Nature Writing and Environmental Literature

Literary studies currently finds itself in the midst of a “spatial turn” and scholars are increasingly interested in the environmental aspects of literary expression. This course will introduce students to ecocriticism's core concepts, as well as the various forms taken by its commitment to environmental and political activism. Students will consider the differences between terms like “ecocriticism,” “literary ecology,” and “environmental literature” and “nature writing” and will reflect on how these terms signal different critical commitments within ecocriticism. Students will also consider the role of nature in literature and the ethical implications of literary representations of nature. We will also spend time exploring the limits of ecocritical approaches, as well as speculating on what the future of environmental approaches to literature holds. Our primary emphasis will be on concepts of “nature” and rural landscape, but we'll spend substantial time considering the role of urban and suburban environments, as well.

Required Texts:
Willa Cather, My Antonia
Mike Gold, Jews Without Money
Helena Maria Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus

Course Reader

Assignments:

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<td>Final paper</td>
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<td>Midterm Paper</td>
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<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
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Final Paper: You will write a 10-12 page researched paper on a topic you develop in consultation with me. Drawing heavily on the sources you have identified in your annotated bibliography, your final paper should demonstrate your ability to synthesize the claims of multiple environmental critics, apply those claims to works of literature, and to develop an original thesis about the representation of space in a particular literary text.

Midterm Paper: You will write a 6-8 page midterm paper that mobilizes a critical and theoretically complex understanding of “environment,” “nature,” or other similar concept in relation to a fictional text. You should demonstrate your ability to apply critical and theoretical concepts to your reading of a fictional text, as well as your ability to locate and interpret textual details in the fictional text itself.

Annotated Bibliography: You will compile and comment on a list of 10-15 sources that all engage with a particular issue, theme, or problem you wish to address in your final paper. The bibliography should contain 3-5 references from the required reading of the course, 3-5 references from the optional readings list distributed with the syllabus, and 3-5 sources you locate on your own using library databases to find relevant articles and books. The annotated bibliography should help you articulate and research the primary thesis you plan to pursue in your final paper.
Place Description: In order to develop a sensitivity to noticing spatial detail, early in the semester you will write a 2-3 page description of a local site. The site may be on- or off-campus, naturally or architecturally produced. You should spend several hours sitting in your site, observing its natural rhythms, the social dynamics of people moving through the site, and the spatial features that seem to produce certain feelings or behaviors in people and/or animals in the site.

Participation: You should be present in class regularly, and should actively participate in class discussions (this means you should participate every day to secure full credit). Keep in mind that much of the learning in literature classes happens through the collective discussion and exploration of texts, and that missed class time simply cannot be recreated or reconstructed.

READING SCHEDULE:

Unit 1: What is Ecocriticism?
Week 1: Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”
Ralph Waldo Emerson, selections from “Nature”
Lawrence Buell, “Introduction” from The Environmental Imagination

Week 2: Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” from The Ecocriticism Reader
Frederick Turner, “Cultivating the American Garden” in The Ecocriticism Reader

Week 3: Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence” from The Ecocriticism Reader
William Howarth, “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” from The Ecocriticism Reader
Place Description Paper due

Unit 2: Case Study in Environmental Approaches: My Antonia
Week 4: Willa Cather, My Antonia

Week 5: Stephen Trout, “Seeing the Rattlesnake in Willa Cather's My Antonia” in ISLE
Ann Fisher-Wirth, “Clean as a Cow that Calves: My Antonia, Plainsong, and the Semiotics of Birth” in ISLE
Patrick Dooley, “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in O Pioneers!, My Antonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop” in Cather Studies

Week 6: Cheryll Glotfelty, “A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism with Excursions to Catherland” in Cather Studies
Jan Goggans, “Social (Re)Visioning in the Fields of My Antonia” in Cather Studies
Joseph Urgo, “My Antonia and the National Parks Movement” in Cather Studies

Unit 3: Landscape Studies
Week 7: Helena Maria Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus
Midterm paper due
Week 8: Denis Cosgrove, “Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea” in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*
Don Mitchell, “Introduction” in *The Lie of the Land*

Week 9: W.J.T. Mitchell, “Introduction” in *Landscape and Power*
Annette Kolodny, selections from *The Lay of the Land*

“The oil was made from their bones”: Environmental (In)Justice in Helena Maria Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*

**Unit 4: Spatial Studies and the Expansion of Ecocriticism**

Week 11: Mike Gold, *Jews Without Money*

Week 12: Michael Bennett and David W. Teague, “Introduction” from *The Nature of Cities*
Lawrence Buell, “Conclusion” from *The Future of Environmental Criticism*

*Annotated Bibliography due*

Week 13: Mike Davis, selections from *Planet of Slums*
Dolores Hayden, selections from *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*

Week 14: *No class: individual conferences about annotated bibliography and final paper thesis*

Week 15: Alexander Wilson, "Technological Utopias: World's Fairs and Theme Parks" in *The Culture of Nature*
Susan Willis, "Disney World: Public Use, Private State" in *South Atlantic Quarterly*

*Final paper due one week after final class session.*