

**English 350: American Nature Writers**  
**Block 3: Oct. 27 – Nov. 19, 2014**  
**South Hall, Room 108**  
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The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science – *Albert Einstein*

The real significance of wilderness is a cultural matter. It is far more than hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, or canoeing; it has to do with the human spirit – *Sigurd F. Olson*

**Required Books:**

Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*.  
Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.  
Moore, Kathleen Dean. *The Pine Island Paradox*.  
Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*.  
Individual readings on moodle.  
A reading journal to bring to every class.

**Overview:**

“In wildness is the preservation of the world” – Thoreau

What does Thoreau mean by “wildness”? What is it we are trying to preserve? Should we? To what ends? This course will explore the notion of wildness and wilderness as part of an American mythology as well as an environmental concern.

When Europeans first arrived on the shores of North America, the continent was seen as a “New Eden,” a vast, bountiful wilderness of endless riches inhabited by wild, savage primitives. Even as the wilderness has been tamed (or erased?), images of wilderness and the frontier have remained a defining element of the American ethos, serving as a spiritual, religious, and aesthetic metaphor for the American character. Wilderness is at the heart of the American mythology. At the same time, America has had a long, troubled relationship with its wilderness as environmental concerns clash inevitably with economic/political concerns.

This course will trace both a historical/political and a literary relationship with “nature,” looking specifically at philosophical meditations on the concept of “nature.” In the terms of a predominant Judeo-Christian heritage, what does it mean to have “dominion” over the wilderness and its inhabitants? How do we define nature and what is our relation to the natural world? Is “nature” the opposite of “culture”? What do we mean by “human nature?”

We will also explore a variety of approaches to conservation and environmental issues and try to develop our own ethical stance to our environment. How should we act in

relationship to the world around us? We will read influential writers such as Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, Wendell Berry and Annie Dillard.

### **Assignments:**

- **Participation:** This is an essential element of this course. I expect you to read the work and come to class fully prepared to contribute to discussion. I do not necessarily expect you to speak every class, but I will look for substantive contributions over the course of the block. Do remember that a question can often be as important as a comment—any kinds of contributions are important. 10%
- **Small group discussion:** All of you will be assigned to a group of 3 or 4 peers. These groups will meet individually on most mornings to discuss the texts at hand or particular questions that I pose to the group. This is an important preparation for the conversations we have as a large group. One person from the group each day should be assigned to take notes and to be the “point person” for me in the larger class. In other words, if I want to know what you talked about in small groups, someone should be ready to give me a synopsis or respond to other questions I have. This will be factored in as part of your overall participation grade.
- **Nature Essay:** This will be a creative writing project in which I expect you to use our texts as inspiration and as models. These essays will be 6-8 page meditations on place, history, and the concept of nature and our relationship to it and will engage with the issues we read/discuss throughout the course. 25%
- **Exams:** You will have two take-home exams. Each exam will be cumulative; you should expect anything that we have read to be possible subject matter for these exams. 25% each
- **Discussion:** Each reading group will be assigned one day’s reading. For that day, you are in charge of starting discussion. You will present your responses to the work at hand—what are the most important ideas in the text? What images or metaphors of nature do you see at work? How does the work relate to other readings or discussions? What stylistic elements are most important in the work? Etc. You will then pose several questions to get the class talking. We will discuss different ways to approach this assignment. The only absolute requirement is that everyone should participate in the presentation. 15%
- **Reading quizzes.** I will use quizzes throughout the block to assess your level of reading comprehension. You should not let yourself get behind in the reading. Quizzes are meant to be reasonably easy if you’ve done the reading attentively. Quizzes are pass/fail. A failed quiz drops 10 points from your total (of a 1000 point total). A missed quiz counts as a failed quiz.

I will give you letter grades, but these translate to a point total. Grades translate as A+ = 98 (a 100 is possible but incredibly rare); A = 95; A- = 92; B+ = 88; B = 85 etc. Total points = 1000, so you can multiply your score by the percentage to figure points for each assignment.

**Schedule:**

We will meet Monday through Thursday afternoons, 1-3. Monday through Friday, we will meet from 9:00-11:00. Most of these will be small group meetings, except for Fridays when we will meet as a large group. I will give you weekly updates with more specifics on each day's reading.

# = Small Group Discussion day; \* = Readings on Moodle  
(when you print out readings from Moodle, please print double-sided to reduce our paper usage! Thanks)

**Week 1**

Mon: AM: Introductions and syllabus.  
PM: Read Thoreau, *M*

Tue: AM: Emerson; Muir; Leopold; Sanders \*  
PM: Continue AM discussion

Wed: AM: Sigurd Olson / Edward Abbey  
PM: Continue AM discussion

Thur: AM: Abbey  
PM: Continue AM discussion #

Fri: AM: Abbey  
PM:

**Week 2**

Mon: AM:  
PM: Begin Gary Snyder

Tue: AM: Gary Snyder  
PM: Continue AM discussion #

Wed: AM: Gary Snyder / Wendell Berry \*  
PM: Continue AM discussion #  
Take-Home mid-term exam

Thur: AM: mid-term due by 11  
PM: Discuss mid-term questions

Fri: AM: Begin Annie Dillard  
PM:

### **Week 3**

Mon: AM:  
PM: Annie Dillard / Barbara Kingsolver \* #

Tue: AM: Annie Dillard  
PM: continue AM discussion #

Wed: AM: Begin Kathleen Dean Moore  
PM: continue AM discussion

Thur: AM: Kathleen Dean Moore  
PM: continue AM discussion #

Fri: AM: Kathleen Dean Moore / Terry Tempest Williams/Mary Oliver \* #  
PM:  
Due: Nature Essay by 5 PM

### **Week 4**

Mon: AM:  
PM: Paul Gruchow/Wendell Berry \*

Tue: AM: Sanders/Bill McKibben \*  
PM: Continue AM Discussion  
Take-Home Final Exam

Wed: No Class.  
Final Exam due by 12 noon—no late work accepted!