

English and Cultural Studies 1A03 (Fall Term, 2016)

Instructor: Dr. David L. Clark

**Essay Assignment #1**

A key to understanding poetry is connecting *what* a poem says to *how* it says it. Indeed, one of the things that makes poems unique and uniquely challenging is the degree to which they explore questions, themes, and problems by drawing upon the rich resources that language offers. Poems are sometimes spoken in the voice of someone who is struggling with a question or problem, and whose character traits—their peculiar point of view, their strengths and limitations—we are left to determine by picking up on various cues and clues buried in the language. Moreover, as we’ve seen in this course, poems use metaphorical language (i.e., vivid turns of phrase that make unexpected comparisons and analogies) to register the complexity of the issues that they negotiate. Poems also often draw on certain sound effects and patterns of sound—rhyming words, for instance—to weave together what it is that they are trying to say and do. Unlike everyday and more transparent kinds of communication, poems draw explicit attention to themselves as dynamic creatures that are made out of the stuff of language. They put language to work, making it go farther by capturing our attention, slowing us down, and inviting us to puzzle and think. In other words, the “content” of a poem is conveyed to the reader through various manipulations of its “form.” It might help to recall what I will often say in the Study Notes for this course: with poetry, with all literature, *the devil is in the details*.

Write a brief (500 words) but leanly cogent essay that demonstrates the relationship between the “form” and “content” of **ONE** of the poems that are listed below (p. 3-5). Two closely related tasks await you:

1. Identify the poem’s central question, theme, or problem—i.e., its “content.” What is at stake in the poem? What problem or question is this poem written to address and explore? What does the poem seek to accomplish? What problem or question does the poem worry or negotiate? What is the work that the poem seeks to accomplish? Once you’ve asked those questions of the poem, wager a specific thesis about what the poem is up to based on your careful reading of it. *Begin* with that thesis and then use the remainder of your essay making a case for it, rooting your argument in details that you find in the poem.
2. Point to and discuss some of the ways in which the poem’s “formal” elements contribute to your understanding of that “content.” How does the poem put the resources of language to work? For example, who is *speaking*? What can you determine about the speaker from his or her voice? What is he or she asking of you or saying to you? How does the poem conclude? How does it work *towards*

its conclusion? How does the poet put ambiguities and metaphors to use? Is there a *volta* or turn in the poem where it shifts gears or takes a leap or develops a new line of thought? Why there? In what ways do repetitions, alliterations, and other regular sound patterns contribute to the poem's work? How is the poem divided up? What do you make of the poem being paced in this way? The poems are inviting you to inhabit worlds and lives that may not at first seem to have anything to do with your own. They invite you to ask questions that may at first seem novel and strange. And yet if the poems work, they will end up speaking to you and to your assumptions about the world in unexpected ways. Poems are meant to challenge, unsettle, and refresh the imagination. They accomplish that task by combining form and content in lots of different ways.

Your TA will provide further helpful suggestions in your tutorials. And of course, the notes you've taken in lectures as well as the Study Notes posted on Avenue can assist you in thinking about the sorts of things to attend to when you read a poem. Don't forget too to draw from the considerable writing resources that are to be found in Leslie E. Casson, *A Writer's Handbook: Developing Writing Skills for University Students* (Broadview Press, 2011) and in the *First Year English & Cultural Studies Handbook*, [http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/undergraduate/FirstYear\\_HandBook/Levelonehandbook.pdf](http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/undergraduate/FirstYear_HandBook/Levelonehandbook.pdf)

The poems that you see below were not written for specialists in English literature but for attentive and resourceful readers like yourself. I encourage you then to immerse yourself in their worlds, taking time to wrestle with their strangeness and challenges. To be sure, specialists have written about these poems. You will see some of that work—called “secondary sources”—in the library or on the web. But for this assignment you are not required to work with already existing scholarship about or discussions of the poem. If you do cite someone else's remarks in your essay (i.e., if you draw from or quote something that someone else has said about the poem that you are analyzing), you must do so in a way that fully integrates that source into your own argument and that acknowledges your indebtedness to that source. Make sure to cite these sources properly, using MLA guidelines as described in the *First Year English & Cultural Studies Handbook*. If you choose to use secondary sources, they must also appear properly referenced on a Works Cited page at the end of your essay. (Note: Wikipedia or analogously user-constructed web-based compendiums of opinion are not recognized as legitimate secondary sources and should not be used or cited at any time in this course.)

My strong suggestion? Bring your own growing strengths as a reader of literature's shorter genres to bear on the poem at hand, and write a brief essay based *entirely* on a careful reading that you have developed on your own. That way you can develop a discussion of the poem that you can call your own.

The poems from which you are making your selection are:

1. Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise”
2. Jehanne Dubrow, “The Blue Dress”
3. Beth Bachmann, “Realism”

**1. Author: Maya Angelou (1928 – 2014)**

**“Still I Rise” (1978)**

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I’ll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don’t you take it awful hard  
‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines  
Diggin’ in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I’ll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I’ve got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history’s shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain

I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **2. Author: Jehanne Dubrow**

### **“The Blue Dress” (2015)**

That day, tired of playing dollies and Let's  
Pretend, I found folded silk in the bottom  
drawer, pushed to the back behind sheets and  
pillowcases, blue silk like skin near drowning,  
each button a drooping pearl. There were  
albums I pulled from other drawers, faces  
behind plastic film, the young couple framed  
with black corners. In each photograph, my  
mother's face was water just before a stone  
drops in, surface-smooth, opaque. That our  
parents have lives before us is a secret we  
close in a dark compartment, the blue dress a  
body dragged from a lake.

.....

**3. Author: Beth Bachmann**

**“Realism” (2016)**

God said, your name is mud  
and the thing about mud is you  
got to throw it down  
repeatedly  
to remove the air  
and sometimes cut it  
and rejoin it with another part.  
If stars are made of dust,  
it's not the same stuff,  
God said;  
you can't make a hut out of it,  
only heaven,  
and when I said dust to dust,  
that's not what I meant.