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Creative Writing Introduction

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English 22000, Introduction to Creative Writing
Professor Gandal
T-TH, 3:30-4:45
Room: NAC 6/106

Office hours: after class and by appointment; Zoom meetings are an option for conferences
Email: kgandal@ccny.cuny.edu

Description:

Students in this course will begin to learn the art of writing and rewriting stories, poems, and one-act plays.

Requirements:

Participation in writing workshop, weekly writing assignments, a short story, a poem, a short one-act play, and a final exam. (Submissions in **doc or docx format**.)

Texts:

Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry and Other Stories* (you can find this book free online)
Daniel Halpern, ed., *Plays in One Act* (you can find the plays online)
Joel Conarroe, ed., *Six American Poets* (you can find the poems online):
 Hughes, Dickinson, Frost
Short stories (all of which are available online)

Further Description:

This course is designed for the student who has interest and potential in creative writing. While it is assumed that the writers in the course are essentially beginners, *students who do not already possess a love of literature and writing and a strong desire to improve their work should not take the course.*

Creative Writing differs from almost all other courses in a few basic ways. First, *you the student are the subject matter of the course.* Your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions are the stuff out of which your stories and poems must be written. Second, your willingness to know yourself and explore who you are and how you understand the world are basic to developing as a writer. If you are not willing or able to engage in this kind of exploration, share it with other students, receive commentary on your writing, or give (honest yet constructive) reactions to other students' writing, this course is not for you. Third, anything of value you may have to say is, in this course, directly dependent on your skill in using the English language. Thus much of the course will center on helping you to find what you have to say that is worth saying and then discovering the best way to say it. Finding fresh ways to see and to say things is absolutely essential to good writing. Superficial perceptions and clichés are touches of death in creative writing.

More on Attendance and Class Participation:

Because your fellow students are dependent on you to help them with their work, your failure to attend class is detrimental to them as well as to me. *It is imperative that students come to class prepared to participate* -- indeed, this is not at all optional, you will be called upon directly every day. It is also imperative that you post assignments at the assigned times. Since classes depend on work coming in when it is due, if students fail to meet agreed upon deadlines, the class will not work. Remember, you are the subject matter of this course, and if you fail to produce that subject matter (written work) whole classes can be undermined (in other words, writer's block is not allowed, and last minute excuses are not

accepted). Needless to say, it is a big problem if we come to class planning to discuss someone's work and that work or that student is not available. (You are allowed 2 absences during the semester, but it is not permitted on a day when you are responsible for presenting material in class.)

Ground Rules:

A creative writing class is a cooperative enterprise. All semester we will be revealing our inner selves and commenting on each other's work. This can only take place in an atmosphere of mutual trust and consideration. A writer's best friend is the person who can give the most constructive criticism, because the more the work can be improved, the better the story (and the final grade) will be. I will ask you to help each other by reading each other's work, and by making pertinent suggestions. Most of our classes will be workshops: students will post assignment and excerpts from works in progress and we will read them, discuss them, and try to revise them. Not all writing problems lend themselves to easy solutions; classes can become tedious as we struggle with recalcitrant issues; but if everyone comes prepared to participate and be of assistance, everyone will benefit. I will provide comments on all drafts submitted to me, so students should have a very clear idea of what I think about their work. *While I am more than willing to make every possible correction in your work, I dislike marking the same mistakes over and over again.* You should proofread your work and correct spelling and grammar mistakes before handing it in. Use the writing center if you need help with grammar.

A note on appropriate behavior in class discussion: please respect your fellow students as you participate. Don't cut others off; don't dominate the discussion; don't whisper to your neighbor as others speak; don't crack your gum or eat noisily. You are welcome to challenge others' comments, but do it in a way that is tactful; don't sneer or mock or yell; disagree openly but calmly. Don't text or call or receive calls or texts in class. As for writing, respect your fellow students' sensibilities and our college environment: do not submit material that is pornographic, gratuitously violent, purposefully offensive, and so on.

Note on Office Hours and Email: In general, unless you have a disability and therefore need special accommodations, *email is for emergencies or for setting up an online appointment or for basic questions:* for example, if you want to let me know, out of politeness, that you are going to miss more than one class. If you do miss a class, do not email to ask what we did in class or if there are any new assignments. Refer to the syllabus for the latter. If you miss a class, get the notes from a fellow student, and, after going over these notes on your own, make an appointment and talk to me in office hours, with those notes in hand, if you have questions. In general, some questions we can handle by email.

Emails should have clear subject lines, so I know what the issue is; they should also be professionally written, like a letter. If you email me for reasons others than the ones described here and without meeting the conditions also described here, do not expect an answer. I am accessible to you at class, immediately after, and during appointments; make use of those opportunities if you want further discussion.

Grading:

Grade values are as follows:	
Class participation and presentation:	25%
Weekly writing assignments (including poem):	10%
Short story:	30%
Play:	25%
Final exam (performance):	10%

Note: Students are required to participate actively in the classroom. It will be unlikely for students who do not participate actively to get a participation grade above a "C."

The procedure for reading and writing assignments during the first half of the semester:

In addition to the creative writing assignment that you are to choose and complete in the first couple of weeks, you are also to write a **reaction paper to one of the published works** that we will discuss in class (due the day the work will be discussed). This paper should be 1 page. You can answer the questions below in regards in completing this assignment.

Before we get to writing a full, unprompted story, you are to write (any) **one** of the short **creative writing exercises** that have prompts. (See schedule below for options.) Your posted piece should make clear who you are and which assignment you are addressing, by use of a title. You can choose to do any one of the suggested assignments, as long as we have as a class read the published story corresponding to that assignment. (You will be assigned to group A or group B, and you will be posting your writing every other week.) This assignment may be **as short as 1 page and no longer than 2 pages, double-spaced.**

Starting with the second class, you will be reading other students' work as part of your weekly assignment, and part of each class will be devoted to a writing workshop (on the student work posted). Read all the posted student writing. Class days below that have no reading assignment of published authors are devoted entirely to workshops. Part of your grade is based on class participation. (So print out student writing off the blackboard, mark it up, and write down commentary that you can discuss in class--or you can do it online with track changes, and afterwards send it to the writer by email.)

Creative writing short story assignments (not reaction papers, not poems, and not plays) **are due on the class blackboard posting site Sunday morning, by 4:00 a.m.** (which I note only for the first assignment for each group). This gives everyone ample time to read before class on Tuesday, the day we begin discussing student writing assignments. Reaction papers can be handed in in class. For poems and plays, post by 1 hour before class time.

Reaction paper:

Answer the following questions in your 1 page reaction paper:

- Why do you like or dislike this story, poem, or one-act play? What struck you?
 - What makes this story, poem, or play effective (effectively told or presented) or ineffective?
 - Comment on the beginning, the climax, and the end.
 - What does this story, poem, or play tell you (or leave you with) that you didn't know?
-

Checklist of requirements, in addition to writing a short story (4-5 pages), a poem (one stanza), and a one-act play (4 pages):

- **one reaction paper to a story, poem, or play (1 page, double spaced)**
- **one creative story writing exercise out the numerous suggestions below (1-2 pages, double spaced)**
- **one drama writing exercise (to be discussed in detail later)**

Note: If you have a disability or need any special accommodations, please email me. Or talk to me outside of class.

Course Learning Outcomes:

Upon successful completion of this course:

1. Students will be able to produce (write and revise) a short short story.

2. Students will be able to produce (write and revise) a short one-act play.
3. Students will be able to produce (write and revise) a poem.
4. Students will be able to critique stories, poems, and one-act plays, in terms of their effectiveness (for the reader or viewer).

The following is a tentative schedule:

Aug 25 Introduction - the Short Story: class procedures, designate A and B groups

Aug 30 Everyone post a document containing a 2-sentence story (2 *short* sentences)
(on Discussion board on blackboard).

(Everyone reads the published works as assigned.)

Read: Isaac Babel, "The Story of My Dovecot"

<https://markmcbride.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/isaac-babels-the-story-of-my-dovecot-fulltext/>

(discuss titles, set-ups / "misdirection," tension, conflict, mix of tones
[comic / tragic], dramatic centers / climaxes)

Sept 1 Read: Babel, "First Love"
(discuss linked stories)

Read: Babel, "In the Basement"
(discuss denouements / epilogues)

3 other Babel stories:

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.65784/page/n234/mode/2up>

I've set the url here to page 235 of the PDF (232 of the scanned book), "First Love." "In the Basement" begins on page 257 (260). "My First Goose" begins on p. 67 (64).

Read: Anton Chekhov, "A Gentleman Friend"
(discuss endings)

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/57333/57333-h/57333-h.htm#id01239>

Sept 6 **GROUP A** is writing & posting on blackboard (by 4 a.m. on Sunday, Sept 4.)
Write: **Exercise. 1-2 pages** (several choices below).

(Everyone is *always* reading *all* student work posted.)

(Regarding: Babel, "The Story of My Dovecot")

Write: the thing you most wanted as a child and what happened or

first brush with a parent's vulnerability or
first realization that the world is dangerous or hateful

(Regarding: Babel, "First Love")

Write: first love or crush or

first shame or

first moment you lost your total adulation for parent(s)

(Regarding: Babel, "In the Basement")

Write: embarrassment by your family in front of a friend

(Regarding: Anton Chekhov, "A Gentleman Friend")

Write: most embarrassing or painful experience

Sept 8 Discussion of Group A Exercise continued

Sept 13 **GROUP B** is writing. Write: exercise (**choices above and below**).
Group B students need to post by 4 a.m., Sunday, Sept 11)

Read: Babel, "My First Goose"

Write: moment you proved yourself or failed to or
first act of violence you committed

See Above for Babel

Read: Zora Neale Hurston, "Spunk"
(discuss endings, epilogues, p.o.v.)

Write: portrait of your class or gang and what happened to it

<https://www.sps186.org/downloads/basic/762878/SPUNK.pdf>

Sept 15 Discussion of Group B Exercise continued

Read: Dorothy Parker, "You Were Perfectly Fine"
(discuss character, setting, tone, mood, irony, surprise, p.o.v.)

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.184951/page/n351/mode/2up>

Read: Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find"
(discuss titles, set-ups / foreshadowing, stakes, suspense, horror, shock/
surprise, character transformation, moral conflict)

<https://www.pothe.org/documents/2017/1/The-Complete-Stories-Flannery-OConnor.pdf>
search for "good man"

Read: Franz Kafka, "Hunger Artist"
(discuss the surreal)

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.185152/page/n209/mode/2up>

Sept 20 **GROUP A** is writing. Write: **first half of your story (2-3 pages)**
Sept 22 Discussion of Group A First-Half of Story continued

Sept 27 & 29: **NO CLASS !**

Oct 4 **NO CLASS !**

Oct 6 **GROUP B** is writing. Write: first half of your story (2-3 pages)

Oct 11 Discussion of Group B First-Half of Story continued

Oct 13 **GROUP A** is writing. Write: **entire draft of your story (5 pages max)**

NOTE: GROUP A must also post by Sunday, Oct 9, 4 a.m.

Oct 18 Discussion of Group A Entire Story continued

Oct 20 **GROUP B** is writing. Write: draft of your story (5 pages)

NOTE: GROUP B must post by Sunday, Oct 16, 4 a.m.

Oct 25 Discussion of Group B Entire Story continued

Oct 27 MOP-UP day -- Discussion of stories cont.

Nov 1 ***Finish and turn in (by class time): final version of your story***

Begin Poetry:

Langston Hughes, "Harlem" ([available online](#))

Emily Dickinson, #288, 303, 405, 435, 579, 754:

"I'm nobody, who are you?"

"The soul selects her own society"

"Much madness is divinest sense"

"I had been hungry all the years"

"My life had stood a loaded gun"

"It might be lonelier

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MGTurroqn3YfG3bufGvlviedLaXU2VdgCE0ZZ5UbFqU/edit?usp=sharing>

-- a doc with the link to all the poems

Nov 3 Poetry -- Robert Frost, "Directive"

Begin writing a poem (everyone). Write a stanza (at least).

Post it before class. Be ready to read it out in class or have someone else read it.

With poems and plays, post an hour before class time.

Nov 8 Begin One-Act Plays

Read: Arthur Miller, *The Last Yankee* (*not available online*); Wendy Wasserstein,
Tender Offer (**Available online in PDF on blackboard**)

Write (everyone): 1-page play that begins with the line: "I lied to you last time we talked" or "Did you bring it?"

Nov 10 **Write: Group B:** first half of one-act (**maximum: 2 pages: 2-3 minutes**)
Read: C. Durang, *Naomi in the Living Room*; R. Greenberg, *Life Under Water*
(Both plays available on YouTube)

Nov 15 Group B: first half of one-act continued
Nov 17 **Write: Group A:** first half of one-act

Nov 22 Group A: first half of one-act continued
Nov 24 **NO CLASS !**

Nov 29 **Write: Group B:** draft of entire one-act (**maximum: 4 pages: 5 minutes**)
Dec 1 Group B: entire one-act cont.

Dec 6 **Write: Group A:** draft of entire one-act
Dec 8 Group A: entire one-act cont.

Dec 13 Final rehearsals if necessary; begin performances

Dec 15 or 20* Final exam day: Continue & finish performances

(*day and time our final exam period not yet determined by administration)