

ENG/ENV 241:
Literature and
the Environment



Class Booklet
produced by the students of
the "Literature and Environment" course
at Redeemer University College
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Introduction

Dr. Deborah Bowen

This booklet is a compilation by the students of the “Literature and Environment” course offered at RUC for only the second time in winter semester 2011. Most of the students in the class have chosen and contributed a piece of their writing from the course to this booklet; one of the students, Emily Williams, has put the pages together and turned the whole thing into a file for the website.

Calendar description of the course:

“Studying literary works through an ecological lens will inform and nuance students’ perceptions of the relationship between culture and nature, the foundation of our current environmental sensibilities, and the role of human beings in the care and sustenance of the earth. Using chronological, regional, and thematic approaches, the course considers possible links between literary appreciation & social action.”

Course goals and objectives:

“The environmental predicament in which we find ourselves has brought the examination of humanity’s relationship with nature to the fore as an important interdisciplinary area of study. Given both the historical significance and present proliferation of creative literature written in relation to and response to the environment, it is timely for a course in Literature and the Environment to be offered.

In our investigations of selected literary texts from the U.S., Britain and Canada over the last two centuries, we will consider (1) a biblical perspective on the role of human beings in the care and sustenance of the earth; (2) the roots (philosophical and historical perspectives) and branches (geographical and social perspectives) of our environmental sensibilities; (3) human interaction with pristine wilderness, with cityscapes, and with toxic environments; (4) questions of ethics and social impact. The course is cross-listed with Environmental Studies, where it forms part of the major with a Humanities emphasis; in the English program it functions as an elective.”

From my perspective, this was one of the most delightful and valuable teaching experiences of my fourteen years at Redeemer so far. The students were a wonderful bunch who read carefully, thought newly, and discussed avidly – thank you, guys! Coming as you did from so many disciplinary backgrounds – Environmental Studies and English, yes, but also Philosophy, Theatre, History, Religion, Political Science, Business – made for a very rich environment in the classroom, and for all kinds of unexpected and unscripted insights and crossovers. I enjoyed you very much, and will remember this course for a long time to come.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, as you continue to learn how to be His people in your minds, hearts, imaginations, and actions –

Deborah Bowen.

Summer Work
Ryan Vandenhaak

I wonder who it was who said
“Slight faith moves mountains.”
The Christ, who rose from dead,
Or man, whose cunning mind contains
The potent seeds of quaint empire
Which choke the voice that quells desire.

We worked on the border of the sprawl
Our boots encased in mud, our hands,
They built what some still might call
Homes. Ten thousand drape the land.
We did not feel, for our feet were shod
When finished here, to the next we plod.

We worked with faces to the wall
Our skin tanned but eyes grown pale.
While at our backs, a meadow called,
And gnarled trees, to no avail.
We cannot hear, our ears are dulled,
Our senses by lumbering landmovers lulled...

Almost unnoticed they came that day.
To peel back that meadow’s grassy skin
To level the land, “make straight the way!”
Bare flesh, where fields had been.
The naked soil seems to crack,
Unearthed, by faith in forged fact.



Photo taken by Ryan Vandenhaak

On Earth Keeping in the 90s: Stewardship of Creation by Loren Wilkinson
Jocelyn Mulock

I found the division of the work in Earth Keeping in the 90s into seven distinct parts to be particularly powerful as a means to convey the message of completeness without actually saying that. I found the last section that focused on humans to have an excellent and disturbing point. It is alarming to note that people today have increasingly less contact with nature, growing up in cities and never seeing stars or a farm or a real live animal. This idea that some people will never truly experience what nature is like stirred me to write a poem about it.

It's the urban jungle, devoid of green,
Where not a twinkling star is seen.
The city of lights, the noise never stops,
No fields of corn or rows of crops.
The rush of cars, the air is thick,
Surrounded by people and always sick.
I want fresh air, I need to breathe,
I feel crowded, I need relief.
But there's no respite here in this city,
Where people rush around and feel no pity.
I long for my home, where I belong,
Where I can hear nature and the earth's song.
Take me to my roots, I long to grow,
Living close to earth's the only home I know.



Photo credit: Taken by Stephen Waterfall, posted on <http://www.watchthisspace.ca/pixelpost/index.php?x=about>

On “Ramsden” by Margaret Avison
Let’s Go to the Park
Katie Lemont

*Let’s go to the park
where*

there are dog feces and no children
playing and stepping on needles,
hidden under the wood chips and garbage.
The newly planted trees - they are
holding grocery bags - while the shoppers
are safe away in their homes, playing video games,
and watching television.
The children no longer come to
the government funded playground,
blind to the potential
of community.
Beside the park there is a
a concrete lot.
There is no sunshine that
glimmers off the graffiti -
painted slide.
The sun is blocked behind large office buildings.
Those that run by are content living “*their day.*”
There is no bench not yet
Destroyed by vandals.
At a different time this park was loved.
Let’s go to the park.



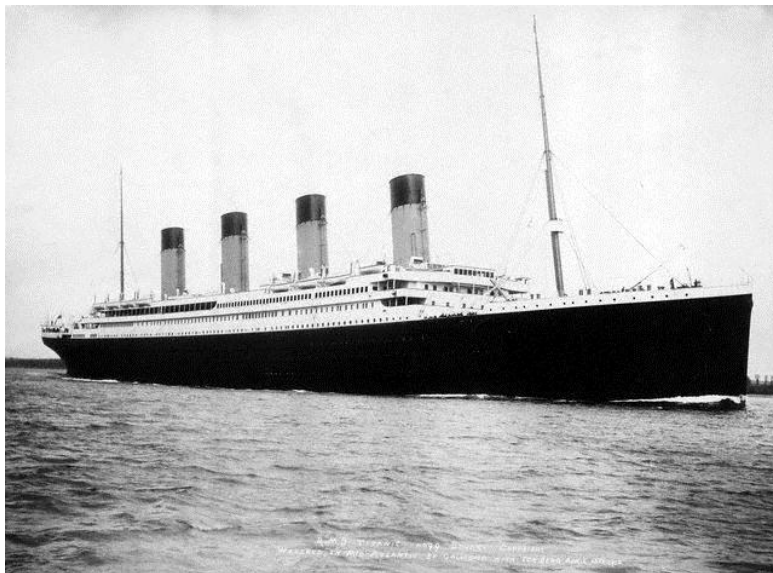
Photo taken from The Town Courier, Gaithersburg, 04/10/2011
<http://www.towncourier.com/2011/04/10/>

On "The Convergence of the Twain" by Thomas Hardy *Eschscholzia Californica*

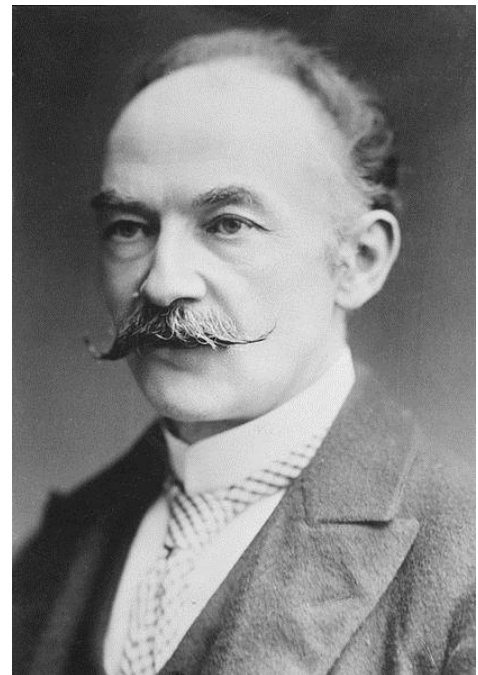
I tried to read this poem as if I had a friend who died in the Titanic. I could not help feeling disturbed. Could it be that my beautiful friend lies at the bottom of the ocean looking like the rest of the ship, in ruins? Thomas Hardy wrote this about the ship: "Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind." I would not feel comforted reading this poem. It makes me picture dead people, who once were alive and beautiful, at the bottom of the ocean.

I cannot help feeling angry because "the Spinner of the Years" allowed the ship, formed from men's pride, and the iceberg to converge. Who is this "Spinner of Years?" Are Thomas Hardy and I talking about the same God? Good qualities of God are left out in Hardy's treatment of God. The "Spinner of the Years" and the "Immanent Will" have it out for mankind. Not only does this god allow for things to happen but also, it seems, this god enjoys them. I can just picture it chuckling in a corner saying "Now!" as it pleases. It is not the God I know to be powerful and gracious.

One part of this poem that I found very interesting was the 8th stanza. Hardy wrote, "And as the smart ship grew/ In stature, grace, and hue, / In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too." It is as if man and nature are working against each other without even knowing it. On second thought, it is as if man and nature are working *together* to cause evil. Is this a proper analysis of life since the fall of humanity? Are mankind and nature working together to evil ends? Hardy, to some degree I can agree with you. Since the fall, all creation—including man as well as icebergs—fell into sin.



The Titanic



Thomas Hardy

On the Romantics

Jessica Brouwer

Today we had a class on the Romantics looking at William Wordsworth and William Blake. It is slightly intriguing because I am in 19th Century Literature as well this semester and this same week we are looking at Wordsworth and Blake. I have no problem with it because I have discovered a new love for these men. I never realized I could get such a thrill out of someone's poetry as much as these writers, but I do. They have inspired me to try my hand in a type of prose, or whatever you might call it. The title is "A Pause."

The snowflakes sparkle in the sun like stars glittering in the inky night sky.
It is peaceful for a moment. Wait.
The swirling wind carries the snow, blocking my view.
It's like traipsing in the tundra to make it to my house.
Cold gusts, drifts; not too far.
A few steps, but I stop and examine the snow canvas around me.
Footprints? Paw prints; animals leave their mark in the snow. Just like me.
A rabbit, a squirrel, maybe a raccoon. A cat!
That is why the mice are inside my cozy house.

Pine trees; tall, towering, glistening with frost and white dust.
I smile. The sun streaks through the clear sky.
It is cold but I can feel warmth on my back.
The bush. A snap of branches, crunching snow.
Peering, searching, spotted: a bunny.
Soft, cinnamon-coloured; he turns to me, ears pricked.
I listen too. I look.
Is he waiting for something? He does not move.
I wait.

Blowing across the trees. Scraping from the pine needles.
Dropped. Ice suddenly upon my shoulder, I shiver.
Is he still there? Only prints in the snow.
Turning from the vacant bush; look at my house.
Door opens. A smile.
Kettle for tea, blanket on the couch and a candle by the window.
Sweet smell of sticky buns.
Three on the couch; content.
I'm home.



Reflections

Rachel Brouwer

On “Pisces” by Hugh Cook

Reading through the short story “Pisces” by Hugh Cook, and hearing him talk about what inspired him to start writing and what inspired him to write this particular short story helped me to understand the story in broader context. Cook mentioned that parts of the story were inspired by his own life experiences. From having his own life experiences, he allowed the characters to go in their own direction without holding back or forcing the characters to go in a way he wanted them to.

I found it interesting that Cook said when he writes stories or poems he tries not to start his stories with themes or messages because they can come across as too preachy to those who are not necessarily Christians, making it hard for them to relate or make connections. Though he said he does not intentionally have a particular theme or message within a story or poem, one can still form on its own.

Cook mentioned that there are three different worldviews within “Pisces.” Thelma’s worldview is through astrology. It is a spiritual way of looking at things, but in a demonic and cultic way. Baars’ view is scientific, and he sees the importance of science and research but he is blind to everything else around him. The overall worldview in the story is a biblical worldview, that creation is a word of God and that Christians are called to act upon the environment as stewards of God’s creation, which is the opposite of Thelma’s view.

Baars, one of the main characters, is father to two sons and has a wife whose name is not mentioned in the story, which shows that she is viewed as unimportant to her husband. Throughout the story, Baars seems very distant and disconnected to both his wife and his two sons, but he hits a turning point later and realizes that his research and his passion for science have taken a lot more time up than spending time with his boys, and that creation is more than just calculations and science: “Baars saw the perch’s scales leave his hands and, catching the sun, float like pearls through the green water.” He reflects on his life and figures out ways he can be a better dad and a better husband. “It struck him how little he really knew of her world, too, and then he felt suddenly alone. Or empty, as if an old friend had died and no new intimate had yet filled the void.”

In the ending paragraph, Baars falls into the water which symbolized being “reborn,” having a fresh start in his life and opening his eyes wider in how he views and treats his wife and sons, and the world and creation as a whole.

On “Planet Earth” by P.K. Page

I really enjoyed reading the poem “Planet Earth” written by P.K. Page. I like how she carefully chose her words and knew exactly where to place them to make them have a unique tone to it.

It was neat that she had part of a different poem in the beginning and used one-liners from the other poem and put it at the end of each section of her poem. She used those one-liners very uniquely and carefully; it was as if she was putting those one-liners at the end as a statement to what she wrote about it. It helped tie in the poem as a whole and it made you go back and reread what she said above to fully understand the message she was trying to portray.

*“It has to be spread out, the skin of this planet,
has to be ironed, the sea in its whiteness;
smoothing the holy surfaces.”*

I loved the imagery she made throughout the poem and how she suggested treating other things with gentleness and care should be the exact same emotion and mindset in how we treat the environment.

*“It has to be loved the way a laundress loves her linens,
the way she moves her hands caressing the fine muslins.”*

P.K. Page has a unique way of describing and encouraging how we should act and think in doing our best to take care of the world we live in, without saying it in a harsh or demanding way; instead, she portrayed it in a strong and tender way.

Follow Me to the Forest

Rachel DeVries

Marilynne Robinson, in her piece titled "Wilderness," explores how the wilderness is a place where we can get away with things that we wouldn't get away with if people were around. Specifically, Robinsons addresses the issue of nuclear weapons being tested under the cover of wilderness. In The following is a creative response to the concept of hiding our tests and trials within nature. I thought about ways in which the forest bears (often covered) bruises from our misuse of it.

Follow me to the Forest
To find our glass bottles and foil wrap
Strewn near cigar tipped ashes

Follow me to the Forest
To dig up our crumbling fantasy land
That once engaged our curious minds

Follow me to the Forest
To see the leave-stripped tree
That still covers our nakedness

Follow me to the Forest
The one no longer there
The one no longer anywhere

And if it's just too much for us
We'll go hand and hand to the forest
And uncover what's been hidden



Photo credit: Taken by Andrea McDowell (2010).

On "Snake" by D.H. Lawrence

Benjamin Bouwman

The snake Lawrence sees is the Other. He comes to his water trough, and Lawrence "must wait, must stand and wait". The snake's presence at the trough puts Lawrence and his need for water in question. The pitcher is significant, because it symbolizes the acknowledged need for water. Both self and other come to fulfill the same need. It is the common lack of water that relates man to snake and that keeps the relationship of otherness intact for the next movement of the poem.

The otherness of the snake awakens the voice of Lawrence's education, which would kill him off. He is a poisonous threat, his presence an omen of doom for Lawrence's house. However, Lawrence is bound up by forces more powerful than his education, forces awakened by the presence of this snake. The first of these forces is common thirst. The snake, thirsting, is not so unlike Lawrence as education would have him believe. Thirst points to common life, which forbids Lawrence to kill. Common life indicates common language. Language bridges gaps of otherness in hospitality.

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

Commonality suspends Lawrence in the moment. He has become the host of a dangerous guest "from the burning bowels of the earth" without being asked for consent. The presence of the snake creates this moment.

The snake leaves. His straight head disappears through a hole in the wall. It is the absence of the snake that awakens rage in Lawrence. The poet protests against his guest only as he leaves. Lawrence has become a hostile host now that the relationship of otherness has been broken.

"I put down my pitcher" Lawrence puts down his need, which began the serendipitous meeting in the first place. His attack on the snake comes first of all at the cost of his own dignity as a water-needing creature who shares the trough. His weapon, the clumsy log, is awkward compared to the grace of an empty pitcher, ready to be filled.

The tail of the snake, the trace left behind in the room, is the target of Lawrence's attack, and "convulse[s] in undignified haste". Commonality with the Other preserved the relationship. The otherness of the other, his independent will, is the quickly disappearing tail that Lawrence attacks in rage.

Lawrence's regret is his realization that he has evicted his guest as he was already leaving of his own will. He has entertained an uncrowned king, and has given up the chance to crown him as an honoured guest.

The pettiness of the log thrown, of ignorance of lack, of setting down the pitcher, of dishonouring the other who has honoured self with presence, will remain something to expiate, a sin against the Other.

On "Autumn" by P.K Page

by Kristy Aloe

Autumn brings about a new chapter in my life this year. For as long as I can remember, the fall has meant the start of a new semester. This meant I would go to school and things would continue on as they always have. This year, autumn means something different. Since I will be graduating I find myself wondering how I will feel when fall comes around.

As Summer Leaves

Leaves change
like traffic lights
shifting from green
to yellow
to red.
And red
Is where I find myself now.
Stopped.
Stopped short, as I look past the lights
watching the leaves begin to fall.

Moving from an Old Growth forest
of dependable habits
and predictable learning;
to a New Growth stand.

Of nothing.

Simply poplars and shrubs.
Nothing like Douglas Firs
or Towering Spruce
or Lodgepole Pines.

Will I be stumped
like a cut down tree?
No growth?
That's the million dollar question.
Shaking the money tree
only to find that money does not grow on trees.
The only thing falling is leaves.

Red
and yellow.

And as the light will soon be green
I wonder when I will see
the green in the leaves again.



On *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens

Emily Williams

On a second reading of the first few chapters of *Hard Times*, I've been struck by the tension between the dual alliances of *nature/fancy* vs. *institution/fact*. This tension is especially noticeable in Chapter Two, "Murdering the Innocents," wherein Dickens creates a strong contrast between nature and the institution. The section which I am interested in—where Mr. Gradgrind is selecting a student—reads like this (emphasis added):

The square finger, moving here and there, lighted suddenly on Bitzer, *perhaps because he chanced to sit in the same ray of sunlight which, darting in at one of the bare windows of the intensely whitewashed room, irradiated Sissy. For, the boys and girls sat on the face of the inclined plane in two compact bodies, divided up the centre by a narrow interval; and Sissy, being at the corner of a row on the sunny side, came in for the beginning of a sunbeam...*

I've highlighted the "natural imagery" with italics, and the "facts about the institution" with bold type. In his inimitable style, in this one descriptive paragraph, Dickens creates a discourse between the voices of "fact" and "nature," giving voice to each in turn throughout the paragraph. The contrast between stark words and descriptive language emphasizes the tension between nature/fancy and institution/fact. No less beautifully crafted is the ironic meaning of the paragraph: as factual as the institution may be, and even as Mr. Gradgrind attempts to quash "fancy" in the children, Dickens demonstrates the influence of nature and fancy on Mr. Gradgrind's selection.

The command to "define a horse" is also interesting in light of this tension. Bitzer defines a horse factually: "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." Bitzer's description of a horse is as colourless as Bitzer is. His objective, factual description of a horse demonstrates the insufficiency of mere fact to express one's interaction with nature; the objective facts cannot capture the effect of nature, the impression left by the presence of a horse. That requires subjectivity, descriptive language; it might even require poetry. Following Bitzer's lifeless definition, the response "Very well...That's a horse," which Bitzer receives from Mr. Gradgrind's fellow champion of fact, leaves the reader with a very definite sense that Bitzer's definition is inadequate.

In contrast, the subjectivity and fancy that is missing from Bitzer's definition of a horse is abundant in Sissy's reasoning. When asked why she would "carpet a room with representations of flowers," Sissy replies, "If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers." In the interchange that follows, Sissy is more reasonable than "the gentleman." "The gentleman" presses Sissy, "And [a fondness for flowers] is why you would put tables and chairs upon [flowered carpets], and have people walking over them with heavy boots?" to which Sissy answers, "It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy—" at which point she is cut off. Mr. Gradgrind and "the gentleman" insist on creating a dichotomy between the natural/fanciful and the institutional/factual which does not actually exist.

As humans, we shape our environments, whether consciously or unconsciously. An overemphasis on facts rather than—or in opposition to—fancy shapes the environment in harmful ways, and not only in Coketown where a bit of fancy would be a breath of fresh air to counteract the daily grind. Gradgrind is dehumanized by his inability to be subjective, to attribute value to anything but facts. In *Hard Times*, Dickens argues that being open to and affected by one's environment is one of the key elements that "defines a human."

Poetry
Joe Moran

Land to be Tilled.

Sunday morning's sun rises
Early as every day;
Hushed bedsprings creak; to barn -
Feed the horses hay;
The pastel of the early sky,
My fingers long awaited
(The snow is turned to falling rain)
The first fresh days of May.
Last week's chores contend my ethic,
The troughs in need of cleaning;
The time is coming to bury seed
And fields yearn for gleaning;
A need to grease the turnwrest plough
Before Ecclesiastes;
The ground is rich with secrecy,
And I will milk its meaning.

Land to be Torn.

Monday's sun is a harsh glint,
Earlier than most;
The commute to work, it's evident
In traffic I'm a ghost;
Americano: black as night,
Helps me see the light;
The cup is empty - the road it shares
As fumes caress the air.
As noon-time lunch, too late, arrives
I join the raging torrent;
Like drones and workers swarming hives,
Day by day; abhorrent;
The final trudge till doors come closed,
To roads through her imposed;
Then celebrate! The day is passed,
Before tomorrow's cast.



Photo credit: Marty Hulsebos, <http://www.beingandseeing.com>

The Yard

Mark Standish

The Yard was inspired by the train yard in Hamilton just off Gage Street. It was written in imitation of John Steinbeck and portrays a man who finds his home to be on the trains and finds his source of comfort and pride in them. It is intended to demonstrate the importance of home in a human context.

Finally, George replied, "Hey, sorry kid, I was just shutting down the trains."

"Oh," the kid sighed as he began to walk away.

"No, no, no, you can stay. I'm not going to kick you off," George breathed. They waited in silence for a couple seconds until George interjected, "Well, I better go finish closing up. The name's George, by the way."

As George was walking back to the roundhouse it dawned on him to bring the kid some blankets. So he turned around and bolted to his old Reliant K. He popped open its massive trunk, (which was vacant except for a couple of blankets that were there because he periodically was forced to sleep in his car) grabbed the blankets, and sprinted back to the kid. When he got back, he stopped to catch his breath and to stop his unreasonably intense panting. Then he walked into the crow's nest to find the kid asleep. So he laid the blankets across the kid, went to walk out the door and then looked back and decided it was best to tuck him in. So he did. As he walked out, he saw 'the kids' as they stared at him with their catlike eyes in dark beneath a car, and he decided to walk quickly away.

The kids' ran into the crow's nest once they were clear of George, and they shoved the sleeping child awake.

"What were you doing with George?" one asked, in his high-pitched accusing tone. As the kid came to, he realized what was going on. He tried to walk out, but they circled around him in front of the door.

"Nothing. I was just sleeping. That's all."

"We saw him walk out. What were you doing?"

"Nothing, nothing, he was just... he just, I'm sure he didn't mean to, he just did it, okay, he just..." and then the kids paused. There was silence, and they left him, and he went back to sleep.

In the morning it came out that the kid, Jimmy, had been touched by George. The yard boys rallied in the roundhouse and ran, enraged, in search for George. George overheard the meeting and escaped into an engine car where he laid down and started to sing. No one had ever heard him sing before.

I've been working on the railroad

All the livelong day

I've been working on the railroad

Just to pass the time away

It was a truly awful sound, but he kept repeating those words he had sung as a child. Louder and louder and louder - his volume increased with every repetition. The yard boys, one by one, stopped and watched in bewilderment until a crowd accumulated.

George lay there beneath his metal roof beside the warm purr of his engine in the midst of the yard returning to life. Smiling, with that beautiful smile, George, in his home, sang.

Then, one of the younger yard boys, burst through the crowd and jumped into the car. George quickly pulled out his gun and bade farewell, smiling.

On “Pike” by Ted Hughes

Jordan Stuive

The name of this poem left me no other choice but to respond. As an avid fisherman – some summer weeks consist solely of working, fishing, and sleeping – I felt immediately at home with this poem. I love it because to me the pike is to the river what the lion is to the plains. The constant reference to the grin of a pike makes me chuckle because it is so true. I have never landed a pike, but I’ve witnessed the battle and participated in the netting of some very large fish. My hand was bandaged for a good part of the summer because I mistook the grin for something friendly, and not maniacal. When I look at a pike I see a well-oiled killing machine, and this is something that Hughes deftly picks up on.

This leads me to my first thought – that a pike is so well-versed at killing that I can’t imagine it being created any other way. The pike is like a flesh-seeking torpedo with razor wire for teeth. This thought extends from the pike to other ‘killing’ creatures. I can’t imagine spiders without them capturing flies, hawks without mice, or lions without antelope. It seems that these creatures have been designed to do what they do, and what they do is kill. Often my view of Eden, which domesticates these animals, has no room for their created wild nature.

Secondly, I can’t help but realize that I look at pike as a sort of ‘legendary’ creature. I think that this comes first from books I read as a young boy (the *Redwall* series by Brian Jacques, where the pike was neither good nor bad, but unspeaking and dangerous) and second from my unfulfilled desire to catch and wrestle with one. In this way, the final four ‘stanzas’ of Hughes’ poem resonate within me. Paddling back to the shore in my canoe as the sun is setting, I often let a flashy lure spin behind me. I do this so as to catch a pike, even though the thought of catching, fighting, and landing a pike alone in the dark is the last thing I want.

Hughes’ poem immediately reminds me of the respect, fear, and desire I have for this fish.



Pike, from cornwallfishbook.com