



*Susan Scott Parrish*



**Associate Professor**  
English Language and Literature, LSA

Sponsored by:  
The Student Sustainability Initiative  
The Graham Environmental Sustainability Institute  
The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

# Historical Literary Analysis and the Evolution of Responses to American Nature

## Teaching Strategy

The word sustainability is a strategic word. It's about maintaining something over time, but also ties into notions of progress and success and our dynamic, American sense of growth. Language connects different kinds of attitudes towards the natural world and sustainability and creates cultural formations. In Professor Parrish's literature class, "The Environmental Imagination in North America," students discuss these diverse uses of language and their effects on policy formation and dialogues.

For example, during class students periodically engage in individual, 30-minute close reading and writing exercises for specific passages. Students analyze and then discuss various elements of the text, such as the sound, diction, sentence or line structure, the imagery and its implications, or how the passage or narrative develops and creates meaning.

Another course goal is for students to get a sense of how people have thought about the environment in over time. While many environmental literature courses cover famous environmental writers like Rachel Carson and David Thoreau, Parrish's course readings and discussions also explore important historical themes, such as the initial attitudes of Europeans towards the land and land usage and how those attitudes were connected to relationships with both African and Native Americans.

The course also integrates experiential learning: trips to the arboretum and the natural history museum and creative research projects to develop educational materials. These experiences connect students on a deeper level to the themes they read in environmental literature, such as prairie ecology or the ethics of bird collection for museums.

## Faculty Perspectives

*"What is fun about teaching this class to two constituencies is that the students can teach each other. The English students may be more proficient about writing essays that analyze language, whereas the Program in the Environment students might know something about the geology."*

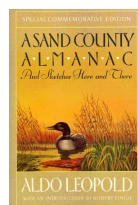
*"The more you care about a place and the more you know about it, the more you care what happens to it. There is the general belief in environmental history that if you become attached to a place, you actually want to protect it. Rather than have literature be abstract, link it to love of a place, and you will want its natural history to be sustained over time."*

*"The field of eco-criticism is a growing field in English. Anthologies are now available that include a mixture of poetry, essays, and short stories where the natural world is very bound up in the action, stories, and characters."*

*"Teaching sustainability creates the possibility of new ways of learning. For example, the experiential component allow students to see, touch, and feel, something we don't get to do very often in English."*

*"At the end of every term my students do a research project which is a mixture of a personal narrative and some research, so that they inquire more thoroughly into something in the non-human world that they've either taken for granted or known for a long time without understanding its natural history."*

## Examples of Teaching and/or Student Artifacts



*Sand County Almanac*  
by Aldo Leopold



*My Antonia*  
by Willa Cather



Thomas Cole, The Oxbow



Historical Propaganda