

Professor Grobe
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Office hours: W 2-4pm
(and by appointment)
in Johnson Chapel #105

ENGL 104: ENGAGING THE ARTS

TUESDAYS & THURSDAYS, 2:30-3:50

COURSE DESCRIPTION

When writing about literature, performance, or indeed any form of art, you face a difficult task. In order to share your perceptions with readers, you must first conjure the artwork for them using nothing but words. The ancient Greeks had a name for this feat: ekphrasis, literally the “speaking out” of an experience or thing, the verbal description of a non-verbal work of art.

In this class, an introduction to literary study, performance analysis, and critical writing across the arts, we will study ekphrastic poems, prose, and plays in order to see how they conjure works of art. We will then test our own ekphrastic powers, not only on these literary works themselves, but also on art we encounter near Amherst College. Since this will require you to attend an assortment of performances (literary, musical, theatrical, and dance-based) and to visit museums, cinemas, and art galleries near campus, it will serve as your introduction to the wide range of cultural institutions in the area. You will be expected to engage in workshops in class and meet individually with the instructor outside class on a regular basis to discuss your writing.

REQUIRED TEXTS *(available at Amherst Books)*

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*
Elena Passarello, *Let Me Clear My Throat*
Yasmina Reza, *Art* (trans. Christopher Hampton)
Natasha Trethewey, *Bellocq's Ophelia*

All starred readings (*) appear in the course packet *(available in Johnson Chapel #001)*

COURSE FORMAT & REQUIREMENTS

What will happen in class?

This course moves in two-week cycles, each of which ends with your submission of a short essay. For the first week of each themed unit (i.e., the first two class sessions), we'll discuss readings relevant to the theme. In these discussions, we will pay special attention to any skills or techniques in these reading that you might find helpful while writing. During the third class meeting, we will continue these discussions, but now our conversation will center on an unusual (e.g., unusually *creative*) version of what we're doing in this unit. During the fourth class meeting, we will hold a workshop where we discuss the first draft(s) submitted by one or more students. We will also briefly discuss/prepare for the next unit. Rinse and repeat six times—and you're done!

What writing is required?

You will write six essays, one for each unit on the syllabus. In each case, you will write a first draft (upon which I will comment), and then a final draft. It is important that your first draft represent your best efforts. After all, it's no use to you if I'm pointing out problems you can see for yourself. You'll want to set the bar high—and then go even higher with your final draft.

You will also write comments (minimum 200 words) on the student essay(s) we are workshopping in each unit. In these comments, you should answer the following questions:

- 1) What works best in this draft?
- 2) What's the single most important improvement the writer could make? And how might they make it? (specific suggestions, please!)

Schedule of Deadlines

First Friday – Draft due at 5pm (except workshop students)

Second Tuesday – Workshop students turn in drafts, either in class (enough hard copies for all!) or an hour before class (to me by e-mail, so I can print the hard copies)

Second Thursday – Non-workshop students bring their marked-up hard copy of the draft(s), as well as their comments (typed, two copies)

Second Friday – Final version due at 5pm (except workshop students)

Second Sunday – Workshop students' final versions due at 5pm

Attendance

Except in the case of a medical or family emergency, you are expected to attend class.

Other expectations

At a few points throughout the semester, you will be required to meet with me outside class to discuss your progress and any particular challenges you might be facing.

Also, please note that you will be required to travel to UMass twice: once on your own (between February 1st and 5th) to visit the Kara Walker exhibition, and once as part of our class trip to see *Cuisine & Confessions* (March 23rd @ 7:30pm).

How will my grade be calculated?

10%	Participation – 1) regular attendance, 2) active participation in discussion and workshops, 3) careful written feedback on others' essays
90%	Essays (6 essays, 15% each)

SCHEDULE

WHAT IS EKPHRASIS?

- Tu. Jan. 24 Introduction
Handout: John Keats, "This Living Hand"; Charles Bernstein, "why we ask you not to touch"; W.H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts," William Carlos Williams, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"
- Th. Jan. 26 Homer, *The Iliad*, excerpt from Book XVIII (translations by Fitzgerald, Fagles, and Lombardo)*
Anne Sexton, "The Starry Night"
<https://youtu.be/NY7eKFgieY8>
Don McLean, "Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)"
<https://youtu.be/4wrNFDxCRzU>

ASSIGNMENT 1: WRITING ABOUT VISUAL ART

Select one artwork from the exhibition, *Emancipating the Past: Kara Walker's Tales of Slavery and Power*. Describe this artwork, making a point about it as you do. Feel free to explore tones other than objectivity or absorption (cf. Hollander), feel free to embed your description in a story or scene (cf. Browning, Reza), and feel free to place your experience of this artwork in a broader institutional, social, or cultural context (cf. Berger).

800-1000 words

- Tu. Jan. 31 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Chapters 1-3
Browning, "My Last Duchess"*
John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit* (excerpts)*
Edith Wharton, et al., on Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa**; Joseph Rodman Drake, "The National Painting"*; Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus"*
Nat King Cole, "Mona Lisa"
<https://youtu.be/NIDX18XI16s>

⇒ **W. Feb. 1** **Opening reception for *Emancipating the Past: Kara Walker's Tales of Slavery and Power* (5-7pm @ UMass Museum of Contemporary Art)**

Th. Feb. 2 **[Mead Museum Visit]**

Tu. Feb. 7 Yasmina Reza, *Art*

Th. Feb. 9 Workshop day

ASSIGNMENT 2: WRITING ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

Explore this website of Pulitzer prize-winning photography: <http://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/217>. Choose a single prize-winning photographer; then, choose a single photograph from that person's winning portfolio. Use words to conjure this photograph for your readers—and to help them share your own experience of it. As you do, you should feel free to consider any broader cultural or ethical questions that arise (cf. Sontag, Ephron, Bellow, Trethewey), but your most important task will be to offer your readers an *experience* of the photograph, rooted in its qualities, textures, or features, at least as they appear to you (cf. Barthes, Cole).

800-1000 words

Tu. Feb. 14 Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave" from *On Photography**

Nora Ephron, "The Boston Photographs"*

Th. Feb. 16 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (excerpts)*

Saul Bellow, "Graven Images"*

Teju Cole, "A True Picture of Black Skin," "Gueorgui Pinkhassov," "Touching Strangers" & "Google's Macchia" from *Known and Strange Things**

[Bring the photograph you're writing about]

Tu. Feb. 21 Natasha Trethewey, *Bellocq's Ophelia*

Th. Feb. 23 Workshop day

ASSIGNMENT 3: WRITING ABOUT POPULAR CULTURE

Select a single object (either a well-known thing, a famous person, a common experience, an iconic video clip, or a widely-recognized snippet of sound) and make an argument by helping us see this familiar object in an unfamiliar way.

1000-1200 words

Tu. Feb. 28 Roland Barthes, "Ornamental Cookery" & "The New Citroën" from *Mythologies**

Malcolm Gladwell, "Listening to Khakis"*

Th. Mar. 2 Brian Phillips, "The Dad-Rock Prometheus"

<http://grantland.com/features/quarterback-peyton-manning-37/>

David Foster Wallace, "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes"*

Claudia Rankine, excerpt from *Citizen**

Tu. Mar. 7 Elena Passarello, "Tips on Popular Singing" from *Let Me Clear My Throat*
Th. Mar. 9 Workshop day

*****SPRING BREAK*****

ASSIGNMENT 4: WRITING ABOUT PERFORMANCE

Offer an evocative account, not just a judgment-based review, of *Cuisine & Confessions* (cf. Jowitt, Kirby). Give your readers a sense of the overall performance, but center your account on one defining moment (cf. Fuchs). You might consider audience experience (cf. Hurston, Lane, Hitt/Glass), and you might experiment with different genres, tones, or formats of writing if they help you capture the spirit of the performance—or, at least, your own experience of it (cf. Nathan, Smith, *ABC's*).

800-1000 words

Tu. Mar. 21 Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me"*
Anthony Lane, "The Maria Problem"*
Jack Hitt & Ira Glass, "Opening Night" (Act I of ep. 510, *This American Life*)
<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/61/fiasco>
Th. Mar. 23 Debora Jowitt, "Beyond Description: Writing Beneath the Surface"*
Michael Kirby, "Criticism: Four Faults"*
Elinor Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet"*

⇒ **Th. Mar. 23 *Cuisine & Confessions* (7:30pm @ the UMass Fine Arts Center)**

Tu. Mar. 28 George Jean Nathan, *Since Ibsen: A Statistical Historical Outline...* (excerpt)*
Matthew Wilson Smith, "Certain Sensations Past: A Hysterical Glossary"*
The ABC's of Bad Acting: <https://youtu.be/mlgKX-tA950>

Th. Mar. 30 Workshop day

ASSIGNMENT 5: WRITING ABOUT READING

Choose a particular text (or, in consultation with me, a particular genre of texts) and consider your own past experience of reading it (or them). Re-read some or all of it (or them), paying close attention to your experience this time. Was your re-reading different from what you remember about your last time through? If so, how—and why? If not, what does this tell us about you, about the text, etc.? In either case, consider which features of the text (or of the book, or of your life) have caused you to experience it this way (or these ways). Does all this have something broader to tell us about the act of reading?

800-1000 words

Tu. Apr. 4 Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"*
Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (excerpt)*

Th. Apr. 6 Zadie Smith, “*Their Eyes Were Watching God*: What Does Soulful Mean?”*
 Alberto Manguel, “The Book Fool” from *A History of Reading**

Tu. Apr. 11 Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read*

Th. Apr. 13 Workshop day

ASSIGNMENT 6: WRITING FROM RESEARCH

Consider an aesthetic or cultural experience that (for whatever reason) you aren’t able to have firsthand. Decide what kinds of research might help you experience it vividly nonetheless. Do this research, then share your research-based, secondhand experience with your readers.

1200-1500 words

Tu. Apr. 18 Elena Passarello, “Screaming Memes” from *Let Me Clear My Throat*

Th. Apr. 20 Practicum: research thinking, research skills

Tu. Apr. 25 Tracy Davis, “The Context Problem”*

[Bring the most interesting bit(s) of evidence you’ve found so far]

Th. Apr. 27 Workshop day