**Poetry and Social Upheaval in America**
Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
Winter Session 2008

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## The Course

There are many ways to access our American past. Too often, we ignore poetry's unique ability to provide insight into periods of great change. This course will view crucial moments of 20th century history through the work of the poets who lived them and put their responses into verse. Ranging from war (both world wars and Vietnam) to Civil Rights and the Depression to Gay Rights, we will examine the "American century" through its poetry.

Our approach will focus on two key questions:

**(1) What (if any) were this poem's political aims when it was written and published?**

**(2) How does it seek to communicate them and why does it use this approach?**

These questions will be tools to help us attend to the interesting (sometimes beautiful) details and complex (sometimes blatant) ideas we find in these texts. And they will help us particularly to deal with the ideas—or expressions—we find unappealing. In the next six weeks, we will be discussing the most contentious political issues of the last 100 years—wars and whether they should be fought; rights and who should have them. Many of the issues here affect us—or people close to us—still today. By focusing on these key questions, I hope we can address these difficult issues head-on without feeling threatened or offended by the language or ideas we encounter.

## Meetings

Our weekly meetings will be directed mostly by your interests and ideas. To be prepared, you should come ready to discuss the poems for that week. One good approach would be to read the poems a few times and make marks on them as you read. Another might be to jot down a handful of questions about the texts or the ideas they communicate—either in the margins of the book or on a separate sheet.

I have selected a few poems which are not included in the Oxford Book of American Poetry. These selections, I will copy and hand out one week (or more, if possible) in advance.

## Further Resources

For starters, feel free to read all of the poems by these selected poets in the Oxford Book of American Poetry; this will enrich your understanding of the poet. Many further resources are easily accessible online. The Poetry Foundation's excellent website offers poems and biographical resources: www.poetryfoundation.org. A similar site is the Poetry Society of America: www.poets.org. A final site, which offers more critical resources, is the University of Illinois's Modern American Poetry: www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/ . I am, of course, glad to suggest further reading, as well. Feel free to ask me in class or over email.

**Readings**

**Week 1: The Great Depression** **January 7**

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|---|---|
| Frost: "Two Tramps in Mud Time" | p. 231 |
| Reznikof: "Beggar Woman" | p. 401 |

**Week 2: World War I & World War II** **January 14**

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|---|---|
| Seeger: "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" | copy |
| cummings: "next to god of course america i" | p. 395 |
| "i sing of olaf" | copy |
| Moore: "In Distrust of Merits" | copy |
| Bishop: "Roosters" | p. 547 |
| Auden: "September 1, 1939" | p. 504 |
| Jarrell: "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" | p. 609 |
| Sandburg: "Grass" | p. 248 |

**Week 3: Vietnam** **January 21**

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| Komunyakaa: "Tu Do Street" | p. 1033 |
| "Facing It" | p. 1035 |
| "Thanks" | p. 1034 |
| "We Never Know" | p. 1034 |
| Lowell: "Waking Early Sunday Morning" | p. 637 |
| Bly: "Johnson's Cabinet Watched By Ants" | p.742 |
| Duncan: "Up Rising" | copy |
| Merwin: "Some Last Questions" | copy |
| "The Asians Dying" | copy |

**Week 4: Civil Rights** **January 28**

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| Hughes: "The Weary Blues" | p. 468 |
| from Montage of a Dream Deferred | p. 469-474 |
| "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" | copy |
| "The Bitter River" | copy |
| "Blue Bayou" | copy |
| Brooks: "A Song in the Front Yard" | p. 623 |
| "We Real Cool" | p. 627 |
| "the mother" | p. 624 |
| "negro hero" | p. 625 |
| "Of De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery" | copy |
| "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" | copy |

**Week 5: Women's Rights** **February 4**

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| Plath: "Daddy" | p.892 |
| "The Applicant" | p. 887 |
| "Lady Lazarus" | p. 888 |
| "Edge" | p. 897 |
| "Tulips" | copy |
| Rich: "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" | p. 867 |
| "living in sin" | p. 868 |
| "Diving into the Wreck" | p. 872 |
| "Orion" | copy |
| "Planetarium" | copy |

**Week 6: Gay Rights** **February 11**

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| Bishop: "Crusoe in England" | p. 561 |
| "One Art" | p. 565 |
| Merrill: "Days of 1964" | p. 765 |
| Ginsberg: "Spinchter" | copy |
| Hacker: "Almost Aubade" | copy |
| Howard: "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals Reported to Have AIDS Virus" | copy |