Welcome to the Intro to Poetry. We’ll be reading a lot of poems over the next few months. You may have read some of them before in other contexts. You may not. That doesn’t really matter. No prior experience is required. **We will not be writing any poems.** Let me repeat that statement, so that there is no confusion: **We will not be writing any poems.** But we will be learning how to read poems, learning how to read them once, read them aloud, read them again (more carefully), read them yet again, and try to figure out more precisely how they work, what they mean, and what’s going on in them, on the surface and beneath the surface. Consider, by way of illustrating one of the things we’ll be trying above all to do, the following quote from Robert Frost in a 1946 essay for the Atlantic Monthly:

“There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority.”

In other words, there is almost always something going on under the surface of a poem, just as there is often something going on under the surface of most other forms of speech. But poetry is more particularly in that business than other discourses, and we will treat with the appropriate care and attention.

We’ll also try to figure out, for example, how and why poetry is different from other modes of writing and speaking. We’ll be talking about some aspects of poetry that it’s important for you to know to have a passing familiarity with the genre. We’ll learn about rhyme, meter, imagery, sound, among other things. We’ll learn about different kinds of poems – sonnets, odes, ballads, blank verse, free verse, iambic pentameter, and a whole lot of other stuff. It’s likely that a lot of this information will be new to you, because poetry isn’t read or discussed as much as it used to be. The most important things to carry with you on this journey will be that you not be afraid (it’s just a bunch of words, perhaps new words, perhaps arranged in a different order from what you are used to seeing, but nothing that can hurt you), and that you keep an open mind (the worst thing that can happen to you is that nothing happens to you after you’ve read these poems – oh well; the best thing that can happen to you is that something will happen to you that will change the way you see the world, or yourself, or other people – and that would be fantastic).

**Class Policies:**
**Attendance/Tardiness**

Attendance forms part of the final grade. If you come to every class, you will ace that part of the grade. It’s like free money. Of course, there are always circumstances which arise from time to time that make it impossible for you to attend. Accordingly, you may miss up to three classes without penalty. However, attendance will be taken, so records of attendance will be kept. Needless to say, you may not sign in for someone else, nor may you have someone else sign in for you. That would be very bad. Absences in excess of three classes will begin the process of nibbling away at your attendance grade. For every class you miss after three, there will be an incremental reduction in your attendance grade. However (and this is very important), missing a class does not obviate the need for you to do the reading (see the note about exams above). If you miss a class, it is still your responsibility to do the reading, and it is also your responsibility to find out what happened in the class discussion. Also, you really can’t afford to be absent on days when an exam is scheduled. As far as tardiness is concerned, please try to avoid it if at all possible. If you’re unavoidably late, please get to class as soon as you can. Above all, please do not disrupt the class if you are late. Please take your seat with as little disruption as possible. The class will start on time whether you’re there or not, and it will not stop as you arrive. If you enter as quietly as possible, the class can continue smoothly without being de-railed by your arrival.

**Participation**

Participation is also part of the final grade (it’s bundled with attendance). This is not to say that you have to be talking all the time and waving your hands in the air to get the instructor’s attention. Obviously, everyone is different. Some people don’t like to talk in class. You can participate by contributing comments to the discussion. You can also participate by paying attention to the discussion. Active non-participation (sleeping, zoning out, and conducting conversations outside of the discussion) will jeopardize your participation grade.

**Classroom Etiquette**

The classroom should be an oasis of civility and calm, away from all the noise in the rest of our lives. It’s where we talk about things that we don’t get the chance to talk about anywhere else. We get to talk about art, about ideas, about reading. This is a rare opportunity for us to engage in an activity that probably doesn’t happen in any other part of our day. So let’s try to give the class, and each other, the respect we all deserve. In other words, let’s be respectful to each other. That means not conducting any side conversations, whispered or otherwise. That means being on time (see attendance above). And it means conducting a conversation with as much respect for each other as possible. That doesn’t mean that all discussion has to flow through the instructor, but it does mean that we should try to achieve an engaging and fulfilling conversation with each other as we discuss these works of literature before us. It means that we listen to each other, and that we try to respond to the comments and the thoughts of others.

**Cellphones and Other Electronic Devices** This is connected to Classroom Etiquette above. For the love of all that is good and holy, please DO NOT USE YOUR CELLPHONES IN CLASS. In any
way at all. Not to send text messages; not to check your Facebook page; not to tweet; not for any reason. During regular class discussion periods, you are asked merely to observe the simple courtesy of not using your phones or electronic devices. We are trying to foster an atmosphere of focused and intelligent consideration of literary history. We can’t do that properly if we’re texting our friends about how dull the instructor is. The instructor may well be very dull indeed, but we owe it to each other to suspend our urges for telecommunication for at least 75 minutes, at least twice a week. If we can’t do that, we’re probably doomed as a civilization.

**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is bad. Don’t do it. Plagiarism, roughly defined, involves using someone else’s words, and passing them off as your own. This usually happens in papers or other written assignments. Sometimes it happens inadvertently, by not attributing quoted materials to their proper sources. Sometimes it happens more deliberately, when someone else’s writing is lifted wholesale and inserted into a paper or test. It’s usually fairly easy to tell when this has happened, because the plagiarized words sound a lot better than the words around them. That’s kind of a clue to the instructor. The penalty for plagiarism is severe. You’ll fail the assignment, which will probably mean that you’ll fail the class, since it’s hard to recover from losing a significant percentage of your grade. It will also mean that your assignments will be subject to a great deal more scrutiny. So do yourself a favor – if you’re quoting, then learn how to quote properly. Then there will be no doubt about who is talking. And if you complete the assignment yourself, you’ll have the genuine satisfaction of having had an original thought and expressed it in your own way, rather than the anxiety of wondering whether you instructor is going to find out that you had neither. It’s just not worth it. Plus, karma.

**Study Methods:**

**Reading**

We read all the time, even when we’re not aware of it. We read signs, instructions, advertisements, pamphlets, cereal boxes. But in this class we will be reading deliberately, and intensively. Reading can be hard, because it requires that we turn on as many of our sensors as possible. We won’t just be reading across the top of these texts; we’ll be reading into them, trying to understand what is happening on as many levels as possible. Some of those levels of reading include the following:

**Sense**

This might be the most basic reading level. What do the words mean, individually, and in the order in which we see them on the page. Who is speaking? What are they speaking about? To whom are they speaking? Are there things we don’t understand? How might be clarify that gap in our understanding? Is it merely that there are words we don’t recognize, or are there things happening that make no sense to us? All of this might seem relatively straightforward, but it is also a potentially deceptive activity – in other words, we might think we understand what is going on, but perhaps there is more going on than we realize initially. By the same token, we might think that we have no idea what is happening in a text, but perhaps we know more than
we give ourselves credit for. We just have to remain patient, and keep working on our reading.

**Context**
There is always context for a piece of literature. Poems and stories never exist in a vacuum. Authors have histories; authors exist in history; they are social beings, produced and influenced by their circumstances. Those circumstances can be more or less important in informing our reading of a given text. We can add what we know about the author, and the historical circumstances of the literary work’s production, to our sense of the text, to our analysis of it.

**Analysis**
With analysis we move to the next level, after reading for a basic sense of “what is happening,” to try to determine what is going on behind the basic meaning. We do this by analyzing the way the language is organized; the way words live next to each other, what is left out, in addition to what is included.

**Meaning**
By analysis, we come closer to understanding the meaning(s) of a text. Notice the parenthetical (s) in that last sentence. This suggests that there may be more than one meaning in a given text. Does a poem only ever mean one thing? Is there a single answer to a poem or a story that puzzles us? Probably not. There are almost always at least two meanings to any document we might read, particularly a literary document. Some meanings are more plausible than others. Some meanings are fairly unlikely. We have to talk about which meanings make more or less sense.

**Interpretation**
That’s where interpretation comes in. Having satisfied ourselves that we understand all of the words in a text; having analyzed the way the poem or story is organized; having arrived at meanings that make at least some sense, we are then in a position to come up with some kind of interpretation. This is our version, an intellectualized take, with justifications, close analysis, argument and examples, of what the text is really doing.

**A Reading**
If we can perform all of the tasks above, and come up with our own cogent articulation of as much as possible of what we think is going on in a given text, we have then performed A Reading, as distinct from “reading.” This is no mean feat, and something to be rather proud of. We will learn together how to do this. And, who knows, you may find that cereal boxes, pamphlets, advertisements and other stray pieces of text become more interesting once you really know how to read them closely.

**Assignments, Exams, and Grades:**
Exam I: (15%)
Exam II: (25%)
Exam III: Response, Close Reading & Analysis (35%)
Participation (15%) & Attendance (10%)  See above
Class Schedule

Class 1 (1/18): Administration, Introduction & Stars
Taylor, Jane – “The Star”

Class 2 (1/23): STARS (Continued)
Taylor, Janet – “The Star”
Sandburg, Carl – “Summer Stars”
Keats, John – “Bright Star”

Class 3 (1/25): America
Whitman, Walt – “I Hear America Singing”
Whitman, Walt – “America”
Lazarus, Emma – “The New Colossus”
Hughes, Langston – “I, Too, Sing America”
McKay, Claude – “America”

Class 4 (1/30) & Class 5 (2/1): Sonnets – Petrarchan, Shakespearean, Spenserian
Wyatt, Sir Thomas – “I Find No Peace”
Shakespeare, William – XVIII, “Shall I Compare Thee To a Summer’s Day?”
Shakespeare, William – CXXX, “My Mistress’ Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun”
Spenser, Edmund – from Amoretti LXXV, “One day I wrote her name upon the strand”

Class 6 (2/6) & Class 7 (2/8): Ballads
Wordsworth, William – “We Are Seven”
Wordsworth, William – “Strange Fits of Passion I Have Known”
Wordsworth, William – “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways”
Wordsworth, William – “Three Years She Grew”
Wordsworth, William – “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”

Class 8 (2/13): Conversation Poems
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor – “The Eolian Harp”
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor – “Frost at Midnight”

Class 9: 2/15: Review Part One

Class 10: 2/20: Midterm I – Sonnets & Ballads

Class 11 (2/22): Birds I – Keats & Hardy
Keats, John – “Ode to a Nightingale”
Hardy, Thomas – “The Darkling Thrush”
Smith, Charlotte – “To a Nightingale”
Class 12 (2/27) Birds II – Frost & Thomas
Frost, Robert – “The Oven Bird”
Thomas, Edward – “The Owl”

Class 13 (3/1): Birds III – Shelley & Stevens
Shelley, Percy Bysshe – “To a Skylark”
Stevens, Wallace – “Of Mere Being”

Class 14 (3/6): Birds IV – Stevens
Stevens, Wallace – “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

Class 15 (3/8): Birds V – Hopkins
Hopkins, Gerard Manley – “The Windhover”

Class 16 (3/20): Midterm II - Birds

Class 17 (3/22): Warren and Creeley
Penn Warren, Robert – “Bearded Oaks”
Creeley, Robert – “The Rain”

Class 18 (3/27): Merwin, Roethke, & Wilbur
Merwin, W.S. – “The Bathers”
Roethke, Theodore – “The Visitant”
Wilbur, Richard – “The Beautiful Changes”

Class 19: (3/29): Heaney
Heaney, Seamus – “Digging”
Heaney, Seamus – “Death of a Naturalist”

Class 20: (4/3): Brooks & Clifton
Brooks, Gwendolyn – “kitchenette building”
Brooks, Gwendolyn – “a song in the front yard”
Brooks, Gwendolyn – “my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell”
Brooks, Gwendolyn – “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother”
Clifton, Lucille – “blessing the boats”
Clifton, Lucille – “here rests”
Clifton, Lucille – “cutting greens”
Clifton, Lucille – “homage to my hips”

Class 21 (4/5): Valentine & Smith
Valentine, Jean – “Actuarial File”
Smith, Tracy K. – “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?”
Class 22 (4/10): Ekphrasis
O’Hara, Frank – “Why I Am Not a Painter”
Ashbery, John – “The Painter”

Class 23 (4/12): Imagists
Pound, Ezra – “In a Station of the Metro”
Williams, William Carlos – “The Red Wheelbarrow”
Williams, William Carlos – “Spring and All”

Class 24 (4/17): Faith & Doubt
Arnold, Matthew – “Dover Beach”

Class 25 (4/19): “Visions & Revisions”

How does a poem become a poem? When does it become a poem?


Class 27 (4/26): Stars II
Sexton, Anne – “The Starry Night”
Hopkins, Gerard Manley – “The Starlight Night”
Smith, Tracy K. – “My God, It’s Full of Stars”

Class 28 (5/1): Review/Evaluation

Class 29 (5/3): Exam III