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# American Literature: Natives, Naturalists, Immigrants, and Settlers

In this course, we will explore how the United States developed its shape and character, throughout the 19th century, by way of the movement called the Westward Expansion. By reading and reflecting on the words, artwork, and novels that contain their stories, we will come closer to the authentic experiences of those who then lived in the United States of America.

The reading selections include four works:

- *My First Summer in the Sierra*, a journal by John Muir
- *River of Shadows* by Rebecca Solnit, a biography set within the history of the American West
- *My Antonia*, a novel by Willa Cather about immigrants and settlers who made their homes in the Nebraska plains during the 19th century
- *The Painted Drum* by Louise Erdrich, a novel centering on the experience of the Ojibwe tribe in North Dakota.

While reading these books and responding to assignments, you will also be developing a semester-long project. This course is a single semester course and will take approximately 18 weeks to complete.

## Unit I: Weeks 2/3

### Reading

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 Solnit and the diary that Muir kept during the summer of 1869, when he followed a shepherd and his flock through the mountains.

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.

#### Week 2

*My First Summer in the Sierra*: Read pages 3-112 (to the breaking of the first camp).

*River of Shadows*: Read pages 1-55 (chapters 1 and 2).

#### Week 3

*My First Summer in the Sierra*: Read pages 112-162 (second camp).

*River of Shadows*: Read pages 55-100 (chapters 3 and 4).

### Assignments

1. Keep a reading journal. For now, your assignment is to record the passages or ideas which make an impression on you, and begin to discover what Muir and Muybridge did and did not have in common.

2. Begin your own journal. Chose a specific place, such as a tree, the sky, the moon, a time of day (morning, sunset, 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.
3. Compare the impressions you have formed of Muir and Muybridge, giving specific examples of their similarities and differences, in a one-page essay.

## Unit II: Week 10

### Reading

Read the Introduction, then the essay “My *Ántonia* and the Americanization Debate” by Guy Reynolds, pages 253-278.

### Assignments

1. Reynolds states, “Assimilation raised a central question...should the immigrants adjust themselves to American culture, or should American national identity redefine items in the face of a multicultural population? The English language is the hook on which this question is hung...Cather describes lives that are shaped by the need to learn a new language and a new culture.” (255-6, 261) Is this debate still part of our world today?
2. Participate in a group analysis of the essay “Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the novel in *My Ántonia*” (412-438). First, read the first two pages on your own. Then you will be assigned a specific section that you will be responsible for reading carefully, summarizing, and explaining to others in the class. Your teacher will set up and share a Google document everyone can contribute to (separate from your Google course doc). When you have read the first two pages, please let your teacher know so you can be assigned a section and given access to the shared document. The essay sections are:
  1. “The Storyteller” (414-417)
  2. “The story as a way of meaning (417-423)
  3. “My *Ántonia* as Counter-Novel” (423-430)
  4. “The Victory of Storytelling ) (430-438)
3. Read the following passage from Book I aloud, to yourself or to someone else. How would you describe Cather’s writing style here? Write a paragraph defining the tone of the narrative in this passage. Then, find and copy another passage that made a strong impression on you.

“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 64-65)