

English 399W
Representing the Environment:
Literature and Ecocriticism
Fall 2007/Spring 2008 English Honors Seminar
Section 1T3A, Tues. 1:40-4:30 PH 102 Code # 3196
Section E6W3A, Wed. 6:30-9:20 RA 201 Code #1556

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Office Hours: T. 12:30-1:20;
W. 5:30-6:20 or by appt.



“Clearing Winter Storm” by Ansel Adams



“Undergrowth” by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison

For the last five decades, a growing group of environmental scientists and activists have been predicting the end of life as we know it, thanks to environmental crisis; still others have been saying, oops, we’ve gone too far, but it’s not *that* bad, we can change; and still others have been saying that environmental pessimism like that is for chicken-littles, and that the truth is we’re living (not just despite, but *because of* all our supposedly nature-destroying ways) better than ever before.

The questions, however, have gotten pretty intimate these days. Did you know, for example, that a recent, and serious, legislative proposal would have allowed and encouraged industry to recycle used, still-radioactive metal from the nuclear industry into our metal stream—potentially putting it (as alarmists said) into our forks, knives, and spoons, our clothing zippers, the rods in the walls of our apartments, our bicycle seats and our mattress springs? And did you know that the proposal had a certain plausibility because we have been accumulating not just spent nuclear fuel, but also decommissioned equipment for using, processing, and handling it, without having any truly safe way of disposing of it? Well, perhaps you didn’t want to know that people had thought of such things—and even had real reasons for weighing them.

The reason for all this is that environmental issues have become, in our now clearly finite world (a world of finite resources and finite sinks to flush wastes down) more and more a source of complex controversy and concern. As this has happened, writers, artists, cultural theorists, literary historians, and philosophers have also been exploring how environmental questions go straight to the heart of our culture as well as society. What place(s) does nature have—and has it had in the

past—in our culture? How has modern Western culture conceived of nature from the Renaissance to the present; what have the dominant trends been, and what alternative traditions have persisted/been invented along with them? To what extent do the “natures” so conceived still exist today, given the massive recent changes brought on by post-World War II and then postmodern economic development, population growth, urbanization, paradigm-breaking technological change, and equally paradigm-breaking intellectual and cultural change? Is there anything left—and *should* there be anything left—of Romanticism’s legacy of nature as central to human creativity, beauty, social transformation, and psycho-spiritual fulfillment? Should that legacy be continued when nature is increasingly endangered and nature experience possibly outmoded? Or does postmodern society in fact dwell, these days, not in nature, but in technologically- and culturally-altered environments—in a “second nature”—and do we not in fact need to demystify and jettison the old romantic notions in order to live fully consciously in our present condition? Or are these enthusiasms for the postmodern and these dismissals of Romanticism’s nature only yet another sign of our society’s hubris, as it heads deeper than ever into environmental disregard and therefore towards its own destruction?

Thanks to three decades of revolution in literary study, the ways we as readers consume and interpret literary texts have changed dramatically. New intellectual and ethical perspectives on literature and culture have flourished, provided, for example, by feminism, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, structuralism, postructuralism, and postmodernism. Now ecocriticism joins this list as its newest member. As more and more urgent, hot-button environmental questions are perceived to be tucked away everywhere in society, they have emerged in culture, literature and literary study as well.

We will, as you might expect, discuss various kinds of writing about nature. But, just as important, we will focus also on texts that have little or nothing (overtly) to do with nature and the natural, exploring what it means to read this literature also through an ecocritical lens. Studying a wide variety of verbal—and also visual—texts from the Renaissance to the present, we will work from the ground up (or the pavement up? or the commercial carpet up? One has to watch one’s metaphors) to an understanding of what ecocriticism involves. We’ll study Shakespeare and science fiction, nature writing and urban literature, idylls and apocalypses, the comedic and the cynical, prose and poetry. We’ll also work with photographic and filmic texts and, on a regular basis, use photography and journaling as tools for investigating our human relationships with our larger, non-human context.

Required Texts:

A large packet of Xeroxes, available at the Queens College Copy Center.

Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge.

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Washington Square Press New Folger’s Edition.

William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, Penguin.

Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Penguin.

Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*, Harper Perennial.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, Penguin.

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, Vintage.

Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*, Warner Books.

(Books are available at the QC bookstore **with the exception** of Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*, which you’ll need to forage for; the required Xeroxed packet is at Queens Copy

Center, 718-886-7635, 65-01 Kissena, just under the Pizza restaurant across from campus. **This packet is a must-have for the class).**

Fall Requirements

Initial written proposal for honors essay	5%
Oral presentation of refined/expanded proposal	5%
Expanded proposal in writing	10%
Annotated bibliography for honors essay	5%
First draft of honors essay	10%
Peer review of honors essay drafts	5%
Blogs	30%
Class participation	30%

Blackboard

On our **Blackboard** site, you will find this syllabus and regular blog assignments, plus internet links and other relevant materials assigned for class discussion.

Blogs

For the duration of the semester, you (and I) will each maintain a blog. Almost every week, I will assign in class a new task for the following week's blog, and I will post that assignment on Blackboard by Thursday noon. Blog assignments must then be done and posted on your blog by 7 pm two days before the class for which they're assigned (i.e. 7 pm Sun. for the Tues. seminar and 7 pm Mon. for the Wed. seminar). Everyone must then look at all the postings by the other students in their section and post two responses (i.e. pick the two you have the most thoughts about and post a short comment on each of them). Then, in class, we will regularly put several blog entries on screen for further discussion—with the people who made the entries leading the discussion.

Most of the blog assignments will involve finding or making texts on particular issues/subjects, then posting what you've found/made and writing and posting a short commentary about it. When I say "texts," I mean the word in its broadest sense: it can include pictures and short video clips as well as written texts. These are ones you can find—by searching the internet, by typing/scanning in material from books and magazines, etc.—or make—by using digital cameras, by writing creatively. Once you have selected and posted your text, I then want you to add a paragraph or two of your reflections on it and on its relevance to the issue/subject assigned.

N.B. When I evaluate your blogs, I will be looking for sincere effort, critical engagement, originality, and creativity, not polish, structure, or mechanics.

Oral Presentation

Every student will give an oral presentation of her/his proposal for her/his honors essay. (The conference presentation in the Spring semester will not be graded).

Attendance and Participation

As in any seminar, attendance and participation are necessary for us to form a productive classroom community, where we learn from each other. More important still, however, is something peculiar to our particular subject: for several reasons, the real work of this course will occur in class. First, the literary texts we will be reading do not, for the most part, reveal any or all of the ways in which they may be (better, need to be) read as eco-texts. Exploring this level of meaning will be the job of class discussion. Second, what readers may find when examining literary texts through an eco-critical lens is still up for grabs. Ecocriticism is notoriously interdisciplinary, something that takes inquiry in a wide variety of intellectual directions. Even more to the point, ecocriticism is still an emergent discipline, with boundaries that are still not drawn. We will use class discussion not just to get some idea of what ecocriticism now entails, but also to see where we might ourselves take it.

Deadlines

Late work: You will complete your major project for the course—the research essay required for you to graduate with honors—in a series of stages. In the first semester, the stages are as follows: development of an initial handwritten proposal (which then will be refined in small writing groups); an oral presentation of the refined and expanded proposal; a fully expanded written proposal; an annotated bibliography in your area of interest; and finally a first draft of the paper itself. In the second semester, a second draft of the paper, and then the finished paper itself will be due.

In the first semester, I will accept *one* of these stages (except the oral presentation) a week late without penalty. After that, your grade for the activity will lose 1/3 of a grade for every 2 days it is late.

I can't cut you any slack, however, about the blogs and posted comments. These must be done on time for them to be useful for class discussion. A late blog will mean loss of credit for that blog.

Essay Guidelines and Academic Integrity

All your formal writing should be typed, double-spaced, in 12 point type, with 1" margins. Please proofread carefully, so that your work will be polished and free of typographical errors. Please give every piece a title and include your name as well as the course name and number. Be sure to include a list of works cited. Use MLA guidelines for citing sources and constructing (if applicable) the works cited list. Content-wise, I want your essays to contain serious and engaging thought, analysis, and reflection, not simply summary or description.

Your work should be your own. But your ideas should also engage the ideas of other thinkers and writers. Communication gives ideas meaning and creates a community of thinkers. This is where citation and plagiarism can become tricky. Plagiarism is, of course, a serious issue. It is important that you establish your own point of view, make it clear what ideas are yours and which come from your sources, and respond to your sources critically. Be sure also to cite all sources appropriately, using MLA style. Finally, if you're struggling with your ideas, your writing, or your sources, be sure to talk to me. Plagiarism sometimes arises from confusion and sometimes from desperation. I can help you work through problems before they escalate.

FALL SEMESTER CALENDAR

Tuesday 8/28 / Wednesday 8/29: Introduction

Introduction: screening *An Inconvenient Truth*; clips from the films *Dances With Wolves*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Deliverance*, *Soylent Green*; examination of poems by Pope, Byron, Olds, and Soyinka; brief intro to ecocriticism via passages from Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*.

Tuesday 9/4 / Wednesday 9/5: Reading Eco-critically

Assigned readings: Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, pp. 1-7 and 14 (starting at the first full paragraph on the page)-15 and Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. From Xeroxes I will hand out in class, read Clive Ponting, "The Lessons of Easter Island" and Edward Brathwaite, "Caliban."

Tuesday 9/11 / Wed. 9/19: Colonialism and Ideologies of Nature

Assigned readings: review *The Tempest*. From Xeroxes I will hand out in class, read Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, pp. 53-5; Jonathan Bate, "A Voice for Ariel."

Tuesday 9/25 / Wednesday 9/26: Sin, Savagery, and Science, and Ideologies of Nature

Assigned reading/viewing: William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*. From a video store, get and view Ridley Scott, dir., *Alien*

Tuesday 10/2 / Wednesday 10/3: Rationality, Technology, Modernization, and Ideologies of Nature

Assigned reading/viewing: from the Xeroxed packet you have purchased, read Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark" and "Rappacini's Daughter." From a video place, get and view Ridley Scott, dir., *Blade Runner* (either commercial version or director's cut—or both, and figure out the differences). [N.B.: all references to the "Xeroxed packet" hereafter refer to the one you've bought from Queens Copy.]

Tuesday 10/9 / Wednesday 10/10: Literature of Nature, Part 1: the Pastoral Mode, and Ideologies of Nature

Assigned readings: from the Xeroxed packet, read the first chapter of *Gilgamesh*; the selection from *Genesis*; the selection from Ovid; the selection from Virgil; and Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village." Then read Greg Garrard, "Pastoral," in *Ecocriticism* Chapter 3.

Tuesday 10/16 / Wednesday 10/17: Literature of Nature, Part 1 cont'd: the Pastoral Mode, and Ideologies of Nature

Assigned readings: from the Xeroxed package, read John Keats, "To Autumn." Then read Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces*. Then, from the Xeroxed package, read Dara-Renee Hollinsed, "Corner Garden" and (looking ahead to the next class) John Muir, "A Near View of the High Sierra" and "A Wind-Storm in the Forests."

Tuesday 10/23 / Wednesday 10/24: Literature of Nature, Part 2: Wilderness, and Ideologies of Nature

Assigned readings: Garrard, "Wilderness," in *Ecocriticism*, Chapter 4. From the Xeroxed package, read William Wordsworth, excerpt from Book 14 of *The Prelude*; Pam Houston, "A Blizzard Under Blue Sky"; Val Plumwood, "Being Prey"; and Henry David Thoreau, "Walking." Then, read Garrard, "Deep Ecology," *Ecocriticism*, pp. 20-3. And, finally, from the Xeroxed packet, read William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness."

Tuesday 10/30 / Wednesday 10/31: Literature of Nature, Part 3: Dwelling, Farming, and the Georgic Mode, and Ideologies of Nature

Assigned readings: Garrard, "Dwelling," in *Ecocriticism*, Chapter 6, and Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*. From the Xeroxed packet, read Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," and Vandana Shiva, excerpt from *Biopiracy*; and Garrard, "Ecofeminism," in *Ecocriticism*, 23-7.

Tuesday 11/6 / Wednesday 11/7: Literature of Unnature: Environmental Apocalypse, and Ideologies of the End of Nature

Assigned readings: from the Xeroxed packet, read Rachel Carson, "A Fable for Tomorrow," "The Obligation to Endure," "Elixirs of Death," and "Beyond the Dreams of the Borgias"; J.G. Ballard, "Billennium"; and Bill McKibben, excerpts from *The Death of Nature*. Then read Garrard, "Apocalypse," in *Ecocriticism*, Chapter 5.

Tuesday 11/13 / Wednesday 11/14: Literature of Postnature: Post-Apocalypse, and Ideologies of Nature-Culture, Part 1

Assigned readings: Don DeLillo, *White Noise* and Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, pp. 8-14 (on the rhetoric of pollution). From the Xeroxed packet, then read Frederick Buell, "Crisis History."

Tuesday 11/27 / Wednesday 11/28: The Environment Comes to the City, Hybridity, and Ideologies of Nature-Culture, Part 2

Assigned readings: from the Xeroxed packet, read T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; Virginia Woolf, excerpt from *Mrs. Dalloway*; Langston Hughes, "Afro-American Fragment," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "The Weary Blues," "Aunt Sue's Stories," "Danse Africaine," "Strange Hurt," "One," "Midnight Dancer," "Trumpet Player," "Morning After," "Fired," "S-sss-ss-sh!," and "Bad Morning"; Anne Matthews, selections from *Wild Nights*; Interview with Alan Weisman, "An Earth Without People"; Bill McKibben, from *Hope Human and Wild*; and Paul Hawken and Amory and L. Hunter Lovins, excerpt from *Natural Capitalism*.

Tuesday 12/4 / Wednesday 12/5: Environment, Multiculturalism, and Ideologies of Nature-Culture, Part 3

Assigned readings: from the xeroxed packet, read Hisaye Yamamoto, "Life in the Oil Fields"; Giovanna Di Chiro, "Nature as Community"; Mike Gold, excerpts from *Jews Without Money*; Andrew Furman, "No Trees Please, We're Jewish"; Pietro DiDonato, excerpts from *Christ in Concrete*; Jhumpa Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's"; Paule Marshall, excerpts from *Praisesong for the Widow*; and Michael Bennett, "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery."

Tuesday 12/11 / Wednesday 12/12: Imagining the Future, and Ideologies of Nature-Culture, Part 3

Assigned readings: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* and Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*.