

American Literature: The Westward Journey Coursebook



Oak Meadow

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Introduction

Welcome to *American Literature: The Westward Journey*. In this course, you will explore how the United States developed its shape and character throughout the 19th century by way of the movement called the Westward Expansion.

In *My Ántonia* (one of the books you'll be reading), when the young narrator travels to his new home in rural Nebraska, he sees “nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (Cather 7). This quote brings up a vital question:

What is the material out of which countries are made?

By reading and reflecting on the authentic experiences of those who lived in the United States of America then, you will come closer to understanding how a country is formed and how the land influences its people.



Storm in the Mountains by Albert Bierstadt, 1870 (Image credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Each of the books we'll explore in this course will help us form a response to this essential question. The reading selections include the following works:

- ***My First Summer in the Sierra* by John Muir**, a journal that chronicles his enthusiastic exploration of the American West

- ***River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* by Rebecca Solnit**, a biography set in the American West in the 19th century
- ***My Ántonia* by Willa Cather**, a novel about immigrants and settlers who made their homes in the Nebraska plains during the 19th century
- ***Sacajawea* by Joseph Bruchac**, an authentic account of the Western explorations of Lewis and Clark and their young Native American guide, Sacajawea
- ***American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* by Zitkala-Ša**, a book of traditional tales and autobiographical stories of late 19th-century Native American life

While reading these books and responding to assignments, you will also be developing ideas for your final project. Read the full description of the project in lesson 16 before you begin lesson 1 so you can have it in mind throughout the course.

What to Expect in This Course

This is a single-semester course that will take approximately 18 weeks. This coursebook includes all the assignments you need to complete the course.

Lesson content is divided into the following sections:

An **Assignment Checklist** is found at the beginning of each lesson so you can see at a glance what you'll be doing and check off assignments as you complete each one. Assignments are fully explained in the lesson.

Learning Objectives outline the main goals of the lesson and give you an idea of what to expect.

Reading assignments detail what you will be reading in each lesson.

Reading Journal assignments are designed to help you get the most out of your reading by keeping notes on your thoughts, impressions, questions, and key passages.

Think About It topics will help you consider and reflect on important concepts and issues. You are encouraged to discuss your thoughts with others as this will further deepen your understanding of the material.

Assignments give you the opportunity to make connections, explore issues, and demonstrate your grasp of literary technique and themes, as well as clarify your own ideas and opinions.

Up for a Challenge? is an optional section that provides more ways to dive into the lesson topics. These activities are encouraged for students who want to further their explorations.

Share Your Work provides reminders and information for students who are enrolled in Oak Meadow School and submitting work to their Oak Meadow teacher.

Please read the unit introductions, lesson introductions, learning objectives, and Think About It sections very carefully as they are integral parts of the course. The information they contain will help you understand the assignments better and put them into context; your assignment responses will often directly relate to themes and ideas that are introduced in these sections.

Academic Expectations

The appendix contains important material that you will be expected to read and incorporate into your work throughout the year. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the resources in the appendix. You will find information about academic expectations, how to avoid accidental plagiarism, and details on citing sources and images.

It is assumed that you will be working with an adult who assesses and supports your learning whether you are enrolled in Oak Meadow or are using this course independently. This teacher—who may be a parent, tutor, or Oak Meadow teacher—is the one to whom you should turn if you have questions about your assignments or how to get the most out of this course.

If you are a student enrolled in Oak Meadow’s distance learning school, be sure to look closely at the Google course doc your Oak Meadow teacher shares with you because the assignments or course requirements may have been modified.

A Note About the Workload

Please note that there are a wide variety of assignments included in this course to give many options for engaging with the material. Students vary greatly in terms of reading speed, reading comprehension, and writing ability. Some may find the reading in this course takes longer than expected; others may find the writing assignments take a great deal of time. In general, you can expect to spend about five hours on each lesson (or ten hours for double lessons). If you need more time to complete the work, you might modify some lessons to focus on fewer assignments, or you might opt to complete some of the written assignments orally. Modifications like these can allow you to produce work that is of a higher quality than if you are rushing to get everything done. Each lesson in this course can be customized to suit your needs.

Keep an eye on the workload as you progress through the course, and make adjustments so you have time for meaningful learning experiences. If you are enrolled in Oak Meadow School, please consult with your teacher when making adjustments to the workload.



Unit I: Discovery

In this unit, you will be reading two books:

My First Summer in the Sierra by John Muir

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

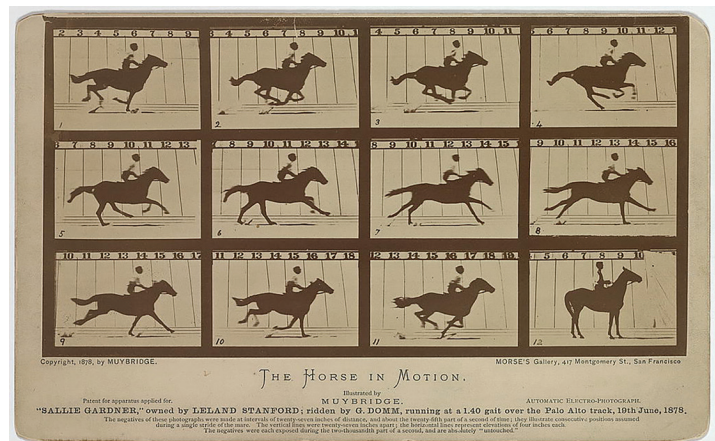
These two books, so different in style and genre, are linked by biography. Both Muir and Muybridge were immigrants (Muir from Scotland and Muybridge from England) whose art, words, and actions have had a lasting effect on our world. Both men were highly inventive and independent; they both set out alone and achieved greatness in their lifetimes. Muir, through his words and actions, founded the environmental movement. Muybridge's experiments in high-speed motion photography led to the invention of modern cinema.

One point of intersection between these two masters is brought into sharp focus in Solnit's chapter about Yosemite in the section, "Mountains and Rivers Without End":

- Muybridge spent time "in the Yosemite region, making a series of landscape photographs that stand apart from everything he and his peers had accomplished." (83)
- "In 1872, several of the prodigies who would determine how the western American landscape would be imagined crossed paths in Yosemite." (89)
- "Roaming around between valley and mountain peaks that summer was John Muir, whose life, like Muybridge's, had changed course after a terrible accident . . . and who found his home, his joy, and his purpose ranging around Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada." (89)

With Muir, you will begin to picture his journey through his words; with Muybridge, the photographs themselves offer his vision.

At the end of this unit, you will do a small project.



The Horse in Motion by Eadweard Muybridge, 1878
(Image credit: Library of Congress)

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 CHECKLIST

- 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 page 89 and the top of 90, where Solnit explains how Muybridge and Muir crossed paths in Yosemite.
- *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.

SHARE YOUR WORK

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 CHECKLIST

- 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.

SHARE YOUR WORK

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.



Unit II: Homeland

For the next four weeks, you will be reading *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather. In an essay titled “*My Ántonia* and the Americanization Debate,” Guy Reynolds writes,

My Ántonia, faithful to the immigrant experience, has an extraordinary multiplicity of voices . . . a democratic mingling of stories from the new and old worlds. (My Ántonia, 265–267)

My Ántonia, written in 1918, draws on the author’s experiences as a child growing up in Nebraska and her memories of the people who lived there, especially the immigrant families who arrived after the prairie was settled. Presented as a first-person narrative by the fictional character Jim Burden, the story is centered on Ántonia, who has come with her family from Bohemia to settle the Nebraska prairie.

The novel explores themes central to many immigrant experiences, including learning to live in a new land, acquiring a new language, and honoring old traditions and memories while creating new ones.

Throughout all the books in this course, you will find a powerful sense of place. Here’s how Rebecca Solnit describes this concept in *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*:

Sense of place is the sixth sense, an internal compass and map made by memory and spiritual perception together.

As you become more aware of the sense of place in the literature you read, consider your sense of place in your own life.



Nebraska Sandhills (Image credit: Ammodramus)

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 CHECKLIST

- 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 Antonia 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

14

Heroes and Visions

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Analyze the literary theme of the female hero.
- Develop an essay based on theme of a heroic vision.
- Revise, edit, and proofread an essay to produce a polished piece of writing.

Have you ever thought about what makes a hero? Have you considered the different forms a hero might take? As you continue reading the works of Zitkala-Ša, consider your own responses to these questions as you see how the author explores them.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Complete the reading assignment.
- Explain how the author depicts the female hero.
- Explore the role and significance of the author's vision.



Untitled work by Lakota leader Black Hawk, ca. 1880
(Image credit: New York State Historical Association)

Reading

In *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, read the following:

- “The Great Spirit” (114–117)
- “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” (118–126)
- “The Trial Path” (127–131)
- “A Warrior’s Daughter” (132–140)
- “A Dream of Her Grandfather” (141–142)
- “The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman” (143–154)
- “America’s Indian Problem” (155–160)

Assignments

1. Consider this description of the book:

The book starts with an autobiographical narrative that moves from the child to the student to the teacher, and then opens up to a series of stories centered around a female hero. (67)

Write one or two paragraphs about the nature of the female hero found in “A Warrior’s Daughter.”

2. In the Introduction, Zitkala-Ša’s tales are described as “survivor stories, on the most profound and compelling level” (xii). In “A Dream of Her Grandfather,” the hero of the story is one who continues her grandfather’s work and recounts her own vision.

How is this vision meaningful in light of all you know about the Native American experience in the 19th century? What makes this vision heroic? What significance does this have for the life and work of Zitkala-Ša? What has survived? Explore these questions in an essay of one or two pages.

Follow the steps of the writing process while crafting your essay:

- **Organize your ideas, and write a rough draft.** Organize your paragraphs to highlight the main ideas, and use relevant supporting details.
- **Revise your rough draft to improve the clarity and flow.** Read your rough draft aloud, or share it with someone else for feedback, and revise as needed.
- **Edit your revised draft.** How can you make the writing more engaging and effective?
- **Proofread your final version.** Fix any errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation to produce a polished piece of writing.



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