Course Descriptions

Students at the School of Letters take three summers of residential study at Sewanee, supplemented by an independent study and then a thesis semester. Most students complete the program in three years, though there are options for condensing or extending this timeline if desired. The MFA is awarded upon completion of 30 credit hours and successful submission of a creative thesis.

Writing Workshops and Forms Courses

Each summer, students enroll in a workshop and a forms course for a total of seven (7) credits per summer. While most students take classes in the track they chose when applying to Sewanee (fiction, poetry, or nonfiction) they are allowed to take classes in any genre they like. It is common for students to have a primary and secondary genre interest, or to try a little bit of everything. Forms courses are essentially literature seminars, though their focus is on developing creative practice and critical reading skills rather than on scholarly writing or theory-driven analysis. Forms courses change topic and instructor from summer to summer, and so may be repeated for credit.

Independent Study

During the calendar year between the second and third summers, students are strongly encouraged to take a one-semester independent study for six (6) credit hours. The student proposes an independent study project to the Director, who will pair them with a faculty member to serve as one-on-one mentor. Students have considerable latitude in proposing independent studies. Some use the time to do a deep dive into the work of a particular author, topic, or research question; some take the opportunity to explore a secondary genre interest; some use the time to do preparatory work for their thesis. The student and her mentor work together to develop a reading list, define the scope and nature of the work, and set a schedule.

Thesis Project

When the student has twenty-four (24) credit hours, they are eligible to begin their thesis work. Most students hit this benchmark at the end of their third summer of study. The thesis is a mandatory, one-semester project worth six (6) credits. Upon approval of the thesis proposal, the student is invited to choose their own advisor. The advisor will provide detailed editorial feedback as well as general guidance, but thesis work is primarily self-directed and more intensive than the independent study. It is expected that the student will enter the thesis process with a substantial body of material already drafted, so that the thesis semester can be primarily focused on revision and, ideally, completion of a full-length creative manuscript such as a novel, a memoir, or a collection of poems, essays, or short stories. Students may choose to embark upon their thesis semester immediately after they finish their third summer, or wait until the following spring.

Courses

ENGL 500 Dante (3)
Close study of the three books of *The Divine Comedy*, with attention as well to Dante's literary ancestors including Virgil.

ENGL 502 Bible as Literature (3)
Introduction to both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, treating the texts, as much as possible, as literary documents open to multiple interpretations. Emphasis is on close reading of important episodes, in several translations. Supplemental readings will include representations of the Bible by major authors and artists.

ENGL 503 Literary Criticism (3)
This course considers some of the great questions about the nature and value of literature addressed by literary theorists from Plato to the present, engaging such critical approaches as the New Criticism, reader response theory, Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism, and cultural studies.

ENGL 504 Film Studies: Film as a Narrative Art (3)
While closely examining several classic films, the course introduces students to the major components of film style, essential techniques of film analysis and the critical vocabulary required for it, and some film theory.

ENGL 505 Classics of Latin American Literature (3)
Study of the literature of Spanish America, with special emphasis on major prose writers of the twentieth century, including Borges, Vargas Llosa, and Garcia-Marquez.

ENGL 506 Studies in Literature in Translation (3)
Though its content varies from semester to semester, this class always focuses on a special topic in a non-English literature, studied through texts in English translation. Examples might include authors on a single author, a literary movement or tradition, a genre, or a theme. This course may be repeated for credit when the topic differs.

ENGL 507 The Craft of Poetry (3)
Through close analysis of the poems of various modern and contemporary masters, we will consider the implications of verse as an imitation of voice, and consider how the poet's voice is shaped by choices made in terms of imagery, themes, form and technique.

ENGL 509 Workshop in Poetry Writing (3)
Discussions center on students' poems. Selected readings are assigned to focus on technical problems of craftsmanship and style.

ENGL 510 Workshop in Fiction Writing (3)
Discussions center on students' fiction. Selected readings are assigned to focus on technical problems of craftsmanship and style.

ENGL 512 Workshop in Creative Non-Fiction (3)
Discussions center on students' prose. Selected readings are assigned to focus on technical problems of craftsmanship and style.

ENGL 513 Writing Pedagogy (3)
Focuses on imaginative and innovative ways to teach writing. It offers a variety of creative writing techniques and exercises which participants can incorporate into their own English courses as well as into other courses across the curriculum. The course will be useful to participants' own creative ventures as well as their teaching.

ENGL 514 Workshop in Playwriting/Screenwriting (3)
Discussions center on students' plays or screenplays. Selected readings are assigned to focus on technical problems of craftsmanship and style.

ENGL 518 Forms of Nonfiction (3)
Through the close study of nonfiction writing including essays, researched work, and memoir, this course examines the way nonfiction writing works with a special emphasis on form and technique.

ENGL 519 Pictorial Transformations in Literature and Painting (3)
Culture contains memories and traces–textual, visual, graphic, political, rhetorical–from earlier stories and myths. This seminar examines the ways in which iconic moments in sacred scriptural texts are transformed into pictorial language through painting or sculpture, then back again, in altered forms, into literature in English through the ages. These traces of sacred text in "Modern" culture and writing may not explicitly refer to the scriptural text itself or reflect religious belief. The course aims to examine the aesthetic and cultural implications of these transformations in scripture, painting/sculpture, and secular literature. Texts are selected from authors including Shakespeare, Andrew Marvell, John Milton, Aphra Behn, Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, William Blake, John Keats, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Ian McEwan, plus others proposed by presenters in the class.

ENGL 530 Tennessee Williams (3)
A close study of Tennessee Williams's major dramatic works, as well as his poetry and fiction and the films based on the major plays. The course also looks at the biographical genesis of Williams's plays and will focus on the development of and interplay between his concepts of gender, sexuality, and religion. An examination of the critical responses to the plays and films is used to gauge shifts in the American social and cultural landscape.

ENGL 544 Guided Study (1 to 6)
An individualized course designed to meet the curricular needs and interests of a particular student. May be taken only by special arrangement with the proposed instructor, and with permission of the School of Letters Director. This course may be repeated for credit when the topic differs.

ENGL 545 Craft Practice Colloquium (1)
A one-credit colloquium exploring practical aspects of the writing life and publishing industry. Students will attend readings of creative work as well as craft lectures by current faculty and talks with publishing professionals such as agents, editors, and working writers. The School of Letters will offer a variety of events during the summer session, including but not limited to the Wednesday Reading Series. To receive credit, students must attend at least seven events and write brief responses to each to be turned in at the end of the summer session. These assignments will be made available at the beginning of the semester and will focus on how students will apply what they learned in their own writing practice.

ENGL 553 The Romance of Arthur (3)
A study of the literature surrounding the figure of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, from its origins in the early Middle Ages to the present. Readings include *The Knight of the Cart* by Chrétien de Troyes, the Middle English verse romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and Bernard Malamud's baseball novel, *The Natural*. We will also consider offshoots of Arthurian legend in the visual arts, opera, and such films as *Excalibur, The Fisher King*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The final assignment for the course may be either a term paper or a creative project.

ENGL 557 Shakespeare (3)
Advanced study of major plays and lyric poems of William Shakespeare, and of major critical traditions regarding Shakespeare's work.

ENGL 562 Milton (3)
A study of Milton's poetry and prose considered in relation to the political, ecclesiastical, intellectual and literary life of seventeenth-century England. Primary attention is to *Paradise Lost*.

ENGL 563 Hebraism and Hellenism (3)
This course examines the Greek and Biblical traditions inherited by English culture and follows the transformations, adaptations, subversions, and consumptions of these texts and influence. Reading includes passages from the Old and New Testaments, the Homeric epics, and selections from such English writers as Milton, Pope, Fielding, and Byron.

ENGL 566 Dr. Johnson and the Poets (3)
Close study of several major English poets (Shakespeare, Donne, Cowley, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Gray) through the lens provided by the great critic Samuel Johnson, who wrote about them all. The course also looks ahead to such modern writers as Robert Lowell and Samuel Beckett, who read Johnson as a model and inspiration.

ENGL 570 British Romanticism (3)
Study of major literary works and theories of the Romantic period in Britain, including poetry by Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats.

ENGL 572 Special Topics in British Literature (3)
Though its content varies from semester to semester, this class always focuses on a special topic in British literature not fully covered in existing courses. Examples might include courses on a single author, a literary movement or tradition, a genre, or a theme. This course may be repeated for credit when the topic differs.

ENGL 576 American Autobiography (3)
From the earliest period of European settlement, first-person narratives have been a hallmark of literary expression in America. This distinctive subgenre of creative nonfiction has been prominently and variously reflected in texts including Puritan conversion narratives, Ben Franklin's Autobiography, Henry Thoreau's Walden, and enslaved person accounts such as that of Omar Ibn Said, as well as in contemporary memoir by Kiese Laymon. Along the way, our course involves several purposes—artistic and otherwise—motivating such texts and this subgenre's relation to fiction such as that by Elizabeth Hardwick. What contemporary writers might learn from exploring the history of practices in this form is also considered.

ENGL 577 Nineteenth Century American Literature (3)
Studies in the fiction, nonfiction, and poetry written in the United States from the age of Washington Irving to that of Henry James, including major authors of the American Renaissance, the rise of Realism and Naturalism, and the beginnings of Modernism.

ENGL 580 Special Topics (1 to 4)
A seminar on a topic related to literature, language, and/or creative writing. This course may be repeated for credit when the topic differs.

ENGL 581 Modern British Poetry (3)
Examination of the modern period in British poetry, including close study of Hardy, Hopkins, Yeats, Lawrence, Auden and others.

ENGL 585 Literary Humor (3)
Despite E.B. White's warning that analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog ("it tends to kill the frog"), this course examines the serious ends of funny fiction by modern British and American writers, working toward an understanding how humor functions in literature and culture. Reading will include novels by Stella Gibbons, Evelyn Waugh, Kingsley Amis, Richard Russo, Zadie Smith, and others.

ENGL 587 Hybrid and Experimental Literatures (3)
Focuses on narrative modes that foreground formal innovation and/or blur or erase distinctions between traditional genre boundaries such as prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction, image and text, author and reader, etc. Students read creative works that possess these qualities, as well as critical writing that frames, theorizes, and interrogates the aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural conditions in which said work was produced and to which it responds. Assignments are largely creative though students are invited to produce their own theoretical models as well as their own hybrid or experimental works of art.

ENGL 589 Modern American Fiction (3)
Between 1900-1950, literary authors avidly experimented with new forms and philosophies as they depicted rapid changes in sexual, racial, social, and political identity in the US. After defining the relevance of movements such as regionalism, realism, and modernism, this course addresses the historical and social effects of two world wars, immigration, and urbanization. Authors include Henry James, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Richard Wright, and Patricia Highsmith. Short readings may be added by Gertrude Stein, Eudora Welty, John Dos Passos, James Baldwin, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

ENGL 592 The Contemporary Short Story (3)
Among the considerations of this discussion-oriented class will be strengths and weaknesses of stories, collections, and authors of the recent past. Along with speculating about what contemporary fiction can tell us about contemporary culture, we will address specific curriculum issues as they apply to the contemporary short story and the general topic of literary evaluation. Authors discussed include George Saunders, Edward P. Jones, Jamie Quatro, and Rebecca Lee.

ENGL 593 Faulkner (3)
Study of the celebrated novels of Faulkner's major phase--including *Sanctuary, The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom!*--as well as the author's significant but often overlooked work in poetry and short fiction.

ENGL 594 Literature of the American South (3)
Advanced study of the literary tradition of the U.S. South, with emphasis on such major writers as Mark Twain, Charles Chesnutt, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren and others of the Agrarian circle, Zora Neale Hurston, and Flannery O'Connor. Attention also to antebellum and contemporary southern writing, and to writers associated with Sewanee.

ENGL 595 African-American Literature (3)
Advanced study of the major traditions of African-American writing from the nineteenth century to the present, including Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, and Rita Dove.

ENGL 596 American Environmental Literature and Ecocriticism (3)
Exploration of the "green theme" and the emerging cross-disciplinary character of "ecocriticism" as reflected in writings selected from the full span of American cultural history. Readings from diverse genre include both traditional literary texts and seminal nonfiction by figures such as William Bartram, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Wendell Berry.

ENGL 598 Forms of Fiction (3)
How does fiction "work"? This course attempts to answer that question with close study of stories, novellas, and novels with a special emphasis on issues of form and technique.

ENGL 599 Thesis (3 or 6)