

Robert Thacker  
160B Whitman  
[rthacker@stlawu.edu](mailto:rthacker@stlawu.edu)  
Telephone: 5970  
Office Hours: MWF 11:00-12:00  
And by appointment

Spring 2010  
TTh 10:10-11:40  
Richardson 304

## English/Environmental Studies 346A

### North American Literature and the Environment

#### *Course Description*

Here's the description of this course from the university *Catalog*:

A study of the literary response to the taming of the American wilderness. The course focuses on the close association of nature and art in American literature, examining how American writers, shaping story and poem, have tried to reconcile the processes and values associated with 'wilderness' and 'civilization.' Some attention is given to the historical and cultural backgrounds of the wilderness theme. Writers such as Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, Cooper, Thoreau, Melville, Twain, Whitman, Jewett, Frost, Faulkner, Cather, Steinbeck, McPhee and Dillard are studied, but an effort is made to choose works not usually taught in the surveys of American literature. *Also offered as Environmental Studies 346 and through Outdoor Studies.* (2009-10: 107)

Any catalog description has to be glossed and, more to the point, vitalized by an instructor in each iteration, so I'm offering you some thoughts here as I begin teaching this course for the first time:

Reading the course's *Catalog* description, I note the use of the word "tame" in its first sentence and, at the end of its second, the opposition posited between two critical terms: "wilderness" and "civilization." Each of these words, arguably, lies at the very core of our shared project. One of our poets, Robert Frost, begins his "The Gift Outright" (1942) with a line embodying the deep cultural meaning of all three terms: "The land was ours before we were the land's." He continues to conclude that "Such as we were we gave ourselves outright/ (The deed of gift was many deeds of war) / To the land vaguely realizing westward,/ But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,/ Such as she was, such as she would be become" (348). Some years before, famously now, F. Scott Fitzgerald had his by then deeply experienced and forlorn narrator, Nick Carraway—so changed as the result of the story's action--end *The Great Gatsby* (1925) with this sentence: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Writing so, Fitzgerald connects Carraway's longings directly to an immediately preceding passage describing a long-before first glimpse of the North American continent:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses [along Long Island Sound] began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once

for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (141, 140)

The environmental moment Fitzgerald evokes here resonates throughout North American literature, and its resonance owes to the same great fact which Frost later asserted with the truism he offers in his first line in "The Gift Outright": "The land was ours before we were the land's."

As it happened, Fitzgerald evokes the Dutch seeing Long Island early in the seventeenth century and Frost refers to the English in Massachusetts and Virginia about that time too. But these were only two instances of a much larger series of interactions—the French were to the north, the Spanish to the south, the Portuguese were involved, the Scandinavians had come to North America long since (ca. 1000). Always, Native peoples were there on the shore greeting the Europeans. However deeply inculcated an idea among the cultural tropes of the new arrivals, in human terms there was no such thing as a "Virgin Land." True, North America looked in many ways similar to the environment the Europeans had left behind, but its vast extent, its deep hardwood and evergreen forests, its apparent emptiness of human habitation and effect, and above all its fecundity suggested a "Brave New World" indeed—as Shakespeare phrased it in *The Tempest*, a play which is partially about the discovery of America.

The arrival of Europeans brought myriad transformations to North America as they found it, increased their numbers, made towns, and moved ever farther west on this "errand into the wilderness." Settlement and change began in the Americas during the sixteenth century that has continued unabated to the present moment. This processes have been described through words and phrases such as "Virgin Land," "Exploration," "Discovery," "Frontier," "Pioneers," "The Westward Movement," "The Oregon Trail," "The Turner Thesis," "The Laurentian Thesis," "The American Adam," "The Machine in the Garden," "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way." There are many more.

As these considerations suggest, our inherited literature has charted—from the very first, and even before—the relation between first Europeans and then Euroamericans and the North American environment. Our shared project in the course, just as the *Catalog* description asserts, is to examine "the close association of nature and art in American literature." This we will do through our readings, discussions, and writing, keeping ever in mind the assertions offered by both Frost and Fitzgerald. We need to keep in mind also that for us, "American literature" means "North American literature"—that is, there are *two* literary traditions in English on this continent, that of the United States but also Canada. Intertwined with that of its southern (and northwestern) neighbor's, Canada's literary response to the environment offers another view of this process, another "Road Not Taken" (Frost 105).

## *Required Readings*

Cather, Willa. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. 1927. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Frost, Robert. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Ed. Edward Connery Latham. 1969. New York: Henry Holt, 1979.

Moodie, Susanna. *Roughing It in the Bush*. 1852. Ed. Michael A. Peterman. New York: Norton, 2007.

*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Volume A: Beginnings to 1820. Ed. Nina Baym *et al.* 7th ed. New York: Norton: 2007.

Stegner, Wallace. *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and a Memory of the last Plains Frontier*. 1962. New York: Penguin, 1990.

Welch, James. *Winter in the Blood*. 1974. New York: Penguin, 1981.

## *Assignments and Grade Breakdown*

<i>Wolf Willow</i> Book Review (Due: February 2)	15%
Short Responses	15%
Panel Report and Participation	15%
Research Paper (Due: April 29)	30%
Final Examination (May 5: 1:30-4:30)	25%

## **Assignment Gloss and Course Policies**

Early in the term and as we begin discussing our materials in earnest, I would like each of you to write a book review of Stegner's *Wolf Willow*; we will discuss just what this means and I will provide you with examples and an assignment sheet. Throughout the term as well I will ask for short written responses to both primary and secondary readings. Each of you, depending on your interests, will be assigned to a panel. Ideally, the work you do here will serve as a basis for your research paper, a critical analysis of one of our readings (or another with my approval). It will be a sustained piece of research-based critical analysis of about 3000-3750 words following MLA presentation format. It is due the last day of the class. Finally, there will a comprehensive final examination on the day assigned by the Registrar.

## *Attendance*

Daily attendance is required. As a seminar, the course cannot function without each person's full and complete participation. On some days your presence may seem less urgent to you, but it never is: you need to be here to know what's going on, to do your own work, to contribute to the common tasks, be a member of your colleagues' thoughtful and responsive audience. I expect you to be in class, on time and ready to go, every day.

That having been said, I know that sometimes life intervenes. If it does, I expect you to explain the reason for your absence to me *in person* and in a professional way; beforehand if possible, but as soon as you can afterwards if not. Do not simply send me an email or leave a voicemail message, although you are free to do that too. Should you have university-related obligations that may involve missing class, I would like to know about them as soon as you know the specifics.

Students with unexplained absences will have their final grade docked .5 per absence.

### *Professionalism*

While attendance is the first professional expectation required of each student, there are others. You should arrive on time and ready to work. You should have done the day's reading, you should have the relevant book with you and, as always, you need to have a notebook and something to write with. On days when an assignment is due, it should be ready at the beginning of class and meet the standard expectations (typed, printed legibly, stapled or paper-clipped, properly formatted according to MLA Style). On days when you have an oral presentation yourself, you should be organized and ready to go. Turn cell phones off. No food, please.

### *Timetable and Readings*

Note: All readings from the *Norton Anthology* include author biographies, notes, and other critical apparatus; students may expect to be tested on this material as well.

## **Finding a Form: Contexts and The Case of Wallace Stegner**

January 19-21	T:	Introduction to the Course Finding North America Wallace Stegner, <i>Wolf Willow</i> , and the Writer's Relation to an Environment  Stegner, "Coda: Wilderness Letter" (Handout)
	Th:	Stegner, <i>Wolf Willow</i>  Robert Thacker, "Erasing the Forty-Ninth Parallel: Nationalism, Prairie Criticism, and the Case of Wallace Stegner." <i>Essays on Canadian Writing</i> 61 (1997): 179-202. (Angel Site)
	---	"Stegner, the Cypress Hills, and an 'Impenetrable Foreignness': Still Writing the Wests." Review essay. <i>Western American Literature</i> 44 (2009): 64-76. (Angel Site)



March 2-4 Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush*, 153-332

### *Spring Break*

#### **Nature Poetry**

March 16-18 Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*

March 23-25 Frost, *Poetry*

#### **“Something In the Style of Legend”**

March 30-April 1 Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Robert Thacker. “Willa Cather.” Online biography. Willa Cather Foundation. Red Cloud, Nebraska. 2008.

<http://www.willacather.org/about-willa-cather>

---. “Willa Cather's Glittering Regions.” *A Companion to the an Regional Literatures of America*. Ed. Charles Crow. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 513-31. (Angel Site)

April 6-8 Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

April 13-15 Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*

#### **Living on the Land**

April 20-22 Welch, *Winter in the Blood*

April 27-29 Wrap-Up, Evaluate, Review  
**Thursday: Research Paper Due**

May 5 **Final Examination** (1:30-4:30)

#### Works Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Fredson Bowers. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Frost, Robert. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. 1969. New York: Henry Holt, 1979.

St. Lawrence University *Catalog 2009-2110*. Canton, NY: St. Lawrence University, 2009.