



10-650 Seminar in Themes & Theories: American Literary Religion & the Natural World

The class will focus on a peculiarly American set of obsessions: religion (considered in the broadest sense: religious texts & traditions, and also what William James called “religious experience,” a sense or experience of what may be called the sacred, whether or not it entails belief in a deity) and the natural world. The language of these explorations into what is essentially unsayable is characteristically “literary” in that it is self-aware, aware of its limitations, provocative, imagistic, and original. What I hope we will gain from this study, then, is a sense of what literature contributes to a serious conversation about what it means to be both animal and conscious in a world we neither made nor asked for.

The first half of the class will look at early American literature: a very short glimpse at two American Puritans, and then a longer look at Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. We will read all of that amazing and strange American novel, *Moby Dick*.

During the second half of the course, we will concentrate on essays, fiction, and poetry from the late twentieth century and, in one case, from 2007. We will read Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver, Marilynne Robinson, and Northwest’s own Rebecca Aronson.