

American Literature: The Westward Journey Coursebook



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Table of Contents

Introduction	v
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Unit I: Discovery

My First Summer in the Sierra by John Muir

River of Shadows : Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West
by Rebecca Solnit

Lesson 1 Reflective Essay	3
Lesson 2 Impressions	5
Lesson 3 Commonalities	9
Lesson 4/5 Unit Project	13

Unit II: Homeland

My Ántonia by Willa Cather

Lesson 6 Book I: The Shimerdas	19
Lesson 7 Book II: The Hired Girls	23
Lesson 8 Books III and IV	27
Lesson 9 Book V: Cuzak's Boys	31

Unit III: Belonging

Sacajawea by Joseph Bruchac
American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings by Zitkala-Ša

Lesson 10 Exploration and Expansion 37

Lesson 11 Traditional Tales 41

Lesson 12/13 Teachings 45

Lesson 14 Heroes and Visions 49

Lesson 15 Literary Comparison 51

Unit IV: Semester Project

Lesson 16 Project Development 55

Lesson 17/18 Final Project and Course Reflection 57

Appendix

Academic Expectations 60

Original Work Guidelines 60

Finding Reputable Sources..... 61

Plagiarism..... 61

Citing Your Sources 62

Citing Images 63

Lesson

1

Reflective Essay

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Write a reflective essay.
- Demonstrate skills in paragraph structure, revision, editing, and proofreading.

How did you come to live where you are? Where were your ancestors living in the 1800s? What was it like in that place at that time? You will begin this course by exploring your own impressions and ideas about the 19th century in the United States. You will also describe your own family history as it relates to the place you now live.

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Complete the reading assignment.
- ☐ Write a reflective essay.



Travel by train and horse-drawn wagon was common in the 19th century.
(Image credit: Western New York Railroad Archive)

Reading

This week, read the following sections:

- *River of Shadows*: Read Solnit's brief synopsis on pages 89–90.
- *My First Summer in the Sierra*: Read Biographical Note (v–ix) and Introduction (xv–xxvii).

Assignments

1. In what ways are the stories and histories of an earlier era of artists, naturalists, immigrants, and native people meaningful today? What do you imagine when you think of the growth and development, as well as the destruction and change, that took place throughout the 19th century in North America? Do you think about the Gold Rush, wagon trains, pioneers, or wars? What words, phrases, images, or stories come to mind?

Now think about your own family's history. Do you know the story of your own family's journey to the land where you live today?

With these questions in mind, please write a short reflective essay of one or two pages.

For all essays you write in this course, follow the steps of the writing process:

Organize your ideas, and write a rough draft. Identify your main ideas, and then organize your paragraphs around these main ideas. Use supporting details and relevant examples to elaborate on each main idea.

Revise your rough draft to improve the clarity and flow. Read your rough draft aloud or share it with someone else for feedback. Do the ideas flow in a logical sequence? Is there enough elaboration on each main point to explain it fully? Does the information address the assignment prompt? Revise your work as needed.

Edit your revised draft to make the writing more effective. Read your essay again. Have you used careful word choices? Is there any awkward phrasing? Are there a variety of sentence types and lengths? Is your writing engaging and original? Make any necessary edits.

Proofread your final version. Eliminate any errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation with a final, careful reading.

Always strive to present your best work.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS

When you have completed your reflective essay, please share it with your teacher by placing your work under lesson 1 in your Google course doc. Notify your teacher when the work is ready to be reviewed, and then continue to lesson 2.

Lesson

2

Impressions

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify key passages in a text.
- Compare contrasting relationships between groups of humans and the environment.

Over the next four weeks, you will be reading about the lives and times of John Muir and Eadweard Muybridge through the brilliant historical analysis of Rebecca Solnit and the diary that Muir kept during the summer of 1869, when he followed a shepherd and his flock through the mountains.

If you were to keep a journal (and maybe you do), what would be in it? You might fill it with your observations, thoughts on relationships, things that made you wonder, and events or experiences that filled you with confusion or joy. That is what John Muir's journal contains. *My First Summer in the Sierra* is filled with scientific observations and notes related to patterns in nature, relationships, comparisons, emotions, and imaginative stories about what he sees.

You will be reading only the first half of *River of Shadows*. In order to give you the opportunity to reflect on what you are reading, you are encouraged to read both books each week. Because Muir's work is a day-by-day diary, it is best to read *My First Summer in the Sierra* every day.

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Complete the reading assignment.
- ☐ Write reading notes and daily observations in a journal.
- ☐ Reflect on differing attitudes toward the environment.



The Domes of Yosemite by Albert Bierstadt, 1867
(Image credit: St. Johnsbury Athenaeum)

Reading

Read the following sections:

- *My First Summer in the Sierra*: Read pages 3–112 (to the breaking of the first camp).
- *River of Shadows*: Read chapters 1 and 2 (1–55).



Reading Journal

As you read, keep your journal and pen next to you. Stop to write down notes as they occur to you. Write down any thoughts and questions you have, and note the following:

1. Record the passages or ideas that make an impression on you.
2. Try to discover what Muir and Muybridge did and did not have in common. Write down specific thoughts and passages that highlight their similarities and differences.
3. Record your own personal impressions in journal form. Choose a specific place or object to focus on, such as a tree, the sky, the moon, a time of day (such as morning, sunset, or night), or a pet you are close to—or combine all of these—and write a few sentences each day recording your thoughts and observations. You might want to keep these impressions and reflections in another part of your journal, or on separate pages than your notes on the readings. (An easy way to use a blank journal for dual purposes is to have one section start at the beginning and the other section start at the end; just turn the journal upside down, and begin from the back.)

You will be sharing your journal with your teacher at the end of lesson 5.



Think About It

While you are reading *My First Summer in the Sierra*, notice the way Muir refers to Native Americans, using phrases such as:

“ . . . saying never a word, as if he belonged to another species.” (13)

“ . . . the white hunter whom they had learned to respect, and to whom they looked for guidance and protection against their enemies the Pah Utes, who sometimes made raids . . . to plunder the stores of the comparatively feeble Diggers . . . ” (41)

“The wild Indian power of escaping observation . . . ” (72)

“In every way, she seemed sadly unlike Nature’s neat well-dressed animals . . . ” (78)

Like all writers, Muir was a product of his time; his views toward people native to the land (or native in the sense of their ancestors having been there for thousands of years) show both inherent racism and general acceptance. Do you think his way of speaking of Native Americans might have been different if he had been writing today?

Assignments

1. Reread the passage in Muir’s journal on pages 73 and 74, from the entry of June 16, beginning with “How many centuries Indians have roamed these woods nobody knows . . .” and ending with the sentence about nature “patiently trying to heal every raw scar.” This passage compares the ways in which native peoples and immigrants have influenced the landscape. What are your thoughts on this? Why do you think natives and immigrants of the 1800s were so different in the way they viewed and treated the land? Organize your response in one or two paragraphs.



Up for a Challenge?

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman beings or objects, a technique that Muir makes frequent use of. Muir talks of “bossy” clouds, “thoughtful” trees, and “happy” plants. Note the lyric anthropomorphic phrasing in the following passages:

“. . . many a charming flower leans confidently upon [poison oak] for protection and shade.” (35)

Flowers are “glad children of light.” (43)

“. . . the young river sings and shines like a happy living creature.” (46)

Choose a natural creature, object, or element in your local environment (a plant or animal, rock formation, sunset, etc.) and create an anthropomorphic description by identifying a human trait that somehow matches it.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS

You will share your work from this lesson at the end of lesson 3. Contact your teacher if you have any questions about the assignments or reading.

Lesson

6

Book I: The Shimerdas

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Structure a six-paragraph essay.
- Use text references to support your ideas.
- Describe the tone and style of a literary passage.

My *Ántonia* tells the story of a family emigrating from Bohemia (modern-day Czech Republic) to the midwestern plains of Nebraska. Jim Burden, who is also new to the area, befriends Ántonia Shimerda, a Bohemian girl his age. Upon first meeting Jim, Ántonia is eager to learn English from him. She points to him and asks, “What name?” Starting with his name, she eagerly learns the words for *sky*, *eyes*, and *blue*, and then she puts them together to describe

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Complete the reading assignment.
- ☐ List setting details.
- ☐ Write an essay on the main character’s perception of the seasons.
- ☐ Describe the author’s writing style.



Group portrait of the Shimerda family, woodcut by W. T. Benda, 1918 (Image credit: Riverside Press)



Mr. Shimerda with a gun, woodcut by W. T. Benda, 1918 (Image credit: Riverside Press)



Bohemian woman gathering mushrooms, woodcut by W. T. Benda, 1918 (Image credit: Riverside Press)

what she sees: “blue sky, blue eyes” (19). Likewise, *Ántonia’s* father is eager for her to learn English. He recognizes language acquisition as essential to their success in the new land. As *Ántonia* and Jim’s friendship solidifies, they learn about themselves, each other, and the land that is now their new home.

Reading

Read the following in *My Ántonia*:

- Introduction (1–2)
- Book I: The Shimerdas (5–90)

Whenever you come across a description, picture the scene in your mind as clearly as you can. Pay attention to how the characters and their relationships with one another develop and change over time.



Reading Journal

There are no reading journal assignments for this book, but you might find it helpful to use your journal to keep track of key scenes and passages, characters, and the chronology of events.



Think About It

In chapter VIII, Jim senses a connecting thread between himself and others who have come from different places:

Up there the stars grew magnificently bright. Though we had come from such different parts of the world, in both of us there was some dusky superstition that those shining groups have their influence upon what is and what is not to be. Perhaps Russian Peter, come from farther away than any of us, had brought from his land, too, some such belief. (36)

The impulse to seek connections with those around us seems universal. Shared experiences, beliefs, goals, values, and interests all provide ways for us to feel connected to others.

Imagine that you are moving to a new land, and think about the experiences or beliefs that you might bring with you. What connections might you find with others? Consider how you might view others in your new land, and how they might view you. Then contemplate this passage from chapter IX where Jim tells of people making assumptions about those they don't know:

. . . there was, faintly marked in the grass, a great circle where the Indians used to ride. Jake and Otto were sure that when they galloped round that ring the Indians tortured prisoners, bound to a stake in the center; but grandfather thought they merely ran races or trained horses there. (42)

Imagine how differently people would feel upon hearing (or spreading) one version of the story or the other. How might this relate to the assumptions we make about people we don't know?

Assignments

1. The book begins with this line:

I first heard of Ántonia on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America. (5)

Discover the prairie through the eyes of the narrator, Jim Burden. As you read, keep a list of animals, birds, plants, and fruits that are mentioned in the story. Write down any passages and scenes that strike you as heightened or extraordinary.

2. What is the quality and essence of each season as Jim remembers it from his first year on the prairie? Describe the seasons that give structure to Book 1 in a one-page essay. Write one paragraph for each season as well as an introductory paragraph and a concluding paragraph. For

each season, include a direct quotation (describing that season) that strikes you as significant or beautiful.

3. Read this passage from Book I aloud, or read it to someone else:

Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross. As grandfather had predicted, Mrs. Shimerda never saw the road going over his head. The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south, so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the proprietary intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence—the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper. (Cather 77)

How would you describe Cather's writing style here? Write a paragraph defining the tone of the narrative in this passage. What feelings are evoked from these words?



Up for a Challenge?

Cather's work includes vivid descriptions. Challenge your writing skills with one of these optional activities:

Option 1: Describe a Place

The description of Jim's first glimpse of grandmother's kitchen (9) includes sensory details such as white-washed walls and a hard cement floor, flowers in windows hung with white curtains, the smell of gingerbread baking, and bright nickel trimmings on the stove. Write a description of a room in your home or elsewhere using vivid sensory details.

Option 2: Describe a Phenomenon

Consider this expressive imagery from chapter VIII:

The wind shook the doors and windows impatiently, then swept on again, singing through the big spaces. Each gust, as it bore down, rattled the panes, and swelled off like the others. They made me think of defeated armies, retreating; or of ghosts who were trying desperately to get in for shelter, and then went moaning on. (36)

Using lively imagery, describe a natural phenomenon, such as a thunderstorm, blizzard, or pouring rain.

Lesson

7

Book II: The Hired Girls

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify key scenes in a story.
- Make comparisons between your life and the lives of story characters.
- Draw parallels between literary themes in different books.

When Jim's family moves to town, he sees prejudice against Ántonia and others. Despite the town's censure of immigrants, Jim admires the "country girls" for their strength and independence:

Those girls had grown up in the first bitter-hard times, and had got little schooling themselves. But the younger brothers and sisters, for whom they made such sacrifices and who have had "advantages," never seem to me, when I meet them now, half as interesting or well educated. The older girls, who helped to break up the

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Complete the reading assignment.
- ☐ Identify and provide examples of scenes that portray prejudice and class differences.
- ☐ Explore story issues and experiences, and compare them with your own life.
- ☐ Describe emotions portrayed by story characters.
- ☐ Explore literary themes of time and timelessness.



Jake carrying a Christmas tree home, woodcut by W. T. Benda, 1918 (Image credit: Riverside Press)



Antonia plowing, woodcut by W. T. Benda, 1918 (Image credit: Riverside Press)

wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like *Antonia*, been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new. (127)

He recognizes that the struggles immigrants face are also what make them stand apart from others:

The Bohemian and Scandinavian girls could not get positions as teachers, because they had had no opportunity to learn the language. Determined to help in the struggle to clear the homestead from debt, they had no alternative but to go into service . . . But every one of them did what she had set out to do, and sent home those hard-earned dollars. The girls I knew were always helping to pay for ploughs and reapers, brood sows, or steers to fatten. (128)

Jim quickly realizes some of the townsfolk consider the girls a threat:

The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. (129)

Jim is the narrator of the novel, and he gives us his first-person viewpoint, but it is *Antonia's* story he is discovering, and conveying, from beginning to end. The things that happen to *Antonia* when she moves into town seriously impact her; the experiences truly affect her life at the time and afterward.



Antonia and Jim watching the sunset, woodcut by W. T. Benda, 1918 (Image credit: Riverside Press)

Reading

Read the following in *My Ántonia*:

- Book II: The Hired Girls (93–161)

Continue to pay attention to how the characters and their relationships change over time.

Assignments

1. In Black Hawk, Jim finds a new kind of social stratification, a hierarchy that places the new immigrants on a lower level than those whose ancestors immigrated in earlier generations. There are a number of depictions of prejudice and class differences that are really striking in this section of the novel.

Choose two episodes that stand out for you, and explore the meaning of these scenes or events in terms of how they tie into or reveal the larger theme of discrimination against foreigners.

2. Jim, Ántonia, and “the country girls” move into town just as they are becoming teenagers. A new interweaving of social relationships is happening at the same time they are all coming of age, becoming teenagers (and then adults) in a changing world. The social situation in Black Hawk is being experienced along with all the changes inherent in growing up—this is seen in the dissatisfaction felt and expressed by Jim—and their discoveries about the life of the town. Some of their new experiences center on the dancing pavilion (set up by the Italian immigrants), which brings delight and joy (dancing!) in equal measure to all, as any who could pay were welcome.

With these ideas in mind, answer the following questions:

- a. How does this move into town, which happens during adolescence, bring out the town’s prejudice against the hired girls?
 - b. In what way is the Vannis’ tent neutral ground?
 - c. Is there anything in your own experience as a teenager that is comparable? Have you had an experience of discovery, perhaps of a place or a new interest, that has coincided with this particular time of transformation in your life?
3. The cultural values in Black Hawk differ from those Jim and Ántonia experienced in rural country life. This is eloquently expressed in chapter XVI when they all go to the countryside for an outing and open up to their hopes and dreams and memories (150–155). What are the feelings they share with each other?
 4. After opening up to one another, Jim and Ántonia experience a heightened moment where the landscape seems to resonate with their feelings and openness, as if their revelations with each other can be seen in the land around them, in the details they witness, almost as a symbol:

Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disc rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disc: the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared: the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below us were dark, the sky growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie. (156)

How are the themes of time and timelessness found in the works of Muir and Muybridge conveyed in this passage? Write your thoughts in one or two paragraphs.



Up for a Challenge?

When the Burdens move to town, Jim meets many new people. His description of their neighbor Mrs. Harling is beautifully vibrant and revealing:

Mrs. Harling was short and square and sturdy-looking, like her house. Every inch of her was charged with an energy that made itself felt the moment she entered a room. Her face was rosy and solid, with bright, twinkling eyes and a stubborn little chin. She was quick to anger, quick to laughter, and jolly from the depths of her soul. How well I remember her laugh; it had in it the same sudden recognition that flashed into her eyes, was a burst of humor, short and intelligent. Her rapid footsteps shook her own floors, and she routed lassitude and indifference wherever she came. She could not be negative or perfunctory about anything. Her enthusiasm, and her violent likes and dislikes, asserted themselves in all the every-day occupations of life.
(96)

This description is so clear and specific that we feel like we know Mrs. Harling well, or we know someone like her. Write a description of someone you know. Use all your writing skills to bring this person vividly to life.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS

When you have completed this lesson, please share your work from lessons 6 and 7 with your teacher.

Lesson

10

Exploration and Expansion

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Create a comparison chart.
- Identify purpose and effectiveness of different literary techniques.
- Describe an experience from multiple viewpoints.

Our next reading selection recounts the true story of the journey taken by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, guided in part by Sacajawea, a young Native American woman. Their story highlights the contrast between the white settlers who were eager to push westward to explore and claim more territory, and the Native Americans who were eager to retain their traditional ways and tribal lands. In some ways, this dichotomy (contrast)—wanting to forge a new identity and wanting to protect a traditional culture or way of life—encapsulates the immigrant experience.

Lewis and Clark felt sure they were bringing positive change to the people they met. They believed that their presence—and the presence of others who would migrate to the West after them—would enhance the lives of the Native American people. However, while trying their best to make friends among the local populations, the explorers' behavior often seemed condescending and pompous. Lewis and Clark were determined to push their own customs, values, and agenda on the people they met, rather than respecting them as equals and being interested in learning their ways. For instance, Lewis and Clark named rivers and

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Complete the reading assignment.
- ☐ Identify benefits and drawbacks of different literary techniques.
- ☐ Explore different perspectives regarding attitudes toward immigrants.



Drawing of Artist's World, attributed to Wacochachi of Meskwaki, Iowa, ca. 1830
(Image credit: Marnie Rogers)

plants that already had names and acted as though the expedition “discovered” them; this attitude completely disregarded the thousands of Native Americans for whom these things were a familiar, integral part of their lives. Sacajawea is often bewildered by the ways of the white men; they are sometimes seen as large children who don’t understand the ways of the world.

Reading

Read *Sacajawea* by Joseph Bruchac, described as a story “of how the worlds of the white men and the Indians came together” (1).



Reading Journal

There are no specific reading journal assignments for this book, but you may want to use your journal to keep notes as you read.



Think About It

In life, it’s important to avoid making assumptions about what “everyone” thinks or feels. For example, while the Shoshone and WallaWalla were welcoming to the white travelers, perhaps others did not want them there; likewise, while some Blackfeet and Sioux may have not wanted peace with other nations, others may have. Some of the established families in *My Ántonia* were welcoming to the immigrants, and others were not. Some immigrants were eager to learn the language and customs of their new land and take on a new identity; others held fast to their traditional ways.

Imagine yourself as someone whose generations of ancestors have lived in one place for hundreds of years. How might you feel about newcomers arriving? Would you feel one way if these newcomers wanted to adopt your culture and differently if they wanted to maintain their own traditional ways? Now imagine yourself as a newly arrived immigrant in a country far away. Would you want to become part of the established culture, or would you rather maintain your own cultural identity? Would you automatically trust the established population, or would you be wary of their motives and ways? Think about your response, and ask someone you know for their thoughts.

Assignments

1. This story is told using alternating viewpoints with each chapter switching between Sacajawea and Captain Clark. It also uses the story-within-a-story technique: it is narrated as though being told to Sacajawea's son many years later. The author also includes Native American folktales at the beginning of each chapter narrated by Sacajawea (another type of story within a story). Why do you think the author chose these literary devices to tell this story? Does each technique enhance the story's effectiveness? Does it detract from your experience as a reader? Make a chart listing the benefits and drawbacks of each of these three techniques:

- Alternating viewpoints between Sacajawea and Clark
- Using the story-within-a-story technique of narration
- Including Native American folktales within the story

When creating your chart, you do not have to write in complete sentences. List at least one benefit and one drawback for each technique based on your experience as a reader.

2. Many people view Lewis and Clark as explorers paving the way for others to migrate westward. However, what if you looked at Lewis and Clark's party as migrants—newcomers to a land already inhabited? How do these “migrants” differ in their behavior and attitude than the immigrants in *My Ántonia*? Think of how the families already established on the Nebraska prairie treated the new immigrants, and then consider how their behavior compares to the way the Native Americans treated the newly arrived white men. As we've seen in *My Ántonia* and *Sacajawea*, often newcomers are given very practical, essential help, without which the newcomers wouldn't have survived. Other times, the newcomers are not welcomed or treated well.

With these thoughts in mind, answer the following questions:

- a. What kind of help was offered to the Bohemian immigrants in *My Ántonia*? What help was given to the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition by some of the native tribes they encountered?
- b. At times, the newcomers were seen as a threat or looked down upon. What evidence is there of this kind of tension in *Sacajawea*? What difference did it make that Sacajawea was traveling with them?