

# Six Pretty Good Poems

Prof. Luke Bender

Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:00–2:15 in XX

Large Group: Fridays, 12:30–3:30 in XX



*The Poet and Author of the Gita Govinda, Jayadeva, Visualizes Radha and Krishna, ca. 1775–80. Folio from the Tehri Garhwal series of the Gita Govinda. India, Punjab Hills, kingdom of Kangra or Guler.*

## Course Description

The “Six Pretty Good Ideas” series offers cross-cultural first-year seminars that provide an introduction to humanistic thinking at the college level. The seminars in this series aim to be simultaneously accessible for students who have so far had little experience with the humanities and also challenging for students with more background. By considering texts from around the world, we ensure that no one in the room is an expert on all the texts: we are all, including the instructors, beginners with at least some of them, helping each other think through their problems and unpack their treasures.

This year, we begin with a hypothesis: that poetry offers a useful space for exploring the problem of how to relate universals to particulars. This may be a universal problem: across cultures and epochs, most of us confront the difficulties of instantiating our ethical ideals in our actual lives, the problematic relationship between our individual experience and truths that transcend it, and the injustices that result from society’s refusal to treat all alike. But this universal problem has no universal solution: it

both takes different forms across times and cultures and, by its nature, can only be engaged by individuals themselves. Poetry, this course hypothesizes, has the ability to live between the universal and the particular, providing not timeless solutions but compelling and often beautiful examples of individuals navigating shared issues.

In order to test this hypothesis, we will be reading six pretty good poems:

1. Du Fu's (712–770) "Song of My Feelings, Going from the Capital to Fengxian"
2. The Imperial Princess and Great Kamo Priestess Senshi's (964–1035) "Omoedomo"
3. Jayadeva's (b. ca. 1070?) *Gita Govinda*
4. Dante Alighieri's (ca. 1265–1321) *Divine Comedy*
5. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's (1648–1695) "Primero Sueño"
6. Emily Dickinson's (1830–1886) "I heard a Fly buzz"

These poems are all "pretty good" by the standards of their own traditions: each is, to one degree or another, among the most famous poems in their languages. They are all, however, very different. In order to understand something about the individuals and cultures that created them, and also about the cultures that have decided they are "pretty good," we will be reading other works by our poets; historical accounts of their lives and times; secondary scholarship on the poems themselves; and important background works, running from *The Analects of Confucius* to Plato's *Symposium* to medieval Kashmiri literary theory. Every unit will begin with a blank-slate reading of a "pretty good poem," and over the roughly two weeks that follow for each, we will begin to flesh out our initial impressions by contextualizing it within a variety of historical, intellectual, and artistic frameworks.

## Prerequisites

None. All readings in English. No background knowledge presumed.

## Course Goals

In this course, students will learn strategies for reading unfamiliar texts across cultures and across genres. They will come to recognize and understand the questions asked by scholars of the humanities and the basic strategies that are employed to answer them. They will gain familiarity with Yale's resources for humanistic study, including the libraries and various centers dedicated to improving particular skills. They will also have extensive opportunities for improving their writing skills with dedicated attention from several writing instructors. And they will explore works from medieval China, Japan, India, and Italy, as well as early modern Mexico and the United States, working to understand what questions remain constant across all these cultures and how their answers change across time and place.

## Course Responsibilities

**Attendance:** This course will rely on lively interchange: therefore attendance and participation are required. This means having read the texts carefully *before* you come to class, having some specific responses to them that you are willing to share, being sufficiently alert to join in a lively conversation, and being willing to participate in readings and exercises. More than 4 unexcused absences will result

in a lower grade for the course. After 6 absences, you will receive an F.

**Communication:** You are required to check your school email. From time to time, we will send out emails to you and the class: please ensure that we have the correct email for you.

**Meeting with us:** All of the instructors have office hours so that we can talk to you outside of class time. Please make an appointment with the main instructor and your TF at least once in the first half of the semester. Come as many times as you like after that!

**Readings:** Readings for this course will vary from week to week, but will generally be around 50 pages per class. The majority of these readings will be available in pdf form on the course website. The following books should be purchased.

- Jayadeva. *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gītagovinda*. Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller. 20th Anniversary Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Edith Grossman, trans. *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selected Works*. Edited by Anna More. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W.W. Norton, 2016.
- R.W. Franklin, ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1999.

Again, all assigned reading must be completed *before* class, and in many cases before your responses are due on the course chat.

## Written Work

As a writing intensive course offering a WR credit, this course requires students to submit seven main writing assignments of various lengths alongside the daily assignments mentioned above.

**A. Two Papers:** You will write two papers for this course, one mid-term essay of 5–7 pages and a final essay of 10–12 pages in length. You will turn in required drafts for each essay and will go through a peer review process. Due dates are in the schedule below.

**B. Four Short Assignments:** You will write three creative OR critical short papers (500–750 words). More information to follow in class.

**C. Writing Portfolio:** You will keep a writing portfolio of all your written assignments and revisions over the course of the semester. This will be submitted at the end of the term with a self-reflection on your growth as a writer.

**D. Participation & Required Chat:** At most once per week, you will receive a short writing assignment to be uploaded to the “Discussions” tab of the course website. These assignments will never require more than two paragraphs of writing and should take you an hour or less. These will count towards your participation grade.

**Requirements for written assignments:** We expect all written assignments to be typed in a regular 12-point font, with 1-inch margins, proofread and carefully revised. Late papers will be marked down by one letter grade (e.g., from A to A-) for every 24-hour period a paper is late. If you need an extension, please speak with the course leader at least 24 hours before the paper is due. Extensions of over one week will require a note from your residential college dean.

## Criteria for Evaluation

Grades for the course will be decided as follows:

- Class Participation: 20%
- Short Papers (5): 25%
- Midterm Paper: 25%
- Final Paper: 30%

For an explanation of our grading policies, see “Grading Rubric” (handout and on the course website).

## Instructor Contact Information and Office Hours

All of the instructors of this course are available for meetings whenever you would like to talk. Students should plan to meet with the course head at least once over the first six weeks of the semester. If you cannot make our office hours, please email us and we will be happy to arrange another time.

- Prof. Luke Bender, course head  
luke.bender@yale.edu  
office hour: tbd and by appointment at [calendly.com/luke-bender](http://calendly.com/luke-bender)  
Humanities Quadrangle (320 York Street), Room 111
- Ryan Hintzman, Teaching Fellow  
ryan.hintzman@yale.edu  
office hour: Tbd and by appointment  
Humanities Quadrangle, Room XX
- XX  
XX@yale.edu  
office hour: Tbd and by appointment  
Humanities Quadrangle, Room XX

## Statement to Students on their Academic Integrity

You may not under any circumstances present anyone else’s work, words, or ideas as your own. Plagiarism is a serious offense, and will be reported to the Yale College Executive Committee. Please be sure to review Yale’s Academic Integrity Policy (<http://yalecollege.yale.edu/new-students/class-2019/academic-information/intro-undergrad-education/academic-honesty>) and the resources for understanding and avoiding plagiarism available at the Center for Teaching and Learning (<http://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources>). If you are ever unsure as to whether a particular example does or does not constitute plagiarism, please consult one of the instructors before submitting your work.

## Schedule of Readings

Wed, Sept 1      Course Introduction

Unit 1: Du Fu's "Song of My Feelings, Going from the Capital to Fengxian"

- \*Fri\*, Sept 3      **"Song of My Feelings"**  
Read: Du Fu, "Song of My Feelings"  
Read: Pan Yue, "A Westward Journey"
- Wed, Sept 8      **The Confucian Background**  
Read: Selections from the *Analects of Confucius*  
Read: The "Great Preface" to *Mao's Odes*  
\*Short Assignment #1 Due\*
- Mon, Sept 13      **Reclusion and Daoism**  
Read: Selections from the *Zhuangzi*  
Read: Selections from the poetry of Tao Qian (Tao Yuanming)
- Wed, Sept 15      **Moral Difficulty**  
Read: Selections from Du Fu's poetry  
Read again: Du Fu, "Song of My Feelings"  
Read also: Senshi, "Omoedomo – Even though I yearn..."

Unit 2: Senshi's "Omoedomo"

- Mon, Sept 20      *The Lotus Sutra*  
Read: *Lotus Sutra*, selections from chapters 1–3, 12, and 16  
\*Short Assignment #2 Due\*
- Wed, Sept 22      **An Introduction to Waka**  
Read: Selections from Stephen Carter, *How to Read a Japanese Poem*  
Selections from the poetry of Izumi Shikibu
- Mon, Sept 27      **Buddhist Poetry**  
Read: Selections from Senshi's *Hosshin wakashū*  
Read: Selections from the "Shakkyō-ka" book of the *Senzaishū*  
Read: Selections from the poetry and prose of Fujiwara no Shunzei
- Wed, Sept 29      **Saigyō**  
Read: Selections from the poetry of Saigyō Hōshi

Unit 3: Jayadeva, *Gīta Govinda*

- Mon, Oct 4      **Jayadeva's Song of Govinda**  
Read: Jayadeva, *Gīta Govinda*  
\*Midterm Essay Draft Due\*
- Wed, Oct 6      **Krishna in War**  
Read: Selections from *The Bhagavad Gīta*
- Mon, Oct 11      **Krishna in Love**

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Read: The Rāsa-līlā from the *Bhāgavata Purāna*

- Wed, Oct 13     **Rasa theory**  
Read: Selections by Bharata, Anandhavardhana, Bhoja, and Abhinavagupta  
Read: Selections from Rūpa Gosvāmin, *The Bhaktirasāmrtasindhu*

**Unit 4: Dante, *The Divine Comedy***

- Mon, Oct 18     **Hell**  
Read: Dante, *Inferno* I–V, XXVII  
**\*Midterm Essay Due\***
- Mon, Oct 25     **Virgil’s *Aeneid***  
Read: Virgil, *Aeneid* IV and VI
- Wed, Oct 27     **Purgatory**  
Read: Dante, *Purgatorio* I–III, V, XVII–XVIII, a selection from XXII, XXX
- Mon, Nov 1     **Ascent Through Love**  
Read: Selection from Plato’s *Symposium*  
**\*Short Assignment #3 Due\***
- Wed, Nov 3     **Heaven**  
Read: Dante, *Paradiso* I–III, selections from IX and XX, XXX, XXXIII

**Unit 5: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, “Primero sueño”**

- Mon, Nov 8     **Sor Juana’s Dream**  
Read: Sor Juana, “Primero sueño”
- Wed, Nov 10    **Other Poems by Sor Juana**  
Read: Sor Juana, Poems 2, 48, 57, 92, 95, 146, 149, 152, 165  
Film Screening: *Yo la peor de todas*  
**\*Short Assignment #4 Due\***
- Mon, Nov 15    **A Defense**  
Read: “A Letter from Sor Fileotea” and “Response of the Poet”  
Read: Asunción Lavrin, “Obedience and Authority in Her Religious Context”  
Read: Irving A. Leonard, from *Baroque Times in Old Mexico*
- Wed, Nov 17    **Scholarship on Sor Juana**  
Read: Octavio Paz, discussion of “Primero sueño” from *The Traps of Faith*  
Read: Georgina Sabat de Rivers, “A Feminist Rereading of Sor Juana’s Dream”  
Read also: Emily Dickinson, “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died”

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**Unit 6: Emily Dickinson, “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died”**

Mon, Nov 29     **Poet as Volcano**

Read: Emily Dickinson, 138, 165, 181, 240, 312, 314, 407, 439, 450, 517, 620

Read: Adrienne Rich, “Vesuvius at Home”

*\*Final Paper Prospectus Due\**

Wed, Dec 1     **A Formal Feeling**

Read: Emily Dickinson, 348, 372, 423, 446, 466, 519, 550, 772, 930, 1097, 1268, 1593

Read: C.K. Williams, “Poetry and Consciousness”

Mon, Dec 6     **Death and the Material**

Read: Emily Dickinson, 124, 238, 341, 479, 528, 584, 588, 747, 830, 836, 1100

Read: Alexandra Socarides, “The Poetics of Interruption”

Wed, Dec 8     **What Survives**

Read: Emily Dickinson, 23, 236, 279, 319, 325, 365, 373, 533, 1581, 1715

**Reading Period and Finals**

Fri, Dec 10     **\*Draft of Final Paper Due\***

Mon, Dec 20     **\*Final Paper Due\***

**\*Writing Portfolio Due with Self-Assessment\***