unfamiliar with the conventions of poetry is the more acute because it is insufficiently recognized. The dominant literary forms are currently for the most part in prose: newspaper articles, screen-plays and novels. Familiarity with reading prose can tend to corroborate the assumption that literacy and literary competence are the same and that no further specialized knowledge is needed for reading poems. But, in the first place, the more sophisticated forms of prose are no less informed by convention for its conventions being inconspicuous; and secondly, poetic conventions are both more conspicuous and more hazardous to ignore than prose ones.

A factor which has been influential in confirming the habit of indifference to poetic conventions is the *laissez-faire* teaching practices widely advocated in the 1960s. Though the pro-democratic motives of such practices were often admirable, the effect of them has been to reduce the reading of poetry, even when done in a classroom, to vague, subjective and historically reckless 'appreciation'. Too often, practical criticism is understood as an opportunity to emote freely in the presence of a text. Good reading should, ultimately, be a process in which relevant forms of technical and historical knowledge are called on for the most part unconsciously. But in our era it is unlikely to begin that way. We need first to learn how to read (analogous perhaps to learning to dance or play a musical instrument). Reading with appreciation is the result of this process, rather than its starting-point. And the main element in learning to read is what has, since the 1920s, been called 'practical criticism'.

The course will begin with a session in which the nature of practical criticism is explained. There will then follow a series of four seminars in which various aspects of poetic form – diction, syntax, rhyme and so forth – will be investigated. Though the titles of the seminars are a bit stark, I would like to emphasize that I am very far from wishing to promote a conception of reading as a mechanical process in which the various aspects of technique are ticked off, as on a shopping-list, then somehow bundled together so as to make up a complete interpretation of the poem. It will be the aim of the final lecture to explain what (in my opinion) it should feel like to read a poem well.

For this reason, I will throughout attach considerable importance to looking at poetry from the points of view of the people who write it.

Aims

Students are expected to gain from this series of classroom sessions a greater understanding of poetic form and a greater appreciation of the poems we will discuss.

Content

It is essential that you read the relevant section in the Course Booklet prior to each class

Session 1: Metre

Session 2: Diction

Session 3: Syntax

Session 4: Rhyme

Session 5: Figurative Language

Presentation of the course:

Each class will be introduced by a talk from me on the topic followed by open discussion arising from the texts in the course booklet.

Outcomes

The learning outcomes for this course specifically are:

1. To become aware of the kinds of knowledge that the appreciative reading of poetry requires.
2. To acquire a vocabulary for discussing aspects of form and style in poetry.
3. To develop an understanding of how cultural change, across the broad expanse of literary history, affects the reading and writing of poetry.
4. To develop an initial awareness of major poets and poetic forms within their historical contexts
5. To learn something of the theoretical debates which have surrounded the concept of 'practical criticism', along with some of the reasons for them.

Reading and resources list

Required reading

Primary texts

Note: The examples used in the course will be drawn from a wide range of poems. I will alert you before the relevant seminar to any of the more obscure poems that you may need to read. Some of the poems and excerpts will be discussed in detail; others will be adduced only briefly or in passing.

Students will find it extremely helpful to read (however cursorily) the poems included or cited in the Course Booklet and to bring a copy of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (edited by M Ferguson, et al, Norton, 2005, 5th edition) along to the classes with them. It is fine to bring both in screen-versions, though many students find hard copies easier to negotiate. Between them these two sources contain almost all the poems that will be discussed during the course. The Norton Anthology can be bought second-hand on Amazon for around £15.

(<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Norton-Anthology-Poetry-Margaret-Ferguson/dp/0393979202>)

Further suggested reading:

The following books are suggestions for further reading. They do not need to be bought or consulted for the course but would be helpful additions or 'next step' reading:

Secondary texts

Note: Much of the most valuable criticism of the sort which attends closely to a poem's verbal details occurs intermittently in critical studies of a more general nature, or else is published separately in essay-form. Some of this incidental criticism has been collected in anthologies. I shall in any case be developing the view that practical criticism – or explicit explanations of one's response to the verbal details of a poem – should not be regarded as a separate activity; but that it is one of the forms in which a critical response to a poem, or poet's work, may be expressed. Being a good practical critic depends on being a good general critic, and *vice versa*. Accordingly, I have listed below a number of critical studies which should help students achieve the sort of general critical perspective within which good reading (and good practical criticism) is more likely to occur. The list is arranged in five sections.

1. Reference book
2. Introductions to practical criticism
3. Books containing instances of good practical criticism
4. Books on reading and criticism in general
5. Books containing discussions of poetry by poets

1. Reference book

Cuddon, J A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin, 1999, 4th edition.

2. Introductions to literary criticism

Coombes, H. *Literature and Criticism*. Penguin, 1953, 1991, out-of-print.

Fry, S. *The Ode Less Travelled*. Hutchinson, 2005.

Often whimsical and avuncular, but impressively acute on the elements and subtleties of prosody.

3. Books exemplifying the practical criticism of poetry

Empson, W. *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Chatto and Windus, 1987, out-of-print. Especially 'The Verbal Analysis', 'Basic English And Wordsworth', 'Reading A Poem: Cowper's "The Castaway"', 'To Understand A Modern Poem: "A Refusal To Mourn" by Dylan Thomas'.

Lewis, C S. *Selected Literary Essays*. Edited by W Hooper. Cambridge University Press, 1969, out-of-print. Chapter 20, 'Metre'.

4. Books containing discussions of poetry by poets

McCully, C B. *The Poet's Voice and Craft*. Carcanet, 1994.

5. Books on reading and criticism in general

Bloom, H. *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*. Macmillan, 1994; Papermac, 1996. Chapters 1 and 23.

Eaglestone, R. *Doing English: a Guide for Literature Students*. Routledge, 2002.

Admirably lucid coverage of many central issues in literary studies, though occasionally brash in treatment of traditionalists.

McDonald, Ronan. *The Death of the Critic* (Continuum, 2007). Explains how the rise of radical literary theory and the professionalization of reading have changed how critics write about literature.

Lewis, C S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge University Press, Canto Series, 1961, 1992. Especially Chapter X

Note Students of the Institute of Continuing Education are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current Institute course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

Information correct as of: 06 December 2018