

## English 417: Seminar on Henry David Thoreau

Instructor: Prof. Ning Yu  
Office: HU361  
Classroom: BH 114  
Class Time: TR 2:00-3:50

Phone: x-2887  
Office Hours: T, Th 4:00-4:50  
The Arranged Hour: Nature Visits  
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A replica of Thoreau's cabin by Walden Pond.

**Description:** “To improve the nick of time is the highest form of art,” Henry David Thoreau claims. In this course we will trace the whole career of Thoreau and try to figure out how the major voice of American environmental imagination and the founder of what is called the Thoreauvian tradition of American nature writing. We will read four of his books, a collection of his essays and selections from his journal. While reading Thoreau, students will be writing in response to the texts and the environment in which we live and study. Thoreau boasts that the cabin he built by Walden Pond is a better place for serious reading than any university. Do you think place is really an issue in the life of a reader?

**Text:** *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden and Other Writings, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod, Civil Disobedience and Other Essays, Selections from the Journals.*

**Requirement:** 1. Careful reading. Students must read **all** the assigned texts carefully and be well prepared to discuss them in depth. Active participation in class discussion is a must for a successful student in this seminar. 2. A mid-term. 3. Each student will find a place in nature where s/he feels comfortable to visit on a weekly basis and write a Thoreavian journal entry of two pages (double-space, font 12). This place should be safe and close to you, with some shelter where you can write without getting wet in our typical Bellingham winter. The weekly visit is our arranged hour and you have the flexibility of making it at a time convenient to you. Your instructor will visit your sites and discuss senses of place in connection with your reading and writing. I will talk with you to arrange a time good to both of us for the visit. Our objective is to cultivate a connection between the texts and the place: are there special qualities in this place that make our reading and writing especially interesting? What are they? How do they contribute to our reading? Do they distract you? How so? Do the texts you read change your sense of the place? How? Does your inter-connection with your place affect your reading of Thoreau? How? Is Thoreau relevant in terms of your relation with your place in the twenty-first century? 4. Based upon the journal entries or filed notes, you will give an oral presentation in class. You have about 15 minutes to present your place and then about 5 minutes to respond to questions and comments. 5. Each student is responsible for four thought-provoking, well-written questions with a page of responses to each of them about the assigned texts. S/he will submit the questions two days before the day of discussion so that the instructor can organize his lecture and discussion in response to them. 6. A final. 7. Last but not the least, regular attendance is required. The student will lose 3% of their total grade for each unexcused absence. No student with more than three unexcused absences will get a grade higher than B no matter how well s/he does in the class otherwise.

**Evaluation:** Class participation=15% of total grade; mid-term=20%; journal=15%; written questions and responses=12% (3% per question and response); oral presentation=13%; final=25%.

### **Schedule:**

#### **Jan.**

- 6 T Introduction; find the place that you are going to visit on a weekly basis.  
Assignment: Read T's *Journal* (9/24/1851, 5/22/1853, 1/5/1856, 8/8/1856, 10/16/1856, 10/8/1857, 10/10/1860, 1/3/1861, 1/3/1861); each member of group 1 writes a question and a full page of response to that question and submit them on Wednesday, by 8 pm); everybody thinks about T's sense of place/home, his habits of observation, his attitudes towards animals, plants and especially seeds  
The arranged hour: Journal entry about your first impression of the place. What are some of the qualities that made you feel you can visit that place weekly without getting bored?
- 8 R Discussion: T's journal entries; journal sharing; introduce your place to class  
Assignment: *A Week* ("Saturday," "Sunday," "Monday"), group 2 submit questions and responses by 8pm Sunday

- 13 T Discussion: *A Week*  
Assignment: *A Week* (“Tuesday,” “Wednesday”); group 3 questions
- 15 R Discussion: *A Week*  
Assignment: *A Week* (“Thursday,” “Friday”); group 4 questions
- 20 T Discussion: *A Week*  
Assignment: *Walden* (“Economy,” “Where I Lived...,” “Reading”); group 5 questions
- 22 R Discussion: *Walden*  
Assignment: *Walden* (“Sounds,” “Solitude,” “Visitors”); group 1 questions
- 27 T Discussion: *Walden*  
Assignment: *Walden* (“The Bean-Field,” “The Village,” “The Ponds”); group 2
- 29 R Discussion: *Walden*  
Assignment: *Walden* (“Baker Farm,” “Higher Laws,” “Brute Neighbors”); group 3

**Feb.**

- 3 T Discussion: *Walden*  
Assignment: *Walden* (“House-Warming,” “Former Inhabitants,” “Winter Animals”); group 4 questions
- 5 R Discussion: *Walden*  
Assignment: *Walden* (“The Pond in Winter,” “Spring,” “Conclusion”) group 5 questions
- 10 T Discussion: *Walden*  
**Mid-Term**  
Assignment: *The Maine Woods* (“Ktaadn”); group 1 questions
- 13 R Discussion: “Ktaadn”;  
Assignment: *The Maine Woods* (“Chesuncook”); group 2 questions
- 17 T Discussion: “Chesuncook”; presentation 1  
Assignment: *Cape Cod* (“The Shipwreck,” “Stagecoach,” “The Plains”); group 3 questions
- 19 R Discussion: *Cape Cod*, presentation 2  
Assignment: *Cape Cod* (“The Beach,” “The Wellfleet Oysterman,” “Beach Again”); group 4 questions
- 24 T Discussion: *Cape Cod*, presentation 3  
Assignment: *Cape Cod* (“Across the Cape,” “The Highland Light,” “The Sea and

the Desert,” “Provincetown”); group 5 questions

26 R Discussion: *Cape Cod*, presentation 4  
Assignment: *Essays* (“Walking”); group 1 questions

### **March**

2 T Discussion: “Walking,” presentations 5, 6  
Assignment: “Slavery in Massachusetts”; group 2 questions

4 R Discussion: “Slavery”; presentations: 7, 8  
Assignment: “Life Without Principle”; group 3 questions

9 T Discussion: “Life”; presentations 9, 10  
Assignment: “Civil Disobedience”

11 R Discussion: “Civil Disobedience”; presentations 12, 13

**16 T 1:00---3:00 Final Examination**



Lake Padden, one of Western students' favorite reading/writing places.