

Prof. J. Davidov

English 279, Spring 2002: Intro. to American Studies

Office Hour: before class at the Hitchcock Center and in Bartlett 467 by appointment

545-5516; [davidov@english.umass.edu](mailto:davidov@english.umass.edu)

### Contemplating Nature

During the latter half of the twentieth century, a major change took place in the scientific understanding nature on Earth. Ecology, geology, hydrology, geography, oceanography, and paleontology, among other sciences, produced findings that contradicted established beliefs. When the understanding of physical characteristics undergoes a major change, this leads to corresponding changes in the way we perceive our spiritual and religious connection with nature. . . . Our established beliefs are so deep-seated that they function as unstated premises of our lives, and we may not recognize that the basis for these beliefs, in our observations through our senses and technological extensions of these senses, has changed. Yet we can come to terms with changes in our nature-knowledge only when we face them directly, in all their manifestations.

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Daniel Botkin, biologist

*No Man's Garden: Thoreau and a New Vision for Civilization and*

*Nature*

**Description.** This is an interdisciplinary course for majors and minors in American Studies and other students interested in American nature writing. Its focus is the way Americans envision and experience nature, ranging from imaginative representations of landscape to an understanding of the land as a place of habitation, work, worship, solace, and recreation to issues of environmental abuse and conservation. Thoreau's *Walden* provides the grounding for the work of the semester and we will read it very closely, paying attention to the *writing*--from use of metaphors to extended description--and to the *substance*--as natural history, as spiritual meditation, as ecocriticism. Twentieth-century writings that follow take up the themes introduced in *Walden*--seeing, dwelling, working, wilderness and wildness, science, travel, embodiment, spirit-- and also include ecofeminism, green movements, and environmental justice. In

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addition to ranging in our reading from natural history to life-writing to poetry, we will explore visual and aural representations of landscape in painting, photography, film, and music.

**Contemplation.** The title of the course, “Contemplating Nature,” refers to what most nature writers, whether they are natural scientists or poets, *do*. They pay close attention to what they are observing, and in the case of the writers whose works we will read, the precondition for such work is centering, which means going inside, existing in the present moment. Part of my goal in this course is to see whether, in encouraging students to enter into the contemplative space, they can become more engaged readers, thinkers, and writers. We will therefore spend the first few moments of each class in silent meditation. This means that you must come to class on time; if for some reason you must be late, please wait outside until the meditation period is over rather than disturbing the class. It is a good idea to continue this practice on your own by beginning your reading with meditation. This will help you not only to read with care, but also to focus on some specific line or metaphor or description and to make that the subject of your own intense contemplation. To that end, I am asking you to keep reading journals, in which you explore, in depth, an idea that strikes you. (This is not the same as a personal journal; a reading journal is a place to think *analytically* about what you read,

and although these responses will be your own, they should refer to textual passages. More on this below.) There should be at least one entry for each class period. You should bring your journal to class with you every day. I will ask you to read from it during the semester; your reading will serve as a subject of contemplation for the rest of us and, hopefully, lead to good class discussion.

### **Assignments and Evaluation.**

Here are my expectations:

- \* You attend every class and you come to class on time. Because this class meets only once a week, except for documented serious illness, grades will be lowered for missed classes. This is also the only excuse for late work.
- \*You read with care all works on the syllabus, and you keep a reading journal in which you record your contemplative responses to what you read. These responses should not be book reports but original thoughts– interpretations, dialogues with the author, that

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sort of thing.

\*You contribute to every class meeting in some way– by sharing a journal entry, by commenting thoughtfully on readings or on another student’ s remarks.

\*You are considerate and generous to your fellow students; you listen carefully, do not interrupt, do not monopolize discussion; you are an encouraging presence.

If you do all of these things and demonstrate in the exams and in your five best journal entries handed in at the end of the semester that you have done the reading, you are guaranteed a C. A higher grade will depend on the quality of your work. You need not write a paper to get a B, but since there are 15 extra points for doing so, to get an A or AB you need to write a paper on *Walden* which earns a B or higher. Papers cannot be rewritten, but I will read typed journal entries handed in early enough for me to return them to you with written feedback. You are encouraged to work with writing partners on your papers. Peer review is a tremendous way of strengthening one’ s writing, even for professional writers.

There will be a take-home midterm and a final exam. If you get an A or an AB on your first paper, you may write a second paper instead of taking the midterm. If you get an A or an AB on your second paper also, you may write a third paper instead of taking the final exam. This paper writing option is for students whose involvement in the class is at such a deep level that they want to pursue a line of their own rather than respond to questions I propose, and only for those whose writing skills are already at a high level. Everyone will hand in on the last day of class his or her five best journal entries. Note the university’ s policy on academic honesty: stolen work turned in as your own (words and ideas, printed or electronic) earns an F.

Your grade will be computed as follows: group presentations (see below), 15%; midterm (or 2<sup>nd</sup> paper), 20%; final exam (or 3<sup>rd</sup> paper), 25%; five best journal entries, 10%; general class participation as defined above, 15%; *Walden* paper, 15%.

**Community Service.** As Thoreau proposes in *Walden*, the real purpose of learning is to take it into the world. For those of you who wish to do so, I make available a 1-credit add-on option– the course number is 297S– to give you an opportunity to do a community service project for a local environmental institution on a list that I will distribute. The requirement is 30

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hours of community service. You must choose your project no later than the third class meeting (Wednesday, Feb. 13) and hand in a signed contract. You will keep an ongoing record of your work--you decide what form it is to take-- and turn it in on the last day of class.

**Texts** (available at Atticus Bookstore on Main Street in Amherst and on reserve in the library):

Roger Gottlieb, ed., *This Sacred Earth* (Routledge)

H. D. Thoreau, *Walden* (Beacon)

John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Penguin)

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Harper Perennial, 25<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed.)

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Houghton-Mifflin, foreward by Al Gore)

Richard Nelson, *The Island Within* (Vintage)

Gary Snyder, *Practice of the Wild* (North Point)

Terry Tempest Williams, *Red* (Pantheon)

Linda Hogan, *Dwellings* (Simon & Schuster)

Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Beacon)

**Schedule.**

Jan. 30 Introduction

Feb. 6 In *This Sacred Earth*: White, " The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" and Nash, " The Greening of Religion" (everyone will discuss these). In addition, all of the readings in Part II, pp. 46-180 (some are very short). In class there will be group presentations on traditional religious views of nature-- Chinese, African, Islamic, Hebrew, etc.

Feb. 13 *Walden* through " Visitors."

Feb. 20 *Walden* to end.

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Feb. 27 Muir, *My First Summer*. Presentation on 19<sup>th</sup>-century American nature painting and photography. Walden paper due.

Mar. 6 Dillard, *Pilgrim*. Midterm exam handed out.

Mar. 13 Carson, *Silent Spring*; film. Midterm exam due (must be typed).

Spring Break

Mar. 27 Nelson, *Island Within*

April 3 Snyder, *Practice of the Wild*.

April 10 Williams, *Red*. 2<sup>nd</sup> paper due.

April 17 no class: Monday schedule

April 24 Hogan, *Dwellings*.

May 1 In *This Sacred Earth*: group presentations, as follows:  
Green Movements: Gottlieb, “ Spiritual Deep Ecology and the Left” ; Spretnak, “ Beyond Humanism” and “ Ten Key Values” ; Taylor, “ Earth First!,” Sharma, “ On Sustainability.”  
Ecofeminism: Reuther, “ Ecofeminism;” Primavesi, “ Ecofeminism and Canon” ; Riley, “ Ecology Is a Sistah’ s Issue” ; Allen, “ The Woman I Love is a Planet” ; Eisler, “ Messages from the Past.”  
Ecology and Society: Daneel, “ African Independent Churches” ; Ingram, “ Interview with Chavez” ; Chavis, “ Street Trees” ; Spangler, “ Imagination, Gaia, and the Sacredness of Earth” ; Hessel, “ Now that Animals Can Be Genetically Engineered” ; People of Color, “ ” Principles of Environmental

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Justice.”

We will all discuss Macy, “ Faith, Power, and Ecology,” 415-422.

May 8 Oliver, *Poems*. I think it makes more sense to read the poet’ s work in order, so read backwards, up through *American Primitive*. For this session and the next, we will again work in groups. Each group will present one poem.

May 15 Oliver, *Poems*. Continue reading backwards, from *Dream Work* through *New Poems*. Group work again. Evaluations. Five best journal entries due.

May 20 Final exam or final paper due in Bartlett 170 by noon in a box marked “ Davidov/  
(Monday) 279.” All work must be typed, double spaced, proofread.

A note on group work: You will want to find your group the class meeting before your presentation, and exchange email addresses and telephone numbers so that you can discuss your strategy beforehand. Everyone in the group will get the same grade. It is up to the group to insure equal participation.

A note on journal submissions: each entry handed in should be 1-2 typed pages. They must be typed and proofread. They must be original work.

A note on receiving your final grade: If you leave a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your final exam/paper, I will return your work to you and also your final grade. If you do not leave an envelope, I will assume that you do not want your work back. I will not be around the following semester, fall 2002.