

Religion 353: Religion and Nature Writing

MWF 10:35 – 11:30; HL 205

Prof. M. Gail Hamner

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Office hours: Mondays 1:45 – 2:45, and by appointment

Course description:

The scholarly field of Cultural Studies engages cultural events and social relations as *texts* that can be read and interpreted by a range of theories, from psychoanalysis to queer studies. This course applies cultural studies to writings about nature in order to examine where and how religious words, themes and values affect 19th-20th century understandings of the human relationship to the natural environment. Lectures and discussion will also draw on semiotics, poststructuralism, feminist theory, and political theory to draw out the various cultural and political implications of the religious presumptions used or implied by the texts we read. I want students to examine how words like “nature”, “wilderness”, and “solitude” come to be held up as paradigmatic sites of so-called ‘spiritual experience’. This examination requires not only that we figure out how a word like ‘nature’ is functioning religiously, but also that we analyze the cultural significance and cultural (personal and political) practices that encompass words like ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’.

Learning Outcomes

Students of this course will explore the motifs of religion, nature, and identity in selected nature writings as these motifs give vent to historical and contemporary forms of personal and collective meaning, practice, and political hope. For example, we will question what forms ‘place’ for these texts; what the terms ‘land’, ‘earth’, and ‘nature’ signify for them; and how these terms generate religious sensibilities, life habits, and socio-political practices.

Expectations and Grading

1. **Attendance and Participation (15%)** I expect you to come to class on time, having done the reading, and ready to discuss it together. More than two absences will affect your participation grade. Since you must be present to participate, I roll your attendance into your participation grade.
2. **Midterm Essay (40%)**: A take-home essays on 1-2 questions of a synthetic nature, distributed on a scheduled Friday and due the following Friday.
3. **Final essay or project (45%)**.

Required books (I will also provide Blackboard posts).

- Thoreau, *Walden*
- Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*
- Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*
- Dillard, *For The Time Being*
- Meloy, *Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections on Desert, Sea, Stone & Sky*
- Childs, *Soul of Nowhere*
- Bass, *Winter: Notes from Montana*

Official Policies

Academic Integrity

The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort. For more information and the complete policy, see <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>

Disability Statement

Students who may need academic accommodations due to a disability are encouraged to discuss their needs with the instructor at the beginning of the semester. In order to obtain authorized accommodations, students should be registered with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, 315-443-4498 and have an updated accommodation letter for the instructor. Accommodations and related support services such as exam administration are not provided retroactively and must be requested in advance.” For more information about services and policy, see [Office of Disability Services](#): **Address:** Syracuse University, Office of Disability Services, 804 University Ave., Room 309.Syracuse, NY 13244-2330
Phone: Voice: (315) 443-4498; **TDD:** (315) 443-1371
E-Mail: odssched@syr.edu

Syllabus

A. Early voices

Week I: Thoreau

Mon	Aug 31	Introductions
Wed	Sep 2	Thoreau, <i>Walden</i> , Chapter 1.
Fri	Sep 4	Thoreau, <i>Walden</i> , Chapter 1 (cont.), and 2, 5, 11 if you can.

Week II: Whitman

Mon	Sep 7	No class: Labor Day
Wed	Sep 9	Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok", from <i>Leaves of Grass</i> , http://www.bartleby.com/142/10.html
Fri	Sep 11	Discussion of Thoreau and Whitman

Week III: Muir

Mon	Sep 14	selections from <i>Essential Muir</i> (on Blackboard): "Knowledge and Inventions"; "A Near View of the High Sierra", and "A Windstorm in the Forest", and "Yosemite Falls at Midnight"
Wed	Sep 16	<i>ibid.</i> , "God's First Temples: How Shall We Preserve our Forests?", and "The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West"
Fri	Sep 18	discussion of 19 th century thinkers about earth, self and religion

Week IV: Austin

Mon	Sep 21	No Class: Eid
Wed	Sep 23	Mary Austin: <i>The Land of Little Rain</i> (This book is also available through Google Books)
Fri	Sep 25	<i>Ibid.</i> , continued discussion.

Week V: Depression era Documentaries

Mon	Sep 28	No Class: Yom Kippur
Wed	Sep 30	<i>The Plough that Broke the Plains</i> (Pare Lorentz: 1936)
Fri	Oct 2	<i>The River</i> (Pare Lorentz: 1937)

Week VI: Leopold

Mon	Oct 5	Selections from Aldo Leopold, <i>A Sand County Almanac</i>
Wed	Oct 7	<i>ibid.</i>
Fri	Oct 9	discussion of documentaries and Leopold

VII: Midterm

Mon Oct 12 current events or debates
Wed Oct 14 *ibid.*
Fri Oct 16 **midterm paper due**

VIII: Annie Dillard

Mon Oct 19 Dillard, *For the Time Being*
Wed Oct 21 *ibid.*
Fri Oct 23 Discussion of Dillard in comparison/contrast with the pre-midterm material.

IX: Ellen Meloy

Mon Oct 26 Meloy, *Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections on Desert, Sea, Stone & Sky*
Wed Oct 28 *ibid.*
Fri Oct 30 Discussion of Dillard and Meloy

X: Craig Childs

Mon Nov 2 *Soul of Nowhere*
Wed Nov 4 *ibid.*
Fri Nov 6 Discussion of Dillard, Meloy and Childs

XI: Rick Bass

Mon Nov 9 **AAR**
Wed Nov 11 *Winter*
Fri Nov 13 *ibid.*

XII: *Wendell Berry* this week's essays are on Blackboard)

For Berry and Kingsolver we could substitute selections from *The Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* by Sarah M. Taylor.

Mon Nov 16 "Two Economies"
Wed Nov 18 "Christianity and the Survival of Creation"
Fri Nov 20 "The Pleasures of Eating"

XIII: Thanksgiving

Mon Nov 23 Kingsolver, "A Fist in the Eye of God" (or another essay from *Small Wonder*; this will be posted on Blackboard.)

XIV: Other perspectives

This week (Nov 30, Dec 2, Dec 4) we either will read essays from the edited collection, *Rooted in the Land* or selections from Bron Taylor's *Deep Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*

XV: Synthesis and student presentation

This week (Dec 7, 9, 11) we will give over to collaboratively crafted synthesis of the course material from the second half of the semester, and student presentations of their final projects.

Mon Dec 14 Course evaluation forms and final statements.