

last revised 1.16.23

Spring 2023 - UHLC

7297 WRC: Poetry Law Interpretation - Mark Dow / David Dow- 24824

Professors:

Mark Dow (Adjunct) - mdu0001@hunter.cuny.edu

David Dow (Faculty)

Credits: 2

Course Areas: Law and Society / Interdisciplinary

Time: Tuesdays 4:00p-6:00p Location: 211

This course will focus on the work of American modernist poet Wallace Stevens and the problem of interpretation as it applies to poetry, law, and language in general.

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), one of the major American modernist poets, was also a lawyer and Vice President of Hartford Accident & Indemnity. From his first book in 1923 through his late work three decades later, Stevens obsessively explored the interplay of reality and imagination, metaphor and meaning, sound and sense.

Legal and literary interpretation, argues Richard Posner, "have little in common except the word 'interpretation.'" Posner has criticized judges who fly "the banner of interpretation" to justify their escape from "empirical reality," and he has even claimed that analogy in law is "soothing" while simile in literature is "jarring."

We will test these arguments and others through in-depth reading of Stevens, as well as readings of writers who influenced or were influenced by him. In the end, we will find ourselves considering the nature of reading itself as we explore, in Stevens's words, not just "the outlines of being and . . . the syllables of its law" but "the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked."

Our primary text will be **Wallace Stevens, *Selected Poems*, ed., John N. Serio (Knopf, paperback, 2011).*** Additional readings are likely to include poems by Coleridge, Keats, Whitman, and Dickinson, as well as prose and criticism by Stevens himself, and by literary critics Helen Vendler and R.P. Blackmur, among others.

Law-related approaches to interpretation will likely include: Charles Fried's "Sonnet LXV and the 'Black Ink' of the Framers' Intention"; Lawrence Lessig on translation; James Boyd White on poems and judicial opinions; and excerpts from Thomas Grey's *The Wallace Stevens Case: Law and the Practice of Poetry*.

Students will write three papers: a very short one to start (500 words), followed by midterm and final essays (2000 and 3500 words, respectively). In addition to papers, students will make presentations in which they interpret Stevens's poems while making a case for their own approaches to the act and process of interpretation.

*Note: Students are required to have a hard copy of this edition of the poems; e-books are not permitted.

Learning Objectives:

Students will develop an in-depth familiarity with the work of American modernist poet Wallace Stevens. They will be able to reflect on and articulately discuss that work, both in itself and with reference to the problems and process of interpretation. They will be able to write grammatically, coherently, thoughtfully, and perhaps even compellingly, about all of this.

General Guidelines and Requirements:

- Read ahead on this syllabus. Assignments are to be completed *before* the class for which they are listed. You should come to class *prepared to lead a discussion* of the day's readings and to discuss any previously assigned reading.
- This syllabus is likely to be revised as our course progresses. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out from a classmate what you missed.
- Written assignments and exercises -- *sometimes not listed here* -- may be announced and explained aloud in class; it is your responsibility to get updates from a classmate if you are absent. Being absent on the day that an assignment is explained is not a valid excuse for failing to hand in that assignment on time.
- All written assignments are to be typed and double-spaced unless specified otherwise. Further details about the requirements for written assignments will be given in class.
- Late assignments will not be accepted unless you have received instructor permission before the due date.
- Attendance, punctuality, and class participation are mandatory. Two late arrivals may be counted as an absence. UHLC policy requires students to attend at least 80% of class meetings; excessive absences may result in a lower grade.
- If applicable, we will discuss the use of cameras and microphones in our "remote-learning classroom." Please reach out to the instructor(s) if your particular situation makes remote learning overly difficult.
- E-mail should be addressed to mdo0001@hunter.cuny.edu. Please make sure to write "UHLC 7297" in the subject line so that your message is filtered to the correct mailbox folder. Keep in mind that when you send an email, you are showing your writing to your writing instructor.

Grading

- 20% Attendance (including punctuality) and participation which demonstrates your having completed -- and considered -- the assigned readings.
- 10% Short paper (500 words).
- 30% Midterm essay (2000 words).
- 40% Final paper (3500 words).

These percentages are approximate, and grading of this kind of work is inevitably subjective. We will discuss instructor expectations. When in doubt, please ask.

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Expect updates to this syllabus as we progress.

Required text: Wallace Stevens, *Selected Poems*, ed., John N. Serio (Knopf, 2011). Students are required to have a print version of this edition of the poems, i.e. no e-books.

Additional required readings (indicated by "+") will be posted on Bb unless otherwise noted.

In-class exercises not listed here will usually require non-electronic writing materials, i.e. paper and pen/pencil. Please have these with you every class session.

Week 1 - Jan. 17, 2023

Introductions.

Bring *Selected Poems of WS* and paper/pen/pencil to class.

Week 2 - Jan. 24

Stevens, *Selected Poems* (SP), 3-16; 35-66.

+NYT review of *Harmonium* (1931).

+R.P. Blackmur, "Examples of WS" (1932).

Week 3 - Jan. 31

Re-read in *Harmonium*.

+WS, "A Comment on Meaning in Poetry."

+[Documentary - WS: Man Made Out of Words \(1988\)](#).

(Link to documentary is also [here](#) and on Bb.)

Short paper due: First impressions, initial questions, articulated confusions (500 words).

Week 4 - Feb. 7

SP, 74-85; 88 (focus: "The Idea of Order at Key West").

+Walt Whitman, "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life."

+A.R. Ammons, "A Poem is a Walk" (essay).

Week 5 - Feb. 14

SP, 111-119; (in class: 90-108, "The Man with the Blue Guitar").

+Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry."

+S.T. Coleridge, poems.

Week 6 - Feb. 21

SP, 122-29; 135-50.
+Thomas Grey, *The Wallace Stevens Case* (excerpt).
+Kenneth Koch on WS.

Week 7 - Feb. 28

SP, 151-183.
+Helen Vendler, *WS: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (excerpt).
Special assignment due (not graded): Imitation of Stevens.

Week 8 - March 7

Midterm essay due: Reflections on 1 long poem or 3 short poems (2000 words).
+Bring to class: printed copies of Ammons and Keats poems.

[Spring break - March 14]

Week 9 - March 21

SP, 195-220 ("Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction").
+Lessig, "Translation" (from *Fidelity & Constraint*).
Concordance exercise due (not graded).

Week 10 - March 28

+Poems by Marianne Moore; essays: WS on Moore, Moore on WS.
+Charles Fried, "Sonnet LXV and the 'Black Ink' of the Framers' Intention."

Week 11 - April 4

SP, 248-272 ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven").
+James Boyd White, "Judicial Opinion and the Poem."

Week 12 - April 11

Short presentations on final essays-in-progress.
Reading assignments TBA.

Week 13 - April 18

Short presentations on final essays-in-progress.
Reading assignments TBA.

Week 14 - April 25

Final essay due: Stevens, Poems, and Problem(s) of Interpretation (3500 words).

UHLC Policies on COVID-19:

To reduce the spread of COVID-19, the University strongly encourages everyone (vaccinated or not) to wear face coverings indoors on campus, including in classrooms.

Your presence in class each session means that you:
are NOT exhibiting any **Coronavirus Symptoms** that makes you think that you may have COVID-19;
have NOT tested positive or been diagnosed for COVID-19;
have NOT knowingly been exposed to someone with COVID-19 or suspected/presumed COVID-19.
If you are experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms that are not clearly related to a pre-existing medical condition, do not come to class. Please see **Student Protocols** for what to do if you experience symptoms and **Potential Exposure to Coronavirus** for what to do if you have potentially been exposed to COVID-19. Consult the **Graduate Excused Absence Policy** for information regarding excused absences due to medical reasons.

Students are encouraged to visit the University's **COVID-19** website for important information including on-campus testing, vaccines, diagnosis and symptom protocols, campus cleaning and safety practices, report forms, and positive cases on campus. Please check the website throughout the semester for updates.

Vaccinations Data suggests that vaccination remains the best intervention for reliable protection against COVID-19. Students are asked to familiarize themselves with pertinent **vaccine information**, consult with their health care provider. The University strongly encourages all students, faculty and staff to be vaccinated.

Additional University and Law Center Required Language:

Reasonable Academic Adjustments/Auxiliary Aids: The University of Houston complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, pertaining to the provision of reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids for disabled students. In accordance with Section 504 and ADA guidelines, UH strives to provide reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids to students who request and require them. If you believe that you have a disability requiring an academic adjustments/auxiliary aid, please contact **the Justin Dart Jr. Student Accessibility Center** (formerly the Justin Dart, Jr. Center for Students with DisABILITIES).

Excused Absence Policy: Regular class attendance, participation, and engagement in coursework are important contributors to student success. Absences may be excused as provided in the University of Houston **Undergraduate Excused Absence Policy** and **Graduate Excused Absence Policy** for reasons including: medical illness of student or close relative, death of a close family member, legal or government proceeding that a student is obligated to attend, recognized professional and educational activities where the student is presenting, and University-sponsored activity or athletic competition. Under these policies, students with excused absences will be provided with an opportunity to make up any quiz, exam or other work that contributes to the course grade or a satisfactory alternative. Please read the full policy for details regarding reasons for excused absences, the approval process, and extended absences. Additional policies address absences related to **military service, religious holy days, pregnancy and related conditions, and disability**.

Recording of Class: Students may not record all or part of class, livestream all or part of class, or make/distribute screen captures, without advanced written consent of the instructor. If you have or think you may have a disability such that you need to record class-related activities, please contact the **Justin Dart, Jr. Student Accessibility Center**. If you have an accommodation to record class-related activities, those recordings may not be shared with any other student, whether in this course or not, or with any other person or on any other platform. Classes may be recorded by the instructor. Students

may use instructor's recordings for their own studying and notetaking. Instructor's recordings are not authorized to be shared with anyone without the prior written approval of the instructor. Failure to comply with requirements regarding recordings will result in a disciplinary referral to the Dean of Students Office and may result in disciplinary action.

Syllabus Changes: Due to the changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, please note that the instructor may need to make modifications to the course syllabus and may do so at any time. Notice of such changes will be announced as quickly as possible electronically and/or in person.

Counseling and Psychological Services ("CAPS") can help students who are having difficulties managing stress, adjusting to the demands of a professional program, or feeling sad and hopeless. You can reach CAPS by calling 713-743-5454 during and after business hours for routine appointments or if you or someone you know is in crisis. No appointment is necessary for the "Let's Talk" program, a drop-in consultation service at convenient locations and hours around campus. The Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program ("TLAP") also supports law students who are dealing with stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and other mental health problems. You can reach TLAP at any time at 1-800-343-8527. TLAP's website includes a page with links to sources about mental health that are of interest to law students: <https://www.tlaphelps.org/law-students>.

Anti-Discrimination and Sexual Misconduct Policies: UHLC and the University of Houston are committed to maintaining and strengthening an educational, working, and living environment where students, faculty, staff, and visitors are free from discrimination and sexual misconduct. If you have experienced an incident of discrimination or sexual misconduct, a confidential reporting process is available to you. For more information, please refer to the University System's [Anti-Discrimination Policy SAM 01.D.07](#) and [Sexual Misconduct Policy SAM 01.D.08](#). Please be aware that under the sexual misconduct policy, SAM 01.D.08, faculty and other University employees are required to report to the University any information received regarding sexual misconduct as defined in the policy. Due to this reporting requirement, faculty members and other employees are not a confidential resource. The reporting obligations under the sexual misconduct policy extends to alleged conduct by University employees and students.

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