

History of the Essay
08N:262 207 EPB
Fall 2007
TTh 1:05-2:20

Prof. Porter
305A EPB
Hours: T 11-12:30 Th 2:30-4
jeff-porter@uiowa.edu

DESCRIPTION

No genre is as rich and varied as the literary essay. If the sheer heft of the venerable *Oxford Book of Essays* is any indication, then the history of the essay is marked by a surprising degree of animation and expressive activity, from the seminal work of Montaigne (going on about his kidney stones) and Burton (who in writing about depression—or melancholy—invents its linguistic cure) to the modern efforts of George Orwell, Virginia Woolf, E. B. White, Joan Didion, and Annie Dillard on politics and culture. In between lies a galaxy of stylistic and intellectual feats, including the arch ironies of Jonathan Swift and the first-person experiments of Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, as well as the lively criticism promoted in the literary magazines *The Rambler*, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Not to mention, of course, the great American essayists Thoreau and Emerson. This course will introduce students to the range of the essay as it has evolved from the early modern period to our own. The class will be organized, for the most part, chronologically, beginning with Plato, Seneca, Plutarch and the Japanese writer and court lady Sei Shonagon, proceeding to the development of the early modern essay in Montaigne, Bacon, and Burton, and finally ending with 20th-century examples of the genre including Virginia Woolf, Annie Dillard, and Roland Barthes. The writing assigned for this course will look at the readings not only as objects of analysis but also as models for our own short stylistic experiments in the art of the essay.

BOOKS (Available at Prairie Lights)

Plato, *Phaedrus*, Robin Waterfield, tr. Oxford World's Classics
Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology*, Anchor Books
Arthur Quinn, *Figures of Speech*, Laurence Erlbaum
Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style*, New Directions Publishing Corporation; 2nd edition

Essays marked “pdf” on our syllabus will be available on disk and on ICON.

Requirements

- Short background sketches of major essayists and orally-performed close readings of chosen passages
- Brief stylistic impersonations (and/or parodies) of selected writers as well as the performance of figures of speech
- 1 moderate-size analytical paper on essayist or theme or stylistic feature of your choice (6-8 pages)
- 1 essay of your own design (6-8 pages)

SYLLABUS

Week 1

T 8/28 Introduction to the Course: Syllabus, assignments, etc.

Classical Forerunners of the Essay

R 8/30

Athens and the Dialogic Imagination

Plato, *Phaedrus*

Week 2

T 9/4

Plato, *Phaedrus*

Roman Prose (and two exquisite Japanese writers)

R 9/6

Seneca (Lopate: *On Noise, Asthma, Scipio's Wife, Slaves*)

Plutarch (Lopate: *Consolation to His Wife*)

Sei Shonnagon (Lopate: selection from *The Pillow Book*)

Kenko (Lopate: selection from *Essays in Idleness*)

The Early Modern Essay

Week 3

T 9/11

Attic and Baroque Prose Style

Montaigne (pdf: *Of Idleness, Of Smells*; and Lopate: *Of Books*)

R 9/13

Montaigne (pdf: *Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions and Of Practice*)

Writing exercise: Montaigne impersonation (or parody)

Week 4

T 9/18

Bacon (pdf: *Of Truth, Of Envy, Of Boldness, Of Nobility, Of Marriage and Single Life*)

R 9/20

Bacon (pdf: *Of Friendship, Of Studies, Of Vicissitudes of Things*)

The King James Bible and Biblical Prose Style

Writing exercise: Bacon impersonation (or parody)

Week 5:

T 9/25

Sir Thomas Browne (pdf: *On Dreams*); Richard Burton (pdf: from *Anatomy of Melancholy*)

R 9/27

Arthur Quinn, *Figures of Speech: 60 Ways to Turn a Phrase*

Writing exercise: doing things with figurative language

The English 18th Century and the Age of Prose

Week 6

T 10/2

Periodical Essays and the Familiar Style

Joseph Addison (pdf: *On The Essay Form, The Adventures of a Shilling,*

Thoughts in Westminster Abbey, The Spectator No. 476)

R 10/4 Richard Steele (Lopate: *An Hour or Two Sacred to Sorrow, Twenty-four Hours in London*; pdf: *On Recollections of Childhood*)
Paper #1 Assignment (analysis)

Week 7

T 10/9 Samuel Johnson (Lopate: *The Boarding House, The Solitude of the Country*; pdf: *Conversation*)

R 10/11 Jonathan Swift (pdf: *A Treatise on Good Manners and Good Breeding, A Meditation Upon a Broom-Stick, A Modest Proposal*)
Writing exercise: Johnson or Swift impersonation (or parody)

Week 8

T 10/16 **Dear Reader: Prose of the Romantic Period**
Charles Lamb (Lopate: *New Year's Eve, A Chapter on Ears, Dream Children: A Reverie, Thee Superannuated Man*)

R 10/18 William Hazlitt (Lopate: *On Going On a Journey, On the Pleasure of Hating*; pdf: *On Familiar Style*)
Thomas De Quincey (pdf: *The Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth, Dreaming*)

19th-Century American Prose Classics

Week 9

T 10/23 Ralph Waldo Emerson (pdf: *Self-Reliance, Nature*)

R 10/25 Henry David Thoreau (Lopate: *Walking*; pdf: *The War of the Ants*)
Paper #2 Assignment (creative)

Preposterous Americans

Week 10

T 10/30 Mark Twain (pdf: *Thoughts of God, Corn-Pone Opinions, Was the World Made for Man?, The Turning Point of My Life*)

R 11/1 Ambrose Bierce (pdf: *Disintroductions*, selected entries from *The Devil's Dictionary*)
H. L. Mencken (Lopate: *On Being an American*; pdf: *Libido for the Ugly*)

On Vicissitudes of the Modern Essay

Week 11

T 11/6 Virginia Woolf (Lopate: *Street Haunting, The Death of the Moth*; pdf: *Shakespeare's Sister, A Sketch of the Past*)

R 11/8 George Orwell (pdf: *A Hanging, Shooting an Elephant, Marrakech, Why I Write*)
Writing exercise: Woolf or Orwell impersonation (or parody)

Week 12:

T 11/13 James Baldwin (Lopate: *Notes of a Native Son*; pdf: *Stranger in the Village*)

R 11/15 Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style*
Writing exercise: doing things with tropes

Week 13 Thanksgiving Break

T 11/20 **HOLIDAY**

R 11/22 **HOLIDAY**

Week 14

T 11/27 Loren Eiseley (pdf: *The Bird and the Machine*, *The Long Loneliness*)

R 11/29 Joan Didion (Lopate: *Goodby to All That*, *In Bed*; pdf: *John Wayne: A Love Song*, *Why I Write*)

Week 15

T 12/4 Annie Dillard (Lopate: *Seeing*; pdf: *The Death of a Moth*, *Living Like Weasels*, *The Deer at Providencia*)

R 12/6 Roland Barthes (Lopate: *Leaving the Movie Theater*; pdf: selections from *Mythologies*)

Week 16

T 12/11 Discussion

R 12/13 Wrap Up