

Lyric Conditions: Survival & Reproduction 18thc–Present

Prof. Lenora Hanson
Thursday 2:00-4:45 PM

What does abortion have to do with the Anthropocene? How is the legal right to termination connected to ecological predictions of extinction? This course will consider the tools that lyric poetry gives us to answer these questions.

Since the Romantic period, lyric poetry has been concerned with the vexed separation between the living and nonliving, the human and the nonhuman. This genre repeatedly demonstrates that our ideas about life and the human are neither self-evident or fixed. Indeed, the lyric often suggests that survival and reproduction are not natural but political processes, the result of decisions that we make about what constitutes life and what deserves to live on. For these reasons, lyric language often animates social and political struggles over personhood and rights, gender and race, and species and collective existence.

This class will treat the lyric as a specific case of poetry and a general condition of concern over reproduction and survival. We will read from eighteenth-century poetry up to contemporary poetry, and from critical writing on literature, ecology and politics. Moving between William Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith, Charles Baudelaire and Walt Whitman, Gwendolyn Brooks and Claudia Rankine, we will consider the lyric as a site in which a variety of contestations and crises regarding the living and non-living, the human and non-human, intersect.

Course goals:

1. To become conversant with multiple, and sometimes conflicting, poetic practices and critical vocabularies that have shaped lyric poetry.
2. To generate connections between the form and rhetoric of lyric poetry and what we will call “lyric conditions.” In other words, we will look for ways in which the formal and rhetorical features of lyric poetry appear in a range of “conditions” defined by their reference to life or the living: environmental, reproductive, biological and otherwise.
3. To investigate the politics and ethics that emerge from an indistinction between the human and nonhuman, persons and things, and the living and non-living, as well as to consider the extent to which these distinctions hold in daily life.

Required Texts (Available at the NYU Bookstore)

Clare, John. *“I am” : The Selected Poetry of John Clare*. ed. Jonathan Bate. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003

Halpern, Rob. *Common Place*. New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2015

Rankine, Claudia. *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*. Saint Paul, MN: Greywolf Press, 2004

Assignments

Bi-Weekly Posts and Responses: 20% (Begins 2/8)

Each week, students will post writing to the Forum page of NYU Classes. Students will be broken into two groups. Group A will write a direct response to one or more of our readings for the upcoming week. Group B will respond the next week. (This should be a sustained reflection on a passage, phrase, or stanza that you find compelling in its deepening or development of our class theme and ongoing discussions.) On weeks that Group A posts, each member of Group B is required to respond to *at least one* of the individual posts from Group A and vice-versa. No posts or responses will be due on weeks when an assignment is due. All posts should be 200 words or more.

Participation: 20%

University classrooms provide the space and time to engage with strange, provocative, and sometimes difficult subjects and objects. In this space and time, we have the exceptional and risky opportunity to engage those subjects and objects with people who may be complete strangers to us, and to communicate experiences, thoughts, and struggles that may push us to our cognitive limits. This formation of community, with its intensity and strange composition, is almost impossible to find on a regular basis otherwise. The extent to which we can create a collective, social situation out of this arrangement depends upon each, individual contribution, in each, individual class.

Participation requires that we each **read, prepare, and annotate our texts before coming to class; that we express interest in others' ideas and offer ours in exchange during *each class*; and that we treat each other respectfully.** Please make an effort to respond directly to other classmates, to build on their ideas with your own, and to not shy away from offering provisional or unfinished thoughts.

Short paper (Due 3/8): 20%

A 3–4 page close reading of the figural and formal features of one of our class poems. A detailed assignment description will be provided later in the semester.

Final Project (Due 5/10): 40%

This project will ask you to apply the figural and/or formal elements of one of our class poems as a lens for a lyric condition. Throughout the semester we will see multiple models of what this translation looks like, in authors who displace the techniques of the lyric onto Guantanamo Bay, abortion, philosophy, capitalism (between the 19th century and today), environmental destruction, the genocide of indigenous populations, and others.

In your final project, you will develop your own theory of how lyric poetry might remake or refashion a condition or situation that does not immediately itself appear poetic. This will require both close reading, textual analysis, and research. Your project could take the form of a traditional course paper, an experimental textual or visual project, a manifesto, etc. For those projects that are not traditional course paper, please see me as early as possible so that we can discuss mutual expectations of the project.

A one-page final project proposal will be due in advance on **4/19**. Further information about the proposal will be provided later in the semester.

****Extra Credit:** Should you wish to facilitate discussion of one or more of our texts below, you can volunteer to lead the first part of our class discussion. If you would like to participate in this manner, please let me know in advance and we will consult over email about the structure and content of your facilitation.

Course Policies

Assignments

Detailed assignment instructions will be distributed in class and made available on NYU Classes. If you are away the day an assignment is distributed, please access it online. You are encouraged to read the description closely and ask for clarification early. Assignments are due on the days indicated on the syllabus (**double-spaced, 12-pt font, Times New Roman or Cambria**) on NYU Classes. Handing in assignments late prevents your instructor from giving your work timely attention and feedback; please be respectful of our work schedules and hand them in on time. Late assignments will be penalized 5% per day.

Attendance

Course assignments are entirely premised on our readings and in-class discussion. For this reason, it will be very difficult to receive a satisfactory grade if you do not attend all classes except in the case of an emergency. Because we meet only once a week, if you miss more than 3 classes you will receive a failed grade.

Electronics

This class is an opportunity for us to engage one another through discussion and listening. As you probably know from unsociable siblings, inattentive significant others, and/ or working in customer service, good conversations are impossible to have when laptops, cell phones, tablets, e-readers, etc. get in the way. For this reason, they are not allowed in the classroom. ***Please bring print copies of all readings to class. Please collate readings in a binder and bring previous ones to class so that we can refer to them continuously.*** Be respectful of your classmates and teachers and turn cell phones off upon entering the classroom.

NYU Classes Website

Assignment details and course readings (as pdfs) will be posted on the NYU Classes site. Writing responses and resources for assignments will also be located here.

Communication

For questions about course content, assignments, assessment and special situations, the best thing to do is stop by my office hours and speak to me in person. If emailing, I will try my best to respond within 24–48 hours. *If I do not respond it is because the answer to your question is on this syllabus.*

Disabilities

(I use the term disability on this syllabus to recognize that that we live in a world that systematically discriminates between some abilities and others, not as a term that accurately describes any bodies or lives.) The Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (mosescsd@nyu.edu; 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor; tel. 212.998.4980) can provide assistance in

making arrangements for assignments to ensure your full participation and contribution to this course. I must be notified **at the beginning of semester** if you have made such arrangements with the Center.

The Writing Center

You are encouraged to use the resources of NYU's Writing Center, where tutors can give you one-on-one help with your written assignments. <http://ewp.cas.nyu.edu/object/writing.center>

Reading Schedule

Print and bring ALL readings to each class session

1/25 Introductions

Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe"; Percy Shelley, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

2/1 Christina Rossetti, "Life and Death"; Walt Whitman, "Apostroph"; Mahmoud Darwish, "We Have the Right to Love Autumn"; Francis Ponge, from *Soap*; Aja Monet, "the emerging woman after aborting a girl"; Harry Cleaver, Excerpts from "On Schoolwork"

** (Bring in handouts distributed in previous class)

Unit One: Persons, Animals, Things

2/8 Percy Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," Anna Laetitia Barbauld, "The Little Invisible Being," "The Mouse's Petition"; Gwendolyn Brooks, "the mother"; Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion"

2/15 William Wordsworth from *The Prelude*, Books 1, 5–7, 12; From "The Lucy Poems," "She dwelt among the untrodden ways," "A slumber did my spirit seal"

2/22 Giacomo Leopardi, "The Broom Plant (La Ginestra)" and from *Zibaldone*; Percy Shelley, "To a Sky-Lark"; John Keats "Ode to A Nightingale"

3/1 Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric," "The Wound Dresser," "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand"; Rob Halpern, from *Commonplace*: "Hoc Est Corpus," "False Communique" (50–60), "Cavities of Light," "The Ligature," "A Note on These Proceedings," "Funeral Rites," "A New Economy of Bodies and Pleasures," "Correspondences" (99–105)

3/8 Charles Baudelaire, from *Flowers of Evil* and *Paris Spleen*; Walter Benjamin, from *The Arcades Project*, "J Baudelaire" and "M Flaneur"

****Short paper due**

3/15 SPRING BREAK

Unit Two: Survival, Reproduction, Futures

3/22 John Clare, from "Helpstone," "What is Life," "Song ('Swamps of wild rush-beds and slough's squashy traces')," "The Moors," "The Eternity of Nature," "Decay: A Ballad," "[The

Lament of Swordy Well],” “[Field -Mouse’s Nest],” “[Birds at Evening]” “Recollections of Journey from Essex,” “Lines: I Am,” “Sonnet: I Am”

3/29 Wordsworth, “Intimations Ode,” “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman”; S.T. Coleridge, “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “The Foster-Mother’s Tale”; “Robert Southey, “Songs of the American Indian”; William Bartram, “Chapter III.,” from *An Account of the Persons, Manners, Customs, and Government of the Muscogules or Creeks, Cherokees and Choctaws, &c*; Gerald Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance”

4/5 William Blake, “Daughters of Albion” (and images); Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven”; Jordy Rosenberg, “Sky Veins of Potosi”

4/12 Stephen Duck, “The Thresher’s Labor,” Mary Collier, “Women’s Labour,”; Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Washing Day”; Marianna Dalla Costa, “Women and the Subversion of Community”

4/19 Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women*; Lindsay Turner “Essays on Working”

****Final Project proposal**

4/26 “Law of Mother Earth/Rights of Our Planet”; Anna Tsing; Excerpts from *Mushroom at the End of the World*

5/3 Claudia Rankine, *Don’t Let me be Lonely*; Sofia Samatar, “Skin Feeling”

Final Project Due: 5/10

Close Reading Paper: Apostrophe and Inequality

Lenora Hansen, New York University

Length: 3–4 pages (excluding Works Cited)

Times New Roman font; Double-spaced; 1-inch margins

Due: 3/22 on NYU Classes by 5 PM

(Please refer to your syllabus for my policy on late papers)

...the poet addresses, gives animation, gives the capacity of responsiveness to the wind...not in order to make it speak but in order to make it listen to him...A power struggle starts up for control over the poem...

How does lyric poetry create inequality? How do the complexities of its animating voice(s) present us with speakers that are multiple, dependent, imposing all at the same time? What are the power effects of apostrophe’s tendency to make things appear alive?

When Barbara Johnson writes that both poetry and politics are possible because of inequality, she is reflecting on lyric poetry’s ability to maintain two or more seemingly contradictory

positions. After all, how else could Gwendolyn Brooks' *the mother* simultaneously claim that *the mother* killed her children *and* that she did not deliberately end their lives?

Lyric poetry highlights the possibility for the radical co-existence of difference because it maps the speaking "I" through multiple, precarious, and contested relations to and with others (I/Thou; She/It; You-audience/You-object; etc. etc.). In these relations, imbalances of power and struggles over agency, decision, and responsibility appear. Through a **close and attentive** consideration of the *particular* "I"s and "others" that appear in a given poem (mother/child, poet/wind, we/autumn, refugee/soap, and so on and so on), we get a better sense of the *particular* disparities produced by lyric's simple, basic unity of "I/Thou."

In this paper you will close read a poem to unpack how one lyric poem from our class produces inequality or irreconcilable differences through its use of address. Your task is 1) to disentangle the multiplicity of relations that lyric address creates and 2) to assess the *affect* produced by those relations. For this reason, I **do not** want you to offer a single, unifying conclusion at the end of your paper. In the body of your paper, spend time tracing the differences between subjects and objects, speakers and addressees in your poem. In your conclusion, consider the affect or feeling that these relationships enable (For instance, the affect Johnson associates with the competing claims elaborated in *the mother* is mourning. One affect Culler associates with apostrophic address to nature is embarrassment, another is force.)

****You may find it helpful to review the handout from Barbara Johnson's *The Surprise of the Other*, since it provides a list of ambiguous and paradoxical features of poetry.****

Close Reading Instructions

First: Spend time analyzing your poem of choice (as we have in class). Read it multiple times; annotate it; map out the different speakers, audiences, addressees, etc.. Then, write your close reading, paying attention to these differences.

Questions to ask yourself: Who is speaking? Does the poem make clear that someone is speaking or does it hide its production of voice? What is the relationship between the "I" and the "Thou" in your poem? Are there other implied speakers and audience? An unclear third person? A second person that muddles a subject in the poem with readers? Is there a clear speaker or poet established from the outset? Is that speaker clearly differentiated from a subject or object of address? Is it unclear who is speaking? Is it unclear who the subject or object of address is? Etc. etc.

Second: Consider how these different relationships produced by apostrophe and address create *specific* uncertain or unstable relationships throughout the poem. **Do not** remain at the level of a general uncertainty about life/death or I/Thou in your analysis. The point here is to show how your poem utilizes the uncertainty of address to create **particular and distinctive** effects.

For example, Mahmoud Darwish's "We Have the Right to Love Autumn" destabilizes the relationship between humans and objects when the speaker expresses a desire to be a piece of coal, or when he/she apostrophizes Autumn. But this doesn't tell us anything about the specific effects of this confusion between human/object or human/nature. We have to read closer and

think deeper to see that this destabilization plays off of the idea of rights and nature to destabilize the relationship between the human as a rights-bearing subject and rights as “natural.”

Questions to ask yourself: What specific contradictions or differences are put into play in your poem? Some of the ones we have discussed in our class include mastery and fragility; liberation and imprisonment; animation or inanimacy; murder and animation, etc. How does the poem use these contradictions? How does the involvement of specific speakers, listeners, and subjects affect the way we understand these oppositions? Are persons or things involved? Abstract entities (Nature), seasons (Autumn), or particularly strange objects (soap)? How do the entities involved contribute to the uncertainties of the poem?

Finally: Consider how the poem’s various apostrophes and addresses, contradictions and uncertainties produce an **affect or feeling** in the poem.

Questions to ask yourself: How might we understand the affect of the poem as the product of competing, even contradictory, assertions made by the poem? How do particular inequalities or differences produced by speakers, subjects, objects and listeners create the conditions for feeling? What is the affect, for instance, of Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” paradoxical assertion that poetry’s transformative effect on the world culminates in the deanimation of the poet-- Melancholy? Hope? Indebtedness (to the poet)?

Cautionary Notes

DO NOT share your paper through Google Docs. If you use Google Docs, download it as a Word document and then upload it to NYU Classes. One benefit of doing this is that Microsoft Word has a much better spell and grammar check.

DO format your Works Cited page using MLA format. You can rely on the MLA’s own style center for general guidelines (<https://style.mla.org/formatting-papers/>) or on other reliable online sources. Because we are relying on scanned excerpts of works, you will need to locate publication information for your poem through a simple Google search.

My grading rubric is simple. My comments will address the quality of your close reading as it is explained above; the overall organization of your paper and individual paragraphs (including transitions and topic sentences); and your fulfillment of each component of the project. Although I will comment on grammar, it will not factor into your final grade (assigned after our discussion of your paper) unless excessive errors get in the way of your reading and analysis.