

## LITERATURE AND VALUES: WRITING(S) ABOUT NATURE

CRI Fall 2004

Dr. Virginia Meyn  
828-698-3905  
[vmeyn@mchsi.com](mailto:vmeyn@mchsi.com)

### **Textbooks:**

The Tempest, play by William Shakespeare; Norton Critical Ed.

Romantic Poetry, Duncan Wu; Blackwell Publishers

Walden, essays and sketches by Henry David Thoreau; Princeton Paperbacks

Dirt Music, novel by Tim Winton; Scribner Publishers

Whale Rider, novel by Witi Ihimaera; Harcourt Publishers

The Old Man and the Sea, short novel by Ernest Hemingway

My Antonia, novel by Willa Cather; Mariner Books

Small Wonder, essays by Barbara Kingsolver; Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers  
Journal

### **Course Description:**

When you see a tree, you respond in different ways (if you respond at all). You may see it as raw material for paper or a house or a piece of furniture, you may see its potential for an herbalist's brew, you may see it as shade for your picnic, as a prop to lean against, as a branch for your swing. Then again, stretch your imagination a bit more, and you may see it as a pillar reaching into the heavens, Jack's path to steal the gold from the greedy Ogre. Or at the other end of fairy tale, consider the myth of the Tree in the Garden of Eden.

We turn to a favorite nature poet for a simple lyrical response: "I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,/And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk/Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,/But dipped its top and set me down again./That would be good both going and coming back,/One could do worse than be a swinger of birches."(Robert Frost) Some need only look at a tree and experience tears of joy.

The English poet William Blake has expressed the gamut of our responses in this way: "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see Nature all ridicule and deformity, and some scarce see Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, Nature is Imagination itself."

I wonder what Blake means by "Nature is Imagination itself." Let us put on the "eyes of the man of imagination" in this course to see what we come up with. We are sorely in need of such vision, or we probably wouldn't have hungrily crowded into the film theaters to watch J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings again and again to see how the mythical imagination visualizes the threatened loss of that vision. Some even read the books!

To better understand Nature, we will be reading from a variety of literary genres: poetry, drama, narrative, descriptive sketch, and essay. Most though not all of the works fall into the category of literary classics. All of them exemplify what I would call fine writing. Through these works we will be looking at the meaningful relationship between human beings and nature in terms of a dichotomy expressed this way: *Is the writer observing a scene of nature from within the scene and as part of the natural world, even to the point of feeling one with the whole? Or is the writer observing the natural world from outside as something separate or other? Is she or he struggling to create order out of 'wildness', with an often inexplicable longing for the purity and innocence of what once was.* This is NOT a simple either/or.

We will be asking if it is possible to write about nature without having in our minds a previous image of what it should look like, in other words, a mental construct conditioned by our culture in the broad and narrow sense. Do we invariably impose this construct on our vision? Or is it possible to have a vision entirely liberated from such conditioning? In other words, to express a pure image of Nature-as-it-truly-is? Many would say the poet and mystic William Blake did, if such a thing is ever possible in words.

Finally, we ourselves will be writing. We will use our experiences with nature and nature writers to experiment with different kinds of seeing and different ways of using language to express what we see or *imagine* we see. Hopefully we will come closer not only to Nature, but to ourselves.

### **Course Requirements:**

1. Be present, and be on time (9:30 am Friday). Keep up with your readings on the day due. Participation in class discussion is very important.
2. There will be 3 formal papers due unless otherwise notified—in addition to in-class writing exercises. It is mandatory that the papers be handed in on time. They can range between 4-7 pages, but no less than 4.
3. A final take-home exam will be handed in at the last class.
4. Your papers should follow formal guidelines (double-spaced, normal font, standard margins, references when necessary, etc.). They are worth 80% of your final grade.
5. Keep a journal in which you jot impressions of your observations, reflections, and readings. This will be very important as the basis for your writing.

Paper assignments and list of recommended reading to be handed out under separate cover.

## LITERATURE READING ASSIGNMENTS

I. **Sept. 3:** Thinking about Eden, and thinking like a mountain: Based on excerpts (handouts) from the Book of Genesis, St. Augustine's Confessions, Milton's Paradise Lost, Blake's "Wild Rose," John Muir's "Thousand Mile Walk," R.W. Emerson's "Nature," H.D. Thoreau's "Walking," and Aldo Leopold's "Thinking Like a Mountain."

II. **Sept. 10:** The Tempest (1611).

III. **Sept. 17:** Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1798-1800). Selected poems from Romantic Poetry: Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Frost at Midnight"; Shelley's "To a Skylark," Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn." **PAPER #1 DUE.**

IV. **Sept. 24:** Walden, selections. More selected poems: Rainer Maria Rilke's "Autumn Day," Gerard Manley Hopkins' "The Windhover," Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

V.-XI. **Sept. 25-Nov. 12:** Exploration and study in W. Australia and New Zealand. Three literature sessions: Dirt Music, W. Australia; Australian poets (e.g. Les Murray); Whale Rider, New Zealand. See films: Rabbit-Proof Fence (W. Australia); The Last Wave (Australia); Whale Rider. (Discussion questions to be handed out later.) **PAPER #2 DUE** during this period.

XII. **Nov. 19:** The Old Man and the Sea; "Death of a Moth," sketch by Virginia Woolf (handout). **PAPER #3 DUE.**

XIII. **Nov. 26:** Thanksgiving Holiday.

XIV. **Dec. 3:** My Antonia.

XV. **Dec. 10:** Small Wonder, selections. Joanna Macy, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Mary Oliver: "deep ecology" and "ecopoetics." Nature as Healer.  
**HAND IN FINAL TAKE-HOME EXAM.**