

Block I, 29 August – 21 September

EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY NATURE WRITING

STC 007, Noon – 3:00 p.m.

Instructor: Dr. O. Alan Weltzien  
Office: MH 315B  
Office Hours: T TH 11-12; MW 4 – 5; and by appointment  
Phone: -7431 (o)  
e-mail: [a\\_weltzien@umwestern.edu](mailto:a_weltzien@umwestern.edu)

Texts:

Mary Hunter Austen, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903)

Michael P. Branch, Ed., *Reading The Roots: American Nature Writing Before Walden* (2004)

John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (1894)

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

Course statement:

For this rendition of the senior course, Seminar in Literary Period, I have chosen to focus upon pre-twentieth century American nature writing. In recent years, nature writing has come to occupy a larger place in college courses and scholarship, and it constitutes a robust field in its own right: one that crosses genres, though often occurs in one form or other of prose (i.e. nonfiction): essays, field studies, reports. It is a field increasingly attractive to readers and writers as the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded. Often nature writing overlaps with what we might mean by environmental writing, though we shall employ the former term, which avoids some of the simple-minded political stereotyping attached too often to the latter.

For our course we shall study one (brand new) anthology of older writers and three seminal books. In the process, we will propose definitions of nature writing and determine how significant writers before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century broadened the term. Here are some initial questions: What are the thematics of “nature writing”? What do individual essays focus upon? What is the relation of science—natural history—to belletristic writing? I.e. how does technical writing from ornithology or botany balance with literary concerns? What role and scope do narrators occupy in nature writing? What are the proposed relations between writer and reader? How do ethics (e.g. regards hunting) and aesthetics cross? And what are ways in which we should—and should not—read these older texts with our contemporary, early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, lenses? How can we help or control that?

Expectations, X1 and otherwise:

As this is a senior-level course, I've senior-level expectations of/from you. As it is labeled a "seminar," I/we shall run it as a seminar. Notions of seminar in fact logically belong with our changed curricular structure and pedagogy known as X1. I shall not function as a talking head; we will change up how we spend our three-hour blocks, and shan't be doing exactly the same thing for each hour or, necessarily, at the same time each day. E.g. each of you will give a presentation, ½ hour to an hour, several times during the course. There will be no exams, only papers of various lengths and kinds. I shall pose questions, in advance of each day's readings and at the front of each class, which you will work through individually and in pairs. I shall probably divide you into two "study teams" and have a series of protocol suggestions for how you work and interact with one another. Attendance and participation, obviously, represent a big chunk of your course grade. Don't be sick and don't miss class. Period.

Because this is 400-level and because you now find yourselves in X1, you'll have a lot of homework each night. Lots of reading, and then reflection and writing time, too. Remember that X1 is NOT ¼ of a semester but one full semester in one quarter the time.

Evaluation:

Attendance and Participation: 40%

Papers and presentations: 60%

A word about daily schedule and study team protocols, i.e. more expectations:

Ours is a small class so you'll be working a lot individually and in pairs. Each day you'll be taking the lead, in some respects, analyzing and discussing our readings. I expect each of you to be active participants, polite but critical, and always participatory. As seniors you understand rules of classroom decorum. Remember that your conversation extends as much to your classmates as to myself. E.g., I expect you to frequently question the statements (and presentations) of one another, and not just pose questions to myself. We'll follow similar patterns most days but will try to alter our plans and styles to stave off boredom or too much predictability. I'll announce assignments and due dates at least one day before you submit. As I said, you'll have a variety.

I'll discuss your final presentations now and along the way.

A likely schedule:

Day 1: Introduction to 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Nature Writing; introduction to X1 and sundry expectations

Days 2-4 Tours through the menu of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century American nature writing, i.e. *Reading The Roots*. You'll be sampling exploration narratives, ornithological and botanical field notes-as-essays, and other forms. What linguistic challenges do you find? How is the "New World" being captured? What do these readings have to do with your knowledge of American history and American literary history?

Days 5-10 Study of *Walden*. How is Thoreau a watershed writer in the U.S.? How is this text central to our genre? In light of the preceding days of study, what primary influences do you see in the formation of *Walden*? How is the text relevant—or irrelevant—to America and Americans today? What seems contemporary about it?

Days 11-14 Study of Muir and *The Mountains of California*. What religious rhetoric do you find employed here? How does this book change your view of mountains, let alone California's Sierra Nevada? How do you understand the philosophy of preservationism in light of Muir's first book? How does it extend or borrow from *Walden*?

Days 15-17 Study of Austen and *The Land of Little Rain*. What are the ways in which Austen presents a California and an ecology different from Muir's? How is this text an ecofeminist vision of living in place? What new emphases in nature writing do you discover in her text versus the preceding ones?

Day 18 Final Presentations. Course review.