

The Song of Creation

From Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to Cardenal's *Cosmic Canticle*

MLS 589 - Spring 2010
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Course Description:

While every poem creates its own place and hence implies its own creation account, Whitman's masterpiece is a new Genesis. It sets the stage for all of the poetry of America and the democratic cosmos that he imagined would engender the new world. So powerful was his song of creation that many poets to follow, in both North and South America, took heart and followed his grand score, creating ever new oracular voices of the indigenous spirit of the Americas.

This course will explore the scientific, religious, and political basis of Whitman's own creation and move forward to modern and contemporary poets of his kind:

William Carlos Williams, our finest imagist poet, also wrote a long poem, *Paterson*, which uses collage techniques to create a modernist epic of place. His book, *In the American Grain*, provides many of the untold stories in American history.

Pablo Neruda, Nobel laureate of Chile, celebrates the simplest of objects and their spiritual depths, writes passionate love poems, and captures the strength of the native traditions in his longer poems: *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* and *Canto General*.

Gary Snyder, the beat poet of *Turtle Island*, combines a lifetime of zen Buddhist practice and environmental activism to celebrate the earth and the depths of its ecological experience. His *Mountains and Rivers without End* melds the cultures of

east and west through a series of landscape paintings that capture the spirit of place.

A. R. Ammons, lyric poet of the back yard and country walks, plumbs the inner workings of biology and mind in our contemporary world. John Elder has captured the poet's ecological perspective in his fine critical study, *Imagining the Earth*.

N. Scott Momaday, son of a Kiowa artist, wrote *The Way to Rainy Mountain* to tell us what the loss of the Buffalo meant to the tribal culture of his people. In the novel *House Made of Dawn* and the collection of poems and drawings *In the Presence of the Sun* he captures the native vision of America.

Joy Harjo, a poet of the Muscogee Nation, has a band and plays the sax. Her poetry blends story, prayer, and song in praise of the land and its spirit in books like *How We Became Human* and *A Map to the Next World*.

Ernesto Cardenal, Nicaraguan priest and revolutionary, in his *Cosmic Canticle* uses native creation mythology and contemporary science (from the Big Bang to quantum theory) to help us experience the ecstatic joy of creation and the love that binds it all together.

Goals of the Course:

- 1) to focus on the first major American poet and his influence on American culture, north and south, native and European
- 2) to watch that influence interact with the developments of twentieth-century art, science, and poetry
- 3) to learn how to do a graduate-level paper and create a topical anthology
- 4) to discover some new literary friends (in the course and the class).

The Path of the Course:

As Archie Ammons would have it, a poem is a walk, a going out and a return. This course goes out for several weeks from the major poems and prose writings of Whitman to the critical and biographical appraisals of his work. Each student will identify a topic, idea, technique, or issue in Whitman to form the focus of a paper on the author.

In the remainder of the course, we make our return by looking closely at the poetry of seven other poets in the syllabus (others as well in research). Each student will gather a set of later poems to form a short anthology of works that parallel the major poems and prose of Whitman and play out new variations on the topic of the original paper. This creative enterprise will take the form of a small book which illustrates and includes the paper (now revised).

An indispensable element of this major, term-long project will be the research teamwork of the course. We will keep track of everyone's topic and interest, passing suggestions and findings by email, through note cards distributed in class, or in class discussion. You will be given credit not only for what your research produces for your project, but how it helps others.

Course Requirements and Grade Formula:

paper on Whitman -- **DUE WEEK 5**: 20%
anthology of Whitman and his counterparts-- DUE WEEK 15: 40%
participation: attendance, class discussion, report(s), helping others
through blackboard participation: 20%
final examination: 20%



Bird's Nest Fern

Week	Date	Reading Assignments and Classroom Activities
1)	Jan. 19	Introduction to the course: goals, schedule, requirements, and how to read “Song of Myself”
2)	Jan. 26	“Song of Myself” and “There Was a Child Went Forth”
3)	Feb. 2	“Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” “The Noiseless Patient Spider,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “Sleepers,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed”
4)	Feb. 9	<i>Democratic Vistas</i> and selections <i>Specimen Days</i> Choose a critic and be prepared to present the approach
5)	Feb. 16	William Carlos Williams - selections TBA on Bb Paper Due: identifying your own interest and defining a major thrust of Whitman’s creative impulse
6)	Feb. 23	Pablo Neruda: <i>The Heights of Macchu Picchu</i> using the bilingual edition
7)	Mar. 2	Neruda: selections from <i>Canto General</i> and other poems in <i>The Poetry of Pablo Neruda</i> - see Bb
8)	Mar. 9	<i>Spring break</i>
9)	Mar. 16	Gary Snyder: <i>Turtle Island</i>

- 10) **Mar. 23 A. R. Ammons: *Selected Poems, Expanded Ed.***
- 11) **Mar. 30 N. Scott Momaday: *In the Presence of the Sun***
- 12) **Apr. 6 Joy Harjo: *How We Became Human***
- 13) **Apr. 13 Ernesto Cardenal: *Cosmic Canticle***
- 14) **Apr. 20 Cardenal: science, religion, and politics in the poetry of earth**
- 15) **Apr. 27 Final projects due**
- 16) **May 4 Celebration**

Textbooks:

The bookstore has ordered all of my preferences for the texts in this course. For most of the authors, you are free to use any edition. However, for Whitman, Neruda, and Cardenal, please buy or borrow the following four specific editions:

- Whitman. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Norton Critical Edition.
Cardenal. *Cosmic Canticle*. Tr. John Lyons. Curbstone Press.
Neruda. *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*. Ed. Ilan Stavans. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux.
The Heights of Macchu Picchu. Bilingual Edition. Tr. Nathaniel Tarn.
Farrar, Strauss, Giroux.

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