

The Poetry of Wallace Stevens

Instructor: Andrew Goldstone

Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:15–3:05 p.m. in room 160-329

<http://www.stanford.edu/people/goldstone/stevens>

Description

This course is an intensive study of one of the greatest and most challenging twentieth-century poets, Wallace Stevens, from his early, playful lyrics to his monumental meditative sequences of the 1940s and 1950s. We will spend time learning and luxuriating in Stevens's language, but we will also pay critical attention to biographical and historical contexts. Some readings in the impressive body of scholarship on Stevens. Topics include: modernism 1910–1955, abstraction, literary politics in the 1930s, poetry and war, the late-Romantic lyric, philosophical poetry, the sequence form, poetic sound, humor, "late style." We conclude with a survey of Stevens's influence on later poets.

There is no formal prerequisite, but English 160 (Poetry and Poetics) is strongly recommended. This course will assume students have already studied the basic skills for interpreting and analyzing poetry, including poetic forms.

Readings

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose [CPP]*. New York: Library of America, 1997. Available at the Stanford Bookstore. amazon.com or other online retailers will be less expensive. Other collections of Stevens are not acceptable for this course.

Course reader. Selected Stevens scholarship and some more recent poetry in the Stevens tradition. Reader to be available at the Stanford Bookstore. Further readings will be available digitally through the library; if you are on the Stanford campus or logged in to a Stanford proxy, you can simply follow the links in the web and PDF versions of the syllabus.

The course texts and a further selection of sources relevant to Stevens will be placed on [reserve at Green Library](#).

Assignments and Grading

Seminar participation: 20%

Students are expected to come to class prepared and ready to engage in discussion. The purpose of the seminar format is to allow you to take intellectual risks, trying new ideas, ways of expressing yourself, styles of argumentation, and modes of collaborating with others; to encourage you to take these risks, participation is a major component of your grade. This component also depends on your timely completion of any response papers or other ungraded exercises I assign. You are, of course, expected to attend every class. If you have a serious reason why you must miss class, please contact me ahead of time. More than two unexcused absences will place you in danger of failing. If however you become seriously ill, *please stay home*, and get in touch with me as soon as you are well enough to do so.

Presentation and first paper: 30%

In the fifth week students will each give a ten-minute presentation on some of the material covered thus far. This presentation must make an argument about either one or two Stevens poems; it must also engage some of the assigned readings in Stevens scholarship. This presentation should then be written up as a 4–5 pp. paper. The presentation and the paper will be evaluated together.

Research paper: 50%

The seminar culminates in a research paper of moderate length, 10–14 pp. The topic is open, but the paper must invoke sources beyond those on the syllabus—other scholarly discussions and, possibly, further historical and poetic sources. I will meet with each student to help develop paper topics and bibliographies. The paper must argue for a distinctive interpretation or explanation of some aspect of Stevens's work, making extensive use of evidence from the poems as well from contexts supplied by scholarship. Comparative papers on Stevens's relation to a successor poet may be possible but will require initiative on the part of the student.

Administrative Details**Office Hours and How to Reach Me**

My office is 460–315. I will announce my standing office hours at the first class. I will also usually be available by appointment. I respond quickly to e-mails at andrew.goldstone@stanford.edu. For urgent questions, feel free to call my cell phone between 9 a.m. and 10 p.m.; I'll give out my number on the first day of class.

Honor Code

All students are to observe the Honor Code:

<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/vpsa/judicialaffairs/guiding/honorcode.htm>.

Students with Disabilities

Students who have a disability that may require an academic accommodation or the use of auxiliary aids and services should contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) as soon as possible so that accommodations can be arranged.

Class Schedule

Monday, January 3. Introduction.

Rapid tour of the course. Why Stevens?

(Wednesday, January 5. **Class to be rescheduled.**)

Harmonium (selections); early poems.

Read only the following: “Earthy Anecdote,” “The Snow Man,” “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” “Metaphors of a Magnifico,” “Ploughing on Sunday,” “Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule . . .,” “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” “Sunday Morning,” “Anecdote of the Jar.”

Uncollected Poems: *The Little June Book*, “Phases,” “Blanche McCarthy.”

Read the Chronology in *CPP*.

Monday, January 10.

Harmonium.

Read all poems in the volume, including those added to the 1931 edition.

Wednesday, January 12.

Stevens in *Poetry* magazine ([reading assignment online](#)).

James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens*, 1–8, 41–52, 65–82 (book online at [mylibrary.com](#) or [ebrary](#)).

Selected letters and journal excerpts through 1930 (in *CPP*).

Gorham Munson, “The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens” (*The Dial*, November 1925; online via [American Periodical Series](#)).

(Monday, January 17. Holiday; no class.)

Wednesday, January 19.

Ideas of Order.

For discussion: “Farewell to Florida,” “How to Live. What to Do,” “The Idea of Order at Key West,” “Mozart, 1935,” “Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons,” “Academic Discourse at Havana,” “Re-statement of Romance,” “Anglais Mort à Florence,” “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” “A Postcard from the Volcano,” “Autumn Refrain.”

Selected letters.

Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police*, chap. 3, pt. 1 (in reader).

Note: The poems listed as “for discussion” here and below will be particularly emphasized in class, but seminars and mini-lectures will also touch on poems throughout the assigned reading. We will discuss strategies for reading whole volumes throughout the term.

(Friday, January 21. Study List deadline.)

Monday, January 24.

Ideas of Order, continued.

The Man with the Blue Guitar (volume).

Wednesday, January 26.

Reread the poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar”; read the 1936 “Owl’s Clover” (*CPP* 567–91) and compare it with the book version.

Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects*, 194, 212–40 (book online at [ebrary](#)).

Monday, January 31.

Parts of a World.

For discussion: "Parochial Theme," "The Poems of Our Climate," "The Man on the Dump," "The Latest Freed Man," "United Dames of America," "Of Hartford in a Purple Light," "Variations on a Summer Day," "Of Modern Poetry," "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay," "Asides on the Oboe," "Extracts from Addresses . . ."

Bonnie Costello, "Planets on Tables: Still Life and War in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens" (article online in [Modernism/Modernity](#)).

Wednesday, February 2.

Parts of a World, continued.

For discussion: "The Man on the Dump," "On the Road Home," "The Latest Freed Man."

Thursday, February 3, at 11 a.m. in 160-B39. **Make-up class: note time and place.**

Presentations (10–15 minutes) begin. The presentation assignment can be downloaded from [the Course-Work site](#).

Parts of a World, continued.

For discussion: "Connoisseur of Chaos," "Life on a Battleship."

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction (CPP 329–352).

Monday, February 7.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.

Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, introduction and chap. 7 (in reader).

Marjorie Perloff, "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" (article online in *NLH* via [jstor](#)).

(Tuesday, February 8.)

Feb. 3 presentation write-ups due at 11:59 p.m.: 4–5 pp.

Wednesday, February 9. Prose.

From *The Necessary Angel*: "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems," "Imagination as Value."

From Uncollected Prose: "The Irrational Element in Poetry," "Insurance and Social Change," "Surety and Fidelity Claims," "A Note on Poetry" (CPP 781–99, 801).

Michael Szalay, "Wallace Stevens and the Invention of Social Security" (journal article online in [Modernism/Modernity](#)).

Monday, February 14.

Feb. 9 presentation write-ups due at 11:59 p.m.

Transport to Summer.

For discussion: "The Motive for Metaphor," "So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch," "Somnambulisma," "Repetitions of a Young Captain," "Holiday in Reality," "Esthétique du Mal," "The Pure Good of Theory," "Description without Place."

From *The Necessary Angel*: "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting."

Randall Jarrell, "Reflections on Wallace Stevens" (in reader).

Wednesday, February 16.

Transport to Summer, continued.

For discussion: "Man Carrying Thing," "A Completely New Set of Objects," "Two Versions of the Same Poem," "Thinking of a Relation . . .," "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "Burghers of Petty Death," "Credences of Summer."

Selected letters.

(Monday, February 21. Holiday; no class.)

Wednesday, February 23.

The Auroras of Autumn.

For discussion: “The Auroras of Autumn,” “Large Red Man Reading,” “World Without Peculiarity,” “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” “Angel Surrounded by Paysans.”

Optional: Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, chap. 4 (book online via [Oxford Scholarship Online](#)).

(Friday, February 25. Withdrawal deadline.)

Monday, February 28.

The Rock; Late Poems in *CPP*.

For discussion: “The Plain Sense of Things,” “The Hermitage at the Center,” “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” “The World as Meditation,” “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.”

Wednesday, March 2.

The Rock and Late Poems, continued.

For discussion: “The Rock,” “The Planet on the Table,” “The River of Rivers in Connecticut,” “Not Ideas About the Thing . . .,” “The Course of a Particular,” “Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination,” “Local Objects,” “Of Mere Being.”

From Uncollected Prose: “Two or Three Ideas” (*CPP* 839–49).

Research discussion.

Monday, March 7. (Dead Week begins.)

Stevensian successors (selections in reader).

John Ashbery, “Errors,” “Illustration,” “Some Trees,” “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.”

James Merrill, “The Broken Bowl,” “The Green Eye,” “Accumulations of the Sea,” “Cloud Country,” “Page from the Koran.”

John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* 1, 4, 14, 29, 37, 76, 145, 149, 153, 219, 312, 384; “Henry’s Understanding.”

Wednesday, March 9.

Successors, continued (selections in reader).

A. K. Ramanujan, “Ecology,” “No Amnesiac King,” “Looking for the Centre,” “Chicago Zen,” “Waterfalls in a Bank,” “Second Sight.”

A. R. Ammons, “So I Said I Am Ezra,” “The Wide Land,” “Gravelly Run,” “Identity,” “The Misfit,” “Snow Log,” “Classic,” “Further On,” “If Anything Will Level with You Water Will,” “Triphammer Bridge,” “The City Limits,” “Easter Morning.”

Mark Strand, “Keeping Things Whole,” “Coming to This,” “Seven Poems,” “Not Dying,” “The Way It Is.”

Jorie Graham, “Steering Wheel,” “Notes on the Reality of the Self,” “The Visible World,” “The Surface.”

Susan Howe, “Errand,” “118 Westerly Terrace.”

(Monday, March 14.) **Final paper due: 10–14 pp.**

The research paper assignment can be downloaded from [the CourseWork site](#).

(Tuesday, March 22. Grades due.)