

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY
Department of English

Course Title: Environmental Literature

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Forward: This course has been something I have been “stewing” for some time. But it was not until I participated in the Office of Sustainability summer syllabus workshop (The Magnolias Project) that I decided to finally put this all into writing. I am now excited to get this proposal into circulation.

The following adheres to English Department guidelines for a new course proposal. At the same time, it incorporates some important ideas I have taken from my summer workshop participation. I offer two different versions of how this class might look (texts, approaches). I think it is an important course to have in our Wake Forest curriculum and for that reason I’ve tried to construct it broadly enough so that someone else other than me could teach it, and could foreground their own specialties and interests.

Methodology

Ecocriticism examines the dynamic connections between literature and living forms in an epoch of acute environmental crisis. It poses questions about how individuals develop relations to place, and it more broadly assesses the relationship of humans to the natural world. Ecocriticism asks about the correspondences between culture (how meanings, ideas, and beliefs are shaped) and the study of the environment. Because literature can transform and enrich nearly any discourse, it presents readers with unique opportunities to understand environment in a number of meaningful ways. Literature teaches us about the human capacity to envision. It gives purchase to places oftentimes unexplored in other media, and it yields insight into different strategies of living. Studying literature can be an occasion for examining environments as compositions and for developing new approaches to sites of meaning.

Course description

Course participants will examine the relationship between environmental experience and literary representation. Through literary and critical readings, discussion, and writing, we will assess the ways environment is a composition of interconnected systems. Course readings highlight the different ways individuals and communities shape their worlds. Class participants will be exposed to current scholarship on ecological theory (anthropocentrism, biocentrism, ecofeminism, place-based phenomenology, and posthumanist criticism.) Students will have opportunities to build on theoretical frameworks already in place, and will be encouraged to develop hybrid critical lenses in shaping their own approaches to environmental texts. Students in this course should expect to develop a strengthened foundational understanding of issues affecting the environment today.

Rationale for New Course Heading

(Literature and Science) is currently a course heading, and this remains a salient title.

Nonetheless, one reason for proposing a new course is that a good portion of current work in environmental criticism (Laurence Buell, Ursula Heise, Greg Garrard, Scott Slovic, Timothy Sweet, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, etc.) interrogates questions about race, colonization, and anthropocentrism---concepts that do not fold back too easily into a study of science. I have previously taught a class, “Literature and Ecology” as (English 302: Literature and Ideas), and

especially started to see the ways literature's engagement with environmental ethics and place-values are oftentimes separate things from an application of scientific principles or topics.

Another thought, too, is that beginning in the early 1990s, second-wave, revisionist environmental criticism—or simply, ecocriticism—was developed by academics in English Departments to reference the environmentally-oriented study of literature and the “hybrid” genres of narrative scholarship attending this work. There is no real reason why the study of ecology cannot be at the center of humanities projects. Ecology has long been codified as a singular branch of science or a biology subfield. But questions about internal structures, epistemologies, habitats/interactions of living systems, values etc. are things we in English can claim on various levels. I've since had a chance to look at different university course offerings in both research-based and strong liberal arts programs, and environmental literature appears to be offered regularly as a course of study. Based on my discussions and course findings, it seems to reflect student concerns as well. Additionally, the [Association for the Study of Literature and Environment](#) (ASLE) keeps an up to date syllabus exchange database that is viewable to non-members. This is an excellent resource for pedagogical ideas and related course materials.

Single Line Descriptors (Open to all ideas here)

- “Selected topics addressing the relationship between literature and the environment”
- “Studies of the relationship between environmental experience and literary representation”

Schematic flexibility

Literary texts for Environmental Literature could vary considerably. It could be taught as an Early Modern course, an American poetry class, etc. With the view of keeping an open center (generally) in mind, this particular point from Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) seems relevant here:

“Once I thought it helpful to try to specify a subspecies of “environmental text,” the first stipulation of which was that the nonhuman environment must be envisaged not merely as a framing device but as an active presence, suggesting human history’s implication in natural history. Now, it seems to me more productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text—to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces, and at several stages: in the composition, the embodiment, and the reception.” (Buell 1995; 2001; 2005)

Obviously certain novels and poems might promote richer aesthetic resonances with environmental topics than others. Certain texts also occasion more pointed examinations of epistemological value, prime movers, deep ecology, environmental correspondence than others. A number of traditional prose essays about nature in American literature (i.e. Crèvecoeur, Thoreau, Leopold) remain deeply important to scholars of second-wave environmental criticism because they still can be read and taught in ways that are imaginatively suggestive and boldly experimental. But there is not a fixed canon of ecocritical texts. It would depend on the particular interests of the instructor. For the sample syllabus (pp.3-4), I’ve drawn primarily on comparative literature of the Caribbean, something reflective of my own teaching interests.

But it could work very well, I think, as a more discrete period/genre-based class. Below would be a reading list for Environmental Literature with a different set of core texts:

Example: <u>Environmental Literature (with Core Regionalist American Writing Texts)</u>
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George Washington Cable, <i>Old Creole Days</i>
Mary Murfree, <i>In the Tennessee Mountains</i>
Charles Chesnutt, <i>The Conjure Woman and Other Tales</i>
Zitkala Sa, <i>American Indian Stories</i> .
Alice Dunbar-Nelson, <i>The Goodness of St. Roque</i>
Kate Chopin, <i>A Night in Acadie</i>
Sarah Orne Jewett, <i>The Country of Pointed Firs & A White Heron</i>
Willa Cather, <i>O! Pioneers</i>
Electronic reserves from <i>Harper's Monthly</i> , <i>Scribner's Monthly</i> , and <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> .
Critical selections by: Elizabeth Ammons, Richard Brodhead's June Howard, Amy Kaplan Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, Sandra Zagarell
Supplemental criticism: Lawrence Buell, <i>The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture</i> ; Greg Garrard, <i>Ecocriticism (The New Critical Idiom)</i>
Scope and organization: Readings would reflect the genre's engagement with place, built environments, and changing landscapes. The texts could be read with attention to the modes of marketing local knowledges in late nineteenth-century print culture. It could speak to the interests of writers in preserving places through storytelling, as well as literature's engagement with vernacular knowledges and regional epistemes. Such readings could produce questions about what is organic to a community and what are centers of "felt value" (Yi-Fu Tuan).

Below would be a different version of the class, highlighting the study of race, colonialism, and environmental justice:

**Sample Course Schedule for Environmental Literature
Core Texts: Caribbean/ Literature of the Americas
Madera**

"The belief that thinking beings are part of a vast physical order can awaken a kind of awe, wonder, even natural piety. The reflection which moves us is that thought, feeling, moral aspirations, all the intellectual and spiritual heights of human achievement, emerge out of the depths of a vast physical universe which is itself, over most of its measureless extent, lifeless, utterly insensitive to our purposes, pursuing its path by inexorable necessity. The awe is awakened partly by the tremendous power of this world which overshadows us. We sense our utter fragility as thinking reeds, in Pascal's phrase; but we also feel it before the extraordinary fact that out of this vast blind silence, thought, vision, speech can evolve." (Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989, p. 347)

TEXTS TO BE INCLUDED:

Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*
Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*

Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*
Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*
Barry Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America*
Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*
Earl Lovelace, *Salt*
Derek Walcott, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*
Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy* [DE]
Andrew Light and Rolston Holmes, *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology* [EE]
Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* [ER]

Course requirements: Weekly reading assignments, short response papers, class participation (including student presentations), a midterm essay, final, final paper, and term project.

[Weeks 1-3]

Thematic overview: Writing place, rethinking growth; literature and living deliberately paradigms for progress; Indigenous landscapes; lost epistemologies; wilderness and the American imagination; the search for sustainable value; on developing a “land consciousness”

Texts: Barry Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America*; Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*

Criticism: David Kazanjian on “Colonial” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*; William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” [ER]; David Mazel, “American Literary Environmentalism as Domestic Orientalism” [ER]; “Why an Environmental Ethic?” [EE]

[Weeks 4-5]

Thematic overview: Gendering justice; periphery and center; race in the Caribbean, syncretism and local knowledge; writing between two cultures, *conte* and *creolite*

Texts: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*; Derek Walcott, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*

Criticism: Gaard and Gruen “Ecofeminism” [EE]; Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy [ER]

[Weeks 6-7]

Thematic overview: Race and place; Haiti and The Dominican Republic; biology and literature; the politics of water; “externalities” of war; horizon and non-representational geographies

Text: Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*

Criticism: Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence” [ER]; Norton & Hannon, “Democracy and Sense of Place Values” [EE]; Nickel and Viola, “Integrating Environmentalism and Human Rights” [EE]

[Weeks 8-9]

Thematic overview: Pressures of tradition; intentional communities; subsistence agriculture and developing new efficiency models; Botswana; eco-literacy; Head’s idea of spiritual worlds overlapping in physical spaces; rural and urban poor

Text: Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Criticism: Ursula Heise, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism,” [PMLA March 2006; handout]; Cobb, “Toward a Just and Sustainable Ecological Order” [EE]

[Weeks 10-11]

Thematic overview: Slavery and brutal land intimacy; challenges of anthropocentrism; the lives of animals, shaping an ethics in relation to non-humans; Peter Singer; Paul W. Taylor; Gary Varner; healing and community

Text: Earl Lovelace, *Salt*

Criticism: Leopold, "The Land Ethic" [EE]; Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement" [EE]; "The Wealth of Communities" [DE 140-176]

[Weeks 11-finish]

Postcolonial subjectivity; deep ecology as philosophy and the writings of Arne Naess and Warwick Fox; Caribbean ventures; Graham Huggen on greening postcolonialism; tourism and literature

Text: Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

Criticism: Katz, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature" [EE]; "After Growth" (DE 30-45); "All for One, or One for All" (DE 95-128)

Course Goals

I think classes that have the greatest potential to broaden students' intellect and fields of inquiry are those that challenge them to make connections between broader world issues and the more specific points of application that have meaning in their own lives. The goals I include extend from this idea.

-Students in this course will develop a strengthened foundational understanding of a number of key issues affecting the environment today. They will have an opportunity to develop what philosopher Andrew Brennan has termed, "an eco-literacy" for approaching matters of environmental concern.

-Students will be exposed to contemporary global literature and contemporary critical apparatuses for thinking about literature.

-Course readings are intended to challenge seminar participants to become more conscious and conscientious about the ways individual and collectives shape value. Readings will ask students to think critically and analytically about the ways individuals shape environments—even as such environments frequently appear to shape us. Students will gain a broadened knowledge base about the ways different individuals and communities live.

-Course literature will be enhanced by a close examination of new ecological theory (including selections from the course text: *Environmental Ethics*), addressing such issues as anthropocentrism and the cultivation of responsibility to non-humans and future life forms.

-Students will have the opportunity to apply their creative and analytical insights from course readings and discussion to an actual opportunities for creating change beyond the parameters of the classroom. (See term project.)

Classroom Praxis: This seminar is discussion-driven. It will encourage thoughtful self-expression, student debate, and the pursuit of a self-directed term project as a way to undergird the literature and critical methods examined in the course. The novels in this class explore ecological issues such as environmental renewal, animal welfare, green business growth, and different implications of value in individual pursuits. Short readings by such authors as Vandana Shiva, Bill McKibben, Peter Singer, Gary Varner, and Karen Warren challenge students to pose questions of wide value like resource preservation and a spectrum of sustainable benefits.

Term project: Students will be asked to apply their insights from their readings to think creatively and analytically about solving a current environmental problem or participating in a sustainable venture. They will have the opportunity to pursue a concern on campus, and have been invited to bring ideas to a number of start-up and ongoing sustainability projects on campus. This work will constitute the class term project. Students will be asked to consult with the Office of Sustainability at Wake Forest, a valuable resource for identifying and creating sustainable value.

Final paper: Students are asked to reflect critically on the experience they pursued for their term project. The essay will require students to skillfully integrate three texts we have read this semester in class in their final paper and assess the problem they examined and their experiences in building sustainable value. This is an effort to move from exploration and critical methodologies to application. (One of these texts must be a post-midterm novel and one must be a critical piece from the *Environmental Ethics* text.)