

University of Southern Maine
LEWISTON-AUBURN COLLEGE

Fall 2004

HUM/SBS 399: Transforming Words: Poetry and Psychologies of Change

Final Paper: Due December 15

There are several options for your final paper, the topic and format negotiable according to class themes and your interests. Here are some ideas:

1. **A paper describing and reflecting on your participation in one of the service-learning or other field-based projects** – such as working with poetry in the community (e.g., in elementary or high schools, Senior Center or residential facility) or organizing and implementing the “poetry on the walls” project. Your reflections on the experience should include direct consideration and application of material from our course readings. Some more specific suggestions:

In writing about your experience working with community members (whatever age or location outside of LAC) and poetry be sure to include some description of setting and population, as well as the activities you undertook. It would also make sense to describe your original intentions in undertaking these activities, how the activities went, what you observed, etc. You should consider and discuss the applicability of course readings bearing on psychology and poetry. Perhaps more general discussions of poetry in other of our readings may also be “extended” to your discussion. If you would like to pursue an aspect, say, of children’s development, only introduced in our readings, you are free to bring in some outside research and sources, but do make clear where you have considered our assigned readings. (And include complete citation information for any outside resources you do draw upon for your paper!) Please check with me first if you are considering a team-paper.

A paper on the “Poetry on the Walls” project could take several different angles. It is not necessary to describe in full detail the logistics of this project. But, here too it would make sense to describe what you hoped for with this project, its initially conceived goals and possibilities. A brief overview of the project milestones would also make sense. Perhaps you will want to include some description and discussion of reactions to the poems on the walls. In retrospect – when you get to the “retrospect” phase of the project – you might compare your original expectations with what you observed in and/or now reflect on the process and “outcomes.”

Other possible directions: As part of the installation and as part of your paper, you might develop what you would present to the community as an explanation/“illumination” of the project. Similarly, a brief explanation/illumination of the choice of specific poems in the wall-installations could be a good addition to the project and to your paper. These accompanying pieces could be written in any style you choose – whatever you think would be most effective to share with other college community members.

At some points in this paper, also, I would like you to actively bring in course readings.

Perhaps they will come in as relevant when you discuss the general aims of the project, or perhaps as you consider specific poems chosen, or the reactions you encountered. What about potential “political”/public impacts? Did this project have any effect on your own appreciation of poetry and its transformative potentials? I’m throwing out a variety of possible triggers for you here and not intending to sketch out one set structure for the paper nor a set of comprehensive requirements.

While, as discussed in class, you do not need to do a group paper, if several of you are going to base your paper on this project, it might be worth a coordination of efforts. For instance, it would be great for the project and documentation thereof if we ended up with a full set of pieces that could be used with the community to communicate both your overall goals for the project and also rationale for choice of each poem (the explanation/illumination pieces referred to above). If you chose to, you could divide those pieces up, with not everyone tackling the full set... Alternatively, if one, even each one of you, wished to tackle the full set, that’s fine, too.

2. A paper exploring a topic of your choice, utilizing outside research (or not) to further delve into, for instance, a particular poet or a psychological approach to poetry. Has there been a topic you wish we could have explored in more depth? You can! It is important that you consult with me on your choice and approach, however. Every paper conducted under this option will need to address in some way[s] the course themes of the transformative functions of poetry, and the inter-relationships between psychology and poetry. Some further consideration and application of our assigned course readings should also be incorporated into these papers. There will likely be no problem meeting these guidelines if your inquiry is taking off from a topic or article initially introduced in class. Still, it’s best to consult with me on your choices.

3. If neither of the above options work for you, here’s a specific idea for your final paper:

In what ways can poetry have a transformative function at the level of community? This question shifts the emphasis of “psychologies of change” from a focus on individuals to broader units of human experience – variously the community, the society, the culture. You will be able to make some direct use of our upcoming readings on poetry and history, and poetry and politics. While the terms “community” or “society” may not predominate in many of our readings, I am also certain that you will find that you can apply and extend earlier course materials!

Some angles to start you off: How can poetry affect people’s understanding of their times and society? Their interrelationships with and within a group? Perhaps even the politics, attitudes and behavior of a group of people? The meanings they hold as and about the group? Clearly, as with all other essay assignment and project ideas, there is a great deal of room (and need!) for you to frame your own point of view on this, but, in all cases, the essay should incorporate direct considerations and applications of material from our readings.

The approximate page length for all these options: 10 pages, double-spaced.

Addendum: Sample Project Synopses

As outlined in the above assignment hand-out for the "Final Paper," students have much latitude in the shaping of their final projects. Reflecting a relatively high degree of engagement and willingness to plunge in, students from both offerings of the course distributed themselves easily among the three choices provided:

- field-based projects
- independent [usually research] projects
- a default option of an essay exploring poetry and psychology on the level of "community"

The last option is least often chosen – see assignment hand-out for its parameters. The field-based projects tended to spark the most in-depth engagement and enthusiasm, sometimes catching the poetry-skeptics among my students off-guard when they discovered, for instance, how favorably young children respond to poetry. Sample project synopses resulting from the first two options follow:

Field-based projects:

K-12 schools: Five students contributed a total of approximately 65 hours developing and delivering a variety of poetry units under the supervision of an Art and English teacher at a local public alternative high school. Two of these students worked intensively to edit and prepare for public distribution a booklet of the high school students' poetry. Final papers reflected on topics such as the efficacy of poetry in reaching these high school students and the nature of the alternative school students' educational and psychosocial challenges – and strengths. Four other students contributed a total of 35 hours in three local elementary schools; their papers' focus was often on the interrelationships between poetry and children's learning processes. For example, one student's goal was "to observe the children in the writing process and how much they use of their selves in the poems."

"Poetry on the Walls": A team of students resolved to bring poetry more actively into the college's day-to-day life and consciousness. They organized a "guerilla" poetry event, installing lines of poetry on every classrooms' chalkboard during a 1½ hour-break in college course schedule one day during National Poetry Month, April '02, as well as a more permanent installation (with assistance of the college's Arts Coordinator) of four poetry excerpts in three classrooms and the college computer lab. In choosing among poems for installation, students carefully considered accessibility of poems while steering clear of any one-dimensional "inspirational" verse. One student focused her final paper on this project, very effectively integrating a broad range of course readings on both poetry and psychology. She reflected on the

"spiritual and emotional transformations" she thought possible through higher education and how poetry can facilitate deeper awareness and learning. The four poem excerpts remain on the college walls, still catching the attention, anew, of students and staff. My regret is that we did not build in any sort of systematic evaluation of the college community response.

Special Poetry newsletter issue by a support group for survivors of sexual support and abuse: This student was already on staff of the sponsoring agency and had professional experience and supervision working with this group of women. Her course project expanded upon the work and activities already underway, adding another layer to the support group's activities.

After-school poetry activities at a low-income housing project: Another student, with significant experience working in the community, developed several writing workshops for a group of K-Grade 4 children on the form and function of poetry. Human service staff already familiar with these children were stunned at the power of the resulting poetry, including the images shaping many children's perceptions of their world and future. The final paper integrated reflections on the student's experience with both literary and developmental readings.

Independent research projects:

Consideration of Sylvia Plath's life and work: This project took off as a topic of immense interest to the student; she startled herself with the intensity of her inquiry into the applicability of psychological theory (particularly psychoanalytic).

Analysis of the poetry of Langston Hughes: This project resulted in an integration of literary, psychological, and societal analyses.

Research on processes of poetry-writing, applied to student's own development as a poet-songwriter: Project culminated in brief in-class performance, in addition to paper reporting on research.