Why do we experience emotional responses to literature when we know that what happens on the page is not “real”? How do writers use formal techniques to produce or manipulate feelings?

We'll begin this course with the assumption that emotional engagement is required to fully understand literary work. Then, we'll examine work across genres -- fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry -- paying careful attention to the characteristics of those genres. How do we differentiate between genres? Are there things a poem can do that a story cannot? What formal elements are shared across genres?

This course is not a history of form, per se, but an exploration of the strategies of literature – across time and genre – to move, frustrate, and enlighten readers. While attention to content is imperative, we won't focus on what the work is about but rather what the work does, what, at its heart, the work is. We'll use these lessons and examples as models for our own writing. Our goal will be greater control over the mechanisms of literature, in the service of our own work. Moreover, though, this course will transform the way we think about form and literary genre, opening us to the possibilities of language.
Course Requirements

Class Participation (25%) This includes attendance, punctuality and involvement in class discussions (including on the course blog), as well as a presentation on an essay of your choice.

Absences: Attendance is required and essential to your experience of the course. Individual workshops are especially affected by absences and are impossible to recreate. If you have a legitimate reason to be absent, please arrange this in advance; otherwise unexcused absence will reduce your overall grade by 1/3 of a letter grade. Chronic absences will affect your grade significantly.

Presentation: In the first half of the quarter, you will lead a 20-minute discussion on a story, poem, or essay you’ve chosen. Please note that you will need to choose the essay at least a week before your assigned presentation day so that copies can be made and distributed to the class. I will model this presentation the first few class meetings, and am available to help you plan your discussion. Handouts, in-class writing exercises and other ways of involving the class are very much welcomed.

Course blog: We’ll be posting some of the work for class on our course blog, including annotations on the published essays we read and responses to classmates’ work. I’ll ask that you post a short comment on our class blog about some of our readings. We’ll also produce and respond to some short writing assignments. The blog content will be entirely private to our class. We’ll use Lore.com, a simple and functional site for academic coursework. If you haven’t used it before, check it out!

Assignments (20%) This includes all writing exercises you’ve completed in class and for homework, and a longer essay or chapter submitted for the traditional workshop. We’ll conduct mini workshops and/or cold reads (reading the assignment aloud to the class and then inviting response) for many of these assignments, as well as sharing assignments on the course blog.

Stanford Honor Code

The Honor Code is the University’s statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work. The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. That they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;

2. That they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.

3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.

4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.
Written critiques (10%) One of the most valuable elements of a writing class is the opportunity to have your work seriously critiqued both by your instructor and your peers. It will be as beneficial to your nonfiction to think critically and generously about your classmates’ work as it will be to have your own writing discussed. It isn’t necessary to write pages and pages of comments to your classmates, but make sure your letter is carefully thought-out and both critical and kind. It’s important to remember that we won’t be discussing polished essays but early drafts.

Attendance at Readings (15%) Attendance at three readings in the Creative Writing program is required. A list of readings this quarter can be found at http://creativewriting.stanford.edu and http://events.stanford.edu/.

Final portfolio (30%): One of goals in this course is to produce a lot of writing, in the service of exploration. Not everything we write or dream up will be worth pursuing, or will allow us to do our best work. (As Louise Glück once wrote, “The only real exercise of will is negative; we have towards what we write the power of veto.”) We’ll present some of the work we produce to our classmates, either in workshop or on the course blog. As the quarter progresses, we’ll choose some things to pursue and some things to discard. A final portfolio of the work we pursue will be due at the end of the quarter; our goal will be 20-25 pages of revised writing. This portfolio may be composed of a single long essay, a chapter of a memoir, or a series of short essays and investigations. The main criteria will be sustained engagement and thoughtful revision. The portfolio may not constitute a "completion" of the work you pursue, but it should be a significant step toward polish and achievement.

Make-Up Work: If you miss a class, or cannot make three readings, please read an author interview on either The Paris Review’s website, as part of their Art of Nonfiction series theparisreview.org/interviews or on the Identity Theory website identitytheory.com/interviews/ and write a two-paragraph analysis of it, due by

Grading

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Accommodation

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodation.
Provisional schedule:

Influence & Homage: March 30-April 6

Form comes down to us through a tradition. Neither fixed in time nor entirely arbitrary, formal structures can be both patently obvious and difficult to name and define. For this first unit, we’ll examine literary homages – both responses to writers in the same genre, and homages across genre – with careful attention to differences between versions and writers. We’ll use these differences to begin building our vocabulary of form.

Questions this unit will ask: How do changes in form produce different meanings? How do writers use or thwart tradition, and to what effect? How do we identify a “tradition”? What relationship do tradition and form bear to each other?


Catharsis, denied: April 8-April 15

*Workshops round 1

During the serialization of Little Women, 19th-century readers wrote Louisa May Alcott hundreds of letters begging to see Jo married. Yet 21st-century readers often forget that Jo was married at all. They remember stalwart, rebellious, tomboy Jo, refusing (as Cathy Davidson argues) her climactic union with the Professor for reasons of formal importance. Endings are tyrannical -- they demand to be remembered, they close the narrative door. And yet, many readers respond most strongly to the narrative events leading up to climax and resolution, some even rejecting endings in favor of the movement of characters through time.

Questions this unit will address: What makes a plot? What is a traditional plot structure and how have writers manipulated tradition to emotional effect? Is plot the same as story, the same as narration? Is plot the central defining characteristic of fiction? How do we assess or recognize plot in genres not considered fictional or narrative?

Reading: (excerpted) sonnet cycles by Marilyn Hacker, Rilke, Natasha Trethewey, Gwendolyn Brooks, France Prešeren.

The drama of fact: April 20-April 27

*Workshops round 2

Clearly contemporary readers respond enthusiastically to stories presented as facts. Yet “truth” is not the only thing that defines nonfiction. Nonfictional modes borrow from fiction and poetry, but they look and feel unlike both. Once we abandon fact as the single, defining difference between nonfiction and other modes, what formal elements do we find? What is it about nonfiction that moves readers so deeply?

Questions this unit will address: What is the appeal of stories presented as fact? Does nonfiction take the lion’s share of literary drama for formal reasons? What characteristics of nonfictional texts produce rare and singular emotional responses?

Reading: Harriet Jacobs Incidents; “Confessions of Nat Turner”; Thoreau “Wild Apples”; M.H. Kingston Warrior Woman (excerpted); Henri Cole “Birthday”
The body in pain: April 29-May 6

Many writers and scholars have argued that physical pain and psychic trauma are unspeakable, are outside the reach of language. Yet the imperative of literature is to represent pain and suffering, to treat trauma with dignity. We might even say that pain and trauma are literature’s bread and butter. In this unit we will study works that deal with pain, trauma, and cruelty, focusing not on the content of those texts but on how the writer uses techniques to hide or heighten pain.

Questions this unit will address: How do writers use techniques like silence, caesurae, and deferment to render pain? How do writers directly address pain? How does form determine a reader’s response to literary violence?

Reading: Sara Peters “Cruelty” and “Dead Boy Had Too Many Injuries to Fit in One Drawing”; NoViolet Bulawayo “Hitting Budapest”; George Eliot introduction from Felix Holt, A Radical; Hemingway “Indian Camp”; James Baldwin “Notes of a Native Son”; Richard Siken “I Had a Dream About You”; Larissa Szporluk “Guillotine”

Varieties of laughter: May 11-May 18

*Workshops round 3

From the funeral giggles to the belly laugh to the cruel snicker, laughter takes innumerable forms. Laughter can engage or disrupt, reveal or obfuscate. In a text (as in life) laughter can bring us closer to a writer or subject, but it can also estrange us.

Questions this unit will address: What makes something funny? How do formal elements – like timing, line breaks, elision – produce different types of laughter? How would we define satire, absurdism, humor, and other forms?

Reading: Chuck Klosterman “This is Emo” and “The Awe-Inspiring Beauty of Tom Cruise’s Shattered, Troll-like Face”; David Sedaris “Twelve Moments in the Life of an Artist” and readings from This American Life; Eudora Welty “Why I Live at the P.O.”

Empathy: May 20-May 27

Here we might attend to Aristotle’s dictum that tragedy works by producing both “pity and fear.” Does this dictum imply estrangement or empathy? Many writers and scholars have argued that the great gift of literature is to bring us into contact with worlds we might not otherwise visit. Moreover, recent studies have shown that those who are widely-read empathize more readily with others and have greater skill in reading social and emotional cues.

Questions this unit will address: How is empathy defined? What formal elements provoke empathy? How do writers manipulate form to make us feel close to characters? Perhaps especially, how do they make us like people who are unlikeable?

Reading: Louise Glück “Against Sincerity” and “Circe’s Power”; Walt Whitman “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”; Alice Munro “Open Secrets”; Yiyun Li “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl”; Elizabeth Tallent “Little X”

The line: June 1-June 3

*Revision workshops

We might say that the most obvious difference between genres resides in the literary line. To conclude our course, we’ll examine the visual page.

Questions this unit will address: How does the visual arrangement of lines produce emotion or expectation? How do lines lead us toward generic definitions? What is the effect of lines of differing length, of differing sound or rhythm?