NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

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Acid rain. The atmosphere's disappearing ozone layer. Water pollution. Rapidly shrinking rain forests in South America. Hazardous waste. These and other threats to our environment are issues that young people are aware of—and about which they care deeply. And while it is not the role of English teachers to provide the scientific background on such issues, they can provide something that may be even more important—a social, ethical, and philosophical context to help students think through their own attitudes toward nature and toward environmental issues.

To create this context for students, teachers can draw on the writings of literary naturalists—writers who have taken as their subject nature and the environment. They include well—known and frequently anthologized authors such as Thoreau and Rachel Carson. However, they also include frequently overlooked writers, such as John Muir, John Burroughs, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, and Mary Austin, who have done much to shape contemporary attitudes toward nature and the environment. Among the themes they have explored in their writings are the variety of nature, the rewards of observing nature closely, the truths taught by nature, and the environmental dangers posed by onrushing technological progress.

For teachers interested in drawing upon this literature to deepen students' interest in nature and the environment, this article will summarize a number of readings and associated classroom activities. The readings are purposely eclectic; they are drawn from different literary periods dating from the middle of the nineteenth century, and they represent a variety of genres. In addition, they range in tone from the reflectiveness of Thoreau to the alarmism of contemporary science fiction.

There are over 25 suggested readings—far more than can be used in a four—or five—week thematic unit. However, the purpose here is to suggest a menu of appropriate selections from which teachers may choose those most likely to speak to their own students. The literature is accessible to average or above average readers in eleventh and twelfth grades, and much of it is accessible to tenth graders. To give shape and organization to this listing, the readings have been organized into five themes.

1. The experience of nature
2. The awareness of nature
3. The relationship between humanity and nature
4. The value of nature
5. The endangered environment

These five themes could serve as the organizing principles of a coherent and developmentally appropriate thematic unit. The first two themes include the most concrete selections—those that celebrate the rewards of nature and close observation. The third and fourth themes are more philosophical. The last theme returns to the concrete level by addressing particular environmental problems.

The Experience of Nature

Any selections in this first group of readings could serve as a motivational introduction of a unit because they express the rewards of experiencing nature in simple yet memorable ways. To begin a unit, there is no better selection than Annie Dillard's Spring, a chapter from her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The chapter clearly expresses the contentment and joy that Dillard derives from her observations of nature. For example, about a bird's singing she asks, "Why is it beautiful. . . . It has the liquid, intricate sound of every creek's tumble over every configuration of rock creek—bottom in the country" (106—107). Dillard's language is infectious; it reaches out and invites the reader to accompany the writer on a walk through the woods.

A good companion to Dillard's piece is a chapter entitled "A Wind—Storm in the Forest," from *The Mountains of California* by John Muir (1838-1914), conservationist and cofounder of the Sierra Club. In this excerpt, Muir narrates his climb of California's Mount Ritter at a time of year when bad weather came quickly. He is caught in a fierce thunderstorm, but instead of seeking shelter, "I lost no time in pushing out into the woods to enjoy it" (259). What's more, to experience the wildness of the storm more fully, he climbs to the top of a tall pine tree.

> The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves, while I clung with muscles firm braced, like a bobolink on a reed. (261)

As he describes the fierceness of the storm, he becomes one with the tree and the storm. This union with the forces of nature is reflected in Muir's style, which vividly captures the wild beauty Muir experienced during the storm.

The third selection that effectively conveys the direct experience of nature is Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." There may not be a story in American literature that better suggests the feelings of calmness and wholeness that nature can evoke. At beginning of the story, Nick Adams—recently returned from war–is traveling to northern Michigan for a few days of solitary fishing. He comes to the town of Seney, which has been destroyed by fire. Nick hikes away from the town, and the story describes how he camps, fishes, and prepares food. In the course of this description, it becomes clear that the purely sensory experience of nature serves as a source of healing and redemption for Nick. A good activity to accompany

this cluster of readings is to have students recall and share salient experiences that they themselves have had with nature. The teacher can ask students to write in their journals about one or more experiences with nature that absorbed them. Then the students might share those experiences creatively through a series of photographs, a collage of cut—out magazine pictures, a painting, or a personal essay.

The Awareness of Nature

The second group of readings consists of selections that not only celebrate the beauty of nature but also teach readers how to become better observers. A short, accessible essay to begin with is "On Lying Awake at Night," in which naturalist and author Stewart Edward White describes the experience of lying awake at night in the woods while camping. The essay is notable for images that appeal to sight, sound, smell, and touch—an excellent model of how to use all the senses to experience nature fully.

"Seeing," another excerpt from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, is similar to "On Lying Awake at Night" in that the author describes natural phenomena that are perceived only by observing closely. However, Dillard goes further by explaining *how* to see well: "It's all a matter of keeping my eyes open. Nature is like one of those line drawings of a tree that are puzzles for children: Can you find hidden in the leaves a duck, a house, a boy, a bucket, a zebra, and a boot?" (17)

Another essay with practical suggestions for observing is "The Art of Seeing" by John Burroughs. Burroughs (1837-1921), who lived in and wrote about the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, asserts in this essay that the ability to observe closely and truthfully is an art stemming from the love of nature. He describes the characteristics that distinguish good observers and then concludes with examples of "minute things" that he himself has found in nature.

The next two selections demonstrate what one can learn about nature by observing closely and well. "The Marginal World" is the first chapter in Rachel Carson's *The Edge of the Sea*. In the excerpt, Carson describes the life found along the shoreline of the sea, starting with a tide pool in which she sees green sponges, star fish, and beautiful flowers that are actually animals. She then recalls a beach in Georgia and an island off the coast of Florida—both of which hold for her intimations of the continuity of life and time.

The other selection, from a chapter of Mary Austin's book *The Land of Little Rain*, explores an equally fascinating environment—the desert. Austin (1868—1934), a journalist based in California, traveled extensively throughout the West and published numerous novels, short stories, and nonfiction books about that region. This excerpt describes the desert section of California that stretches east from the Sierra Mountains to Nevada. The point of the essay is that "Void of life it [the desert] never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil" (266). Austin concludes that the very barrenness of the desert conveys a "sense of mastery" to the humans who are drawn to its stark beauty.

Classroom activities that accompany this group of readings should help students become better observers themselves. A simple thing to do is to use the opaque projector or slide projector to show students photographs of a variety of natural scenes. Each photo is shown for only a few seconds; from memory, the students then write down as many details as they can.

Another activity is suggested by Annie Dillard's point that "Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization" (30). The teacher can implement Dillard's advice by letting students experience nature — perhaps by taking them on a nature walk — and asking them to write their observations in their journals or describe orally what they have observed.

The Relationship Between Humanity and Nature

The third group of readings explore the relationship of humanity to nature. The selections to be suggested here address key questions about that relationship: Is humanity a part of nature, or are people inevitably alienated from the world around them? Is nature essentially friendly, hostile, or neutral? What is humanity's relationship with the animal world?

A high interest selection with which to begin examining these questions is an excerpt from John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* that shows how one man survived the hostile, life—threatening environment of Alaska's wilderness. Leon Crane was the copilot of a military plane that crashed in the Alaskan wilderness during World War II. Crane, the only survivor, found himself hundreds of miles from civilization. However, he miraculously came upon a deserted cabin in which he found a supply of food, firewood, and matches. Crane was the fortunate beneficiary of an Alaskan custom "always to leave a cabin open and stocked for anyone in need" (253). Crane stayed at the cabin for two months until he ran out of food. He then made his way down the river until he finally came to an inhabited cabin and was rescued. What comes across in the excerpt is not only the harshness of the environment but also humanity's interdependence in dealing successfully with that environment.

The next selection, "All Gold Canyon" by Jack London, depicts humanity as inevitably alienated from nature. The story opens with a lengthy description of an uninhabited canyon in which "The leaves and flowers were clean and virginal" (399). A prospector for gold invades this Acadia, but nature pays him absolutely no attention. He prospects for gold, and as he does so, the gold fever heats up in him. Suddenly, though, he senses someone behind him. But before he can turn around, he is shot in the back. Not fatally wounded, he struggles with his attacker, overcomes him, and leaves with $40,000 in gold. At the end of the story, nature is described as completely unaffected by the man's greed—and the man is equally oblivious to the pristine beauty of nature.

An effective contrast to these two selections is "The Chrysanthemums" by John Steinbeck. This story explores symbolically the struggle between people who are alienated from nature and those who live in harmony with it. A woman, Elisa Allen, has an affinity with nature as evidence by her ability to raise chrysanthemums. She encounters a traveling knife sharpener and mender. To win her business, he affects an interest in her chrysanthemums and offers to take some for another woman's garden. Elisa accepts his offer as sincere and, in return for his feigned thoughtfulness, gives him pots to mend. However, it turns out that he is only exploiting her, for as she and her husband are driving into town, she finds the chrysanthemums scattered by the side of the road—a fitting symbol of the rift between humanity and nature.

An appropriate selection to pair with "The Chrysanthemums" is "The Bend" by Barry Lopez. This is a chapter from Lopez's book *River Notes: The Dance of Herons*, which consists of a series of fictional vignettes about a mountain river. In "The Bend," the narrator becomes ill and falls into depression. As part of his attempt to recover, he tries to measure quantitatively a bend in the river, but the measurements are meaningless to him. Instead, he goes to the bend and experiences it directly. When he relates experientially to the river, he feels whole again, and his loneliness ends.

A particular aspect of the humanity—nature relationship that most students find interesting in humanity's relationship with the animal world. A story dealing with this relationship is "The Cat" by Mary Wilkins Freeman. It is winter, and the cat is on its own in a house because the cat's owner has left until warm weather returns. A stranger breaks into the house and stays through the winter. The man and the cat survive with mutual aid—and a bond grows between the two. However, one day the man leaves. Soon after, as spring comes, the cat's owner, a cold, officious person, returns to the house. The story ends with the man and animal staring at each other across an "impassable barrier of silence" (45).

"Howling Back at the Wolves," an essay by contemporary essayist Edward Hoagland, explores the relationship between humanity and wolves. The essay focuses on research being conducted by L. David Mech, a young scientist who has worked to reverse myths about the wolf. Most notably, Mech has discovered that by howling at wolves, he can get them to answer him—part of what Hoagland says can be "a special relationship" between wolves and people.

An appropriate follow-up activity to these readings is to have students explore how other cultures view the relationship between humanity and nature. For example, they might work in groups to do research on how nature is viewed in different countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as well as in Native American cultures. The groups might find myths and legends in each culture that express the humanity—nature relationship.

Each group can present its findings to the class in a number of ways, ranging from written reports to panel discussions. In addition, the students can present myths and legends by illustrating them on posters.

The Value of Nature

Having examined the relationship between humanity and nature, the students can then turn to works that explore the value of nature—how nature enriches, enlightens, and gives meaning to human life. In these selections, nature is viewed as a repository of wisdom that teaches us about human behavior, ethics, and the deepest mysteries of the universe.

An excellent essay to start with because of its accessibility is "The Gospel of Nature" by John Burroughs. Burroughs wrote the essay in response to a clergyman who asked him what "message" he found in nature. Burroughs asserts that nature "has distinctly a religious value. It does not come to a man or a woman who is wholly absorbed in selfish or worldly or material ends" (141). Burroughs also believes that in nature we can find wisdom to guide our conduct.

To explore further the wisdom that writers have found in nature, two excerpts from *Walden* are recommended. The first comprises approximately the first quarter of Chapter 1, "Economy." Here Thoreau introduces his theme that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," (7) with materialistic pursuits blinding humanity to the values of nature. A few pages later, he summarizes those values: "simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (13).

The second excerpt is the entire second chapter, "Where I Lived, and What I lived For." In this chapter, the woods teach awareness: "Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me" (81). The richness of Thoreau's experience with nature teaches him to "elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" (81) toward more noble ideals, particularly self-reliance and independence.

Fiction writers have also depicted nature as the source of authentic values. An excellent example is William Faulkner's short story "The Bear," the shorter version of which is accessible to high school students. This narrative recounts the efforts of a boy to track down a large bear in a woods. However, he cannot encounter the huge creature until he summons up the courage to set aside his gun and make himself vulnerable to the bear and to the forces of nature that it represents. The naked confrontation with nature allows the by to see clearly that the authentic values of life are "Courage, and honor, and pride. . . and pity, and love of justice and of liberty" (410).

Besides finding in nature values that can guide humanity's ethics and actions, many writers have looked to nature for spiritual truths. For example, in his essay "Once More to the Lake," E.B. White tells about a week that he spent with his son at a lake in Maine where he himself had spent his

summers in childhood. As the week progresses, White increasingly has the sensation that he is his father and that his son is himself. The experience leads to reflections on the gifts on nature, particularly its aura of permanence and continuity. Toward the end of the essay, a thunderstorm comes up, bringing the week to a climax that is nearly operatic in its grandeur. The experience catalyzes one more sensation in White—that of morality—as he concludes the essay.

That nature connects humanity to the mysteries of life is also the theme of "Aravaipa Canyon" by Edward Abbey. The essay begins with a description of a hike by Abbey and some friends into a well-known canyon in Arizona. As they move further into the canyon, the hikers come to "what appears to be a bottomless pool" (157). Abbey contemplates the pool and reflects, "To any man of natural piety this pool, this place, this silence, would suggest reverence, even fear" (159). These feelings of wonder and mystery deepen as he and his friends retreat from the canyon, leading him to the final reflection that the world is "infinitely rich in details and relationships, in wonder, beauty, mystery, comprehensible only in part" (159).

Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous essay "Nature" also explores the spiritual truths found in nature. The thesis of the essay can be summarized in the famous line that when the writer is in contact with nature, "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" (24). The essay goes on to explore the symbolic import of nature: "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. . . . An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox" (32). For Emerson, truth—an understanding of the universe—originates in people's observations of nature. Because Emerson explores so thoroughly the spiritual aspects of nature, his essay is a fitting conclusion to this group of readings.

As a follow-up activity to this group of readings, the teacher may want to give students the chance to see what truths they themselves can discover in nature. The teacher—perhaps with the help of one of the science teachers in the school—demonstrates a process of nature that the students observe, reflect upon, and draw meaning from. For example, the students could observe the behavior of ants in an ant colony and then reflect upon the meaning of what they have watched. What does this natural process say to them about life? About humanity? What lessons can they draw from it—as Thoreau, Abbey, Burroughs, and Faulkner drew lessons from nature?

The students can then use their observations and reflections as the basis for writing a personal essay—of which Abbey's "Aravaipa Canyon" is an excellent model. That essay has an introduction that sets the scene and establishes the tone, a body that intertwines the author's experiences and reflections, and a conclusion that summarizes the meaning of the experience.

The Endangered Environment

At this point, students have explored their awareness of nature, the multifaceted relationship between humanity and nature, and the wisdom found in nature. By now they have both an experiential context and a philosophical context in which to read literature that deals with the importance of protecting and restoring the environment.

As a beginning in examining this theme, two highly dramatic science fiction stories are recommended. "Autofac" by Philip K. Dick dramatizes the problem of the earth's dwindling resources. In the story, all industrial production is in the hands of automated factories that are programmed to produce consumer goods automatically after a nuclear war. Because of their high rate of production, the factories—known as autofacs—are depleting the earth's resources so rapidly that in the near future, those resources will be completely gone. The four central characters in the story develop a plan to set the autofac in one region against that of another, and their trap leads to war between the two autofacs. But as the characters enter one destroyed autofac for the purpose of resuming industrial production themselves, there are surprising results.

The other story is "Gas Mask" by James D. Houston. Charlie Bates is caught in a traffic jam on the freeway on his way home from work. He sees that traffic will not move for days, so he leaves his car on the freeway and walks home. The next day, he and his wife ride a bicycle to the freeway to watch for movement in the traffic, but still there is none. Finally he hears the sound of cars starting up, runs onto the freeway, and starts his own car. The freeway is soon enveloped by smoke and exhaust, and a thick smoke of poisonous exhaust settles over the road. The police tell drivers that it will be yet another 36 hours before the traffic jam is broken. Lungs burning with smoke, Charlie runs off to buy gas masks.

Once these two stories have brought environmental issues into focus, a highly recommended selection is "The Land Ethic," an excerpt from *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold (1887—1948), who was one of the founders of the Wilderness Society and an expert in forestry and game management. The excerpt is a pivotal statement of ecological philosophy—a view of nature that Leopold claims is essential to halt the ruination of the earth. Leopold writes that the land ethic enlarges "the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. . . . [A] land ethic changes the role of *Homosapiens* from conqueror of the land—community to plain member and citizen of it" (239—240). In making decisions about the use of land, humanity must move beyond economics to consider the "healthy functioning" and beauty of the land.

The next selection, "A Wilderness Letter" by the novelist Wallace Stegner, is also philosophical. Stegner wrote the letter in 1960 to an official of the Wildland Research Center in California to argue for the preservation of the remaining wilderness lands in the United States. According to Stegner, the wilderness must be preserved because it allows us "to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of

trees and rocks and soil, . . . part of the natural world and competent to belong to it" (328). Like Aldo Leopold, Stegner articulates a philosophy in which humanity is a part of the community of all living things.

To show students how the ecological perspective can be applied to a particular issue, "The Obligation to Endure" by Rachel Carson is recommended. In this, the second chapter of her landmark book *Silent Spring*, Carson asserts that the rapid introduction of new chemicals into the environment leaves no time for nature to adapt to them, with dire effects for that environment. Toward the end of the chapter, Carson asserts that she is not saying that "chemical insecticides must never be used" (12). Instead, we must learn to discriminate which technological advancements are really necessary from those that are not.

The four selections just described have brought environmental dangers into focus and have introduced students to ecological philosophy, but the question remains, "What is the responsibility of the individual in regard to these problems?" The next two selections will deal with that question.

The first is a short story by Kurt Vonnegut entitled "A Deer in the Works." The main character, David Potter, is the editor of a small local newspaper who has taken a higher paying job as an advertising and promotions writer for the Ilium Works of the Federal Apparatus Corporation. On his first day on the new job, he has to cover a story about a deer that has wandered into the factory from the nearby woods. As he pursues the deer throughout the factory, he finds out that when the deer is caught, "the venison is going to be used at the Quarter—Century Club picnic" (219). David finds the deer surrounded by a semicircle of company workers, including a dozen company policemen with drawn pistols. Acting quickly and instinctively, David opens the gate of the wire fence and allows the deer to escape into the forest. The events in this story should lead to a rich discussion of the extent to which one should follow one's conscience and principles in regard to environmental issues.

Examining the same theme of personal commitment is Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People.* Written in 1882, it is remarkably prescient in foreshadowing environmental issues such as finding the proper balance between economic development and environmental protection.

The plot concerns the discovery by Dr. Thomas Stockmann that the town's public baths—of which he is the medical officer—have been polluted by chemicals from a nearby tannery. This pollution is causing a high rate of illness, including typhoid fever, among those who use the baths. Complicating matters is the fact that the baths draw people from all over Norway, serving as the key factor in the town's economic resurgence. Furthermore, solving the problem will require the laying of an entire new network of pipes, straining the economic resources of the town.

In spite of these economic ramifications, Dr. Stockmann presses ahead in issuing a report on the dangers of the polluted baths, bringing him into dramatic conflict with the mayor of the town and most of the other townspeople, who brand him, ironically, as an "enemy of the people."

The readings just summarized will have sensitized students to problems of the environment. To give the students the opportunity to examine and communicate about environmental problems that directly affect them, a cooperative learning project is suggested. The students should divide into groups of three to five and explore an environmental problem in their own community. Each group should select its own problem, such as a hazardous waste site, a littered stream or river, air pollution caused by a municipal incinerator, the disposal of recyclable materials, and so forth. (You may want to enlist the help of a science teacher in identifying problems for the students to work on.)

After identifying its own problem, each group should conduct research into it. What is the nature of the problem? How long has it existed? What are the causes? Once the students have researched and described the problem, they should then create an action plan for solving it. They might, for instance, plan a publicity campaign or present a local legislator with a plan for legislation that would remedy the problem.

As a fitting and thought-provoking conclusion to a thematic literature unit such as this one, it is useful to ask the students to reflect on how their own attitudes, values, and behavior toward nature and the environment have evolved as a result of the unit. The teacher can provide questions like the following, which can serve as topics for either writing or discussion.

* What were my feelings about nature and the environment at the beginning of this unit? How are those feelings different now?
* Which literature selection had the greatest effect on me? Why did it have this effect?
* How has my awareness of nature changed? Am I a better observer? In what ways? What natural phenomena am I able to notice now that I probably would not have noticed before?
* What do I think should be the relationship between humanity and nature? What action or actions have I taken to carry out my view of that relationship?

Answering these questions will bring into focus what has happened to the students in the course of the unit. If the students recognize that the literature has had an impact by making them more aware of nature and the environment, then the unit will have accomplished its primary goal.

However, a further hope is that the students' interest in nature and the environment will continue beyond the end of the unit. This interest might take many forms. Some students may go on to study the scientific aspects

of ecology, while others may be drawn to the political side of environmental issues; any number of directions are possible. But the seeds of interest and involvement will have been sown by using literature to do what it does best: to motivate, to illuminate fundamental ideas and issues, and to engage the students' imaginations so that they can see what is—and so they can envision what might be.

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