

ENGL 4457-001 Poetry and Poetics
Monday 2:20–3:45 p.m.
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What Kind of a Thing is a Lyric?

Lyric has proved challenging to define—how is the form related to song? Must there be an “I” in the poem? Is lyric a genre or a mode? Are lyrics necessarily brief? Are all short poems lyrics? Are *all* non-narrative poems lyrics? How is “lyric” related to “lyrical,” or “lyrics” of songs related to “lyric poetry”? Are postmodern poets who deliberately position their work outside of historical poetic traditions writing lyric? Does Middle English short form poetry that seems unaware of “lyric tradition” qualify as lyric? Can objects be lyrics?

Current debates in lyric studies pit two theories of the lyric against each other: does lyric have a defined transhistorical tradition rooted initially in musical expression (sung to a lyre), its origins in this view traceable to ancient Greece? or, has lyric shifted in its meaning in recent centuries to encompass pretty much any and all poetry, such that lyric becomes what we make of it, a construct of how critics have relatively recently come to define it? In this mode of thought, how we read lyric in is always historically contingent.

Reading poetry from ancient Greece to the present day, we will consider these questions and others. We will read poems closely, with particular attention to sound, sense, and form. We will also interrogate theories of the lyric and, perhaps, generate our own.

Requirements: short writing exercises; in-class presentation; 5- to 8-page close reading paper; 12- to 15-page research paper; final exam