

6526 LLST 3080 A Emerson & Thoreau FALL 2011
Dates: 8/29/2011 to 12/14/2011;
Day(s): Mon/Wed Time: 08:00 AM to 09:15 AM Room A 517
Professor: Nicholas Birns
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Please note the class will meet only for an hour and fifteen minutes, though due to the extramural work it will be a four-credit course

Although there were good American writers before them, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau set the tone for a distinctly American contribution to world literature. Paradoxically, they did so by abandoning nationalism in favor of attention to nature and the cosmos, the minutely particular and the abstract universal. Quintessentially American in their individualism self-motivation, and optimism, they are also uncannily un-American in their refusal of consensus, their dislike of Rotarian 'socializing', and their unwillingness to court unpopularity as the result of conviction. The movement they led, called "Transcendentalism", was admired, transformed or mocked by their fellow American writers, including Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and, later, Louisa May Alcott, and we will read excerpts of these writers along with the essays, poems, and meditations of Emerson and Thoreau. Our central text will be Thoreau's *Walden*, his memorable account of a year living alone in the New England woods.

Schedule of Classes

Aug 29 Emerson, Nature;
Aug 31 Emerson, Nature; A Young Minister, from Buell.
Sep 7 Emerson, Nature
Sep 12 Emerson, The American Scholar
Sep 14 Emerson, An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College
Sep 19 Emerson, Self-Reliance
Sep 21 Emerson, The Over-Soul
Sep 26 Emerson, Circles
Sep 28 Emerson, The Poet, Paper 1 due.
Oct 3 Experience
Oct 5 Emerson, Montaigne; Or, the Skeptic
Oct 10 Emerson, Napoleon, Or, the Man of the World
Oct 12, Emerson, *Poems*. "The Rhodora"
Oct 17 Emerson, *Poems*; some of the poems in Buell
Oct 19 Thoreau *Walden*
Oct 24 Thoreau, *Walden*
Oct 26 Thoreau, *Walden*

Oct 31 Thoreau, *Walden*, Paper 2 due.
Nov 2 Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*
Nov 7 Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*
Nov 9 Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*
Nov 14 Amos Bronson Alcott, from Buell
Nov 16 Alcott, *Jo's Boys*
Nov 21 Alcott's *Jo's Boys*
Nov 23 Thanksgiving holiday, no class
Nov 28 Theodore Parker, from Buell. Paper 3 due.
Nov 30 Margaret Fuller, from Buell
Dec 5 Fuller, from Buell,
Dec 7 Thoreau, Christianity and Hinduism, from Buell
Dec 12 Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, from Buell
Dec 14 Emerson The Fugitive Slave Law, from Buell. Paper 4 due.

Required texts

Emerson *Nature and Selected Essays* Penguin 978-0142437629

Emerson *Poems Everyman's* 978-1400043163

Thoreau *Walden Maine Woods, Essays* Library of America 978-1598530100

Alcott *Jo's Boys* Bantam ([9781427036360](https://www.bantam.com/9781427036360)):

Buell, *The American Transcendentalists* Modern Library 978-0812975093

Assignments

Paper 1—due September 28—five pages. What does Emerson mean by 'nature'? is it the outdoors? Human nature? The inner self? Transcendence? Explicate his use of this very contested term/

Paper 2—due October 31—seven pages—What does Thoreau 'gain'—morally, normatively, existentially—by his sojourn in the woods? Without a conventional plot or story-arc, how are we to measure the significance of what happens in *Walden*.

Paper 3—Due November 28—two pages—how are the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau embodied in *Jo's Boys*? What difference does the more 'applied' situation, both in terms

Paper 4—due December 14—one and a half pages. In 400 words, tell us which writer you prefer, Emerson or Thoreau, and give convincing reasons for that preference.

Extramural Course Experience

This course is a part of an experimental pilot program, where class time will run an hour and fifteen minutes, and work outside the classroom—for both student and teacher—will be added. For this class, this work will take the form of an experience of ‘nature’ and doing some sort of “metatext” on it. The experience of nature should be solitary (in the spirit of Thoreau) and you should document it in some way, whether through writing, art, video, dance—whatever your best creative or expressive *métier* is—and then, if your primary response is not written, it should be supplemented with a written discussion. You should both give your own response to the situation and think of the situating in light of what Emerson or Thoreau might have thought of it.

The recommendation is to take two nature walks---one alone or with somebody in your family or outside the class, one with another class member. The idea of these walks is not physical exercise or strenuous exertion but to have the intimate and reflective relation with one’s ambient environment that Emerson and Thoreau achieved.

Now—paradoxically we are in New York City the total geocultural and attitudinal opposite of the pristine New England climes where Thoreau and Emerson might have wandered. Yet, since transcendentalism is at once about an intense experience of place and a total relativism as to the actual coordinates of that place, nature in New York is as apposite to this task as nature in Concord, and there are astonishing amounts of locales within the city limits (New York Botanical Garden, Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge) that are totally wild. Feel free though to go to a more ‘landscaped’ location like Central Park. It can also be a boat journey if you do boating and of course if your home is in a ‘wilder’ part of the country and you wish to do the assignment while home you may do so.

Another possibility is to look at the work of a Transcendentalist artist in a museum and report back on that experience. Relevant painters are Thomas Cole, Martin Johnson Heade, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Frederic Church. John Frederick Kensett, Washington Allston. The Brooklyn Museum in its American Identities exhibits has many of these painters, as does the American Wing of the Metropolitan. I also have a book of Cranch paintings I would be happy to lend to anyone interested in working on him.

If your primary response is going to be written it should be 4-5 pages. If it is not written there should be a one-page writing supplement, and the

aural/musical/video and so on response should be recognizably in-depth and committed.

All writing and documentation will be posted on the course's Blackboard shell and be subject to discussion and interlocution by the instructor and your peers.

Please try to complete this part of the course work by November 28.

IMPORTANT UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Absences and Lateness

- Absences may justify some grade reduction and a total of four absences mandate a reduction of one letter grade for the course. Three cases of tardiness in excess of 7 minutes counts as one unexcused absence.
- More than three absences mandate a failing grade for the course, unless there are extenuating circumstances, such as the following:
 - an extended illness requiring hospitalization or visit to a physician (with documentation)
 - a family emergency, e.g. serious illness (with written explanation)

The attendance and lateness policies are enforced as of the first day of classes for all registered students. If registered during the first week of the add/drop period, the student is responsible for any missed assignments and coursework. Students failing a course due to attendance should consult with an academic advisor to discuss options.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of someone else's work (EITHER PUBLISHED OR UNPUBLISHED) as one's own in all forms of academic endeavor (such as essays, theses, examinations, research data, creative projects, etc), intentional or unintentional. Citing material from online databases such as Project Muse or JSTOR without giving full credit to the original author is considered plagiarism, as is lazy paraphrasing of material on the Internet without substantial rethinking and recasting of it. Plagiarized material may be derived from a variety of sources, such as books, journals, internet postings, student or faculty papers, etc. This includes the purchase or "outsourcing" of written assignments for a course. A detailed definition of plagiarism in research and writing can be found in the fourth edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, pages 26-29. Procedures concerning allegations of plagiarism and penalties are set forth in the Lang catalog.

Disabilities

In keeping with the University's policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student requesting accommodations must first meet with Student Disability Services. Jason Luchs or a designee from that office will meet with students requesting accommodations and

related services, and if appropriate, provide an Academic Adjustment Notice for the student to provide to his or her instructors. The instructor is required to review the letter with the student and discuss the accommodations, provided the student brings the letter to the attention of the instructor. This letter is necessary in order for classroom accommodations to be provided. Student Disability Services is located at 80 Fifth Avenue - 3rd Floor. The phone number is (212) 229-5626. Students and faculty are expected to review the Student Disability Services webpage. The webpage can be found at <http://www.newschool.edu/student-services/disability/>