

LIT 180: American Nature Writing and Literature of the Environment

UC Merced, Spring 2011

M/W 9-10:15 a.m.

KOL 297

Instructor: Dr. Ray Winter

Office: AOB 127

Office Hours: M: 10:15-12:15 or by appointment

Email: rwinter@ucmerced.edu

Course

It can be argued that all literature is in some way an environmental reflection of or commentary on the environment, since all stories occur and are written in a finite time, place and culture. Reading American literature with such an environmental lens offers insights into where we locate ourselves in nature and, more significantly, where we locate nature and its values in our very anthropocentric worldview. The success of the American experiment has always depended on some form of environmental provision. For much of our history, however, the prominent imaginative and literal assignment of the landscape has been one of adversary rather than benevolent giver. Likewise, a utilitarian and abusive pattern of exploitation has dominated our actions toward every region and in every era, rather than models of stewardship and sustainability as demonstrated by Native Americans. At times subtle or even sub-conscious, this domineering perspective toward the natural world is an ever-present message in the lineage of American letters.

However, a pervasive American quality equal to this unmitigated spirit of Manifest Destiny is that of protest, and ultimately activism. From the colonial era to today, there have been American voices seeking to educate, inspire, and persuade the American imagination to engage the natural world in a different, more responsible manner. In so doing, these select artists have done much to preserve not only the natural wonders and bounties of the country, but also the ideas that our landscapes shape us as much as we shape them, that there is *spiritual* as well as monetary value in creation, that the influences of civilization are not always the best ones for a better world, and that each generation is entrusted with shaping the world its descendants will inherit. These counter-cultural voices are the core of our reading; we will pay special attention to their intentions, techniques, theories, and reception. While each work will be framed in its specific historical and cultural context, we will also seek to identify its lineage and relevance to today's culture.

Objectives and Outcomes

This course will teach you to:

- Understand the relationship between the production of literatures—including essays, poetry, novels and speeches—and the culture that produced them;
- Specifically, understand how contemporary attitudes toward the United States' role in developing, preserving, exploiting and rescuing the land on which it lives, and beyond, is articulated within literature;
- And vice versa-- how the literatures produced in this country have affected and influenced peoples' attitudes toward it.

This will lead you to be able to:

- Interpret texts with due sensitivity to both the literary and cultural response to U.S. land and landscapes.
- Appreciate the aesthetic qualities of texts as well as the environmental contexts and cultural beliefs that form them.

- Judge the value(s) of texts and contexts;
- Apply the interpretive strategies developed in literary study to environmental literatures.
- Articulate, cogently and with sensitivity to context, in both speech and writing, your interpretations and evaluations.

Requirements

The course will ask you to willingly and actively engage in two forms of scholarship-- written and oral. Orally, you must engage in class dialogue with developed and informed ideas, demonstrating your comprehension and critical processing of the assigned reading. Text-specific and insightful questions about the text or subject likewise demonstrate your full engagement with the assignment. Additionally, you will make two class presentations-- one related to a personal engagement with nature and your literary processing of that in writing, and another presentation describing the findings in your expository essay. These presentations are to be done individually, and must be 3-5 minutes in length.

Your written work will consist of one 4+ page expository essay on a pre-approved environmental topic of your choice, likely dealing with an event, person, theory, or law directly related to environmentalism. Also, you must write at least a 500 word essay based on your personal interaction with nature which intends to educate, inspire, or persuade. There is almost unlimited stylistic freedom for this writing exercise, and word counts can be adjusted for poetic submissions. Finally, a literary analysis essay of 8-12 pages represents your most substantial writing assessment. For this assignment you are to engage in critical analysis of at least two of the major readings in the course, ideally weaving the analysis and professional data together in a textual “dialogue” as you seek to answer/validate your clearly articulated question/thesis. You will be expected to follow MLA guidelines flawlessly.

There is also a mid-term and final that are short-answer based tests.

Attendance

The success of a seminar as a meaningful learning experience heavily depends on good attendance. Because of that, I will take role at each class and weigh your presence appropriately in the overall course grade. While I acknowledge the necessity of occasional appointments, conflicts, or illness, I also understand that attendance is almost always a choice, and will therefore penalize students who choose not to attend and therefore influence the experience of all others.

Required Texts

Henry Thoreau, *Walden*

Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*

American Environmental History (Blackwell Readers in American Social and Cultural History), ed.,
Louis Warren

Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain*

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Percival Everett, *God's Country*

Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*

John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Special Needs:

If you have any special needs, please speak to me and to Student Services as soon as possible so that we can outline the best ways to promote your success in this course.

Writing Tutors:

Students who would like help with their writing are encouraged to visit the Student Advising and Learning Center (SALC) in Kolligian 172. Please check their website (learning.ucmerced.edu) for details on tutoring and other academic assistance.

Laptops/Phones:

Laptop use in class has become quite controversial among many professors. I simply ask that it only be used for work directly related to what is happening in class. In fact, so many of our readings are online that I expect all of you with laptops to bring and use them. However, it is very disrespectful and distracting to the class and to me when students do not act accordingly. [Tone—playful but serious:] A prolonged blinkless gaze, goofy snickers, or rabid flurries of chat-typing while staring at the screen say to me, “This class is a waste of time. What you’ve prepared for me today is meaningless to me, and rather than simply not attend and save myself the pain of it all, I’ve decided to come to class and openly express my disrespect for you.” When this happens, it makes me feel sad. Please don’t do this. As for texting and phone calls, that is obviously not an option.

Course Grading:

Your semester grade will be determined using the following formula:

- Participation and attendance: 10%
- Expository essay: 15%
- Nature writing exercise: 15%
- Midterm: 15%
- Two presentations: 10%
- Analytical essay: 20%
- Final: 15%

Plagiarism Policy:

As a simple guideline, if you submit your own work, you will avoid all serious types of plagiarism. Nevertheless, a responsible student should also consider the less obvious variants of plagiarism, especially when writing research papers that require citations. Consider these examples:

- ✓ *Submitting work that is done in part by someone else.*
Is seeking help from a friend plagiarism? What about incorporating the advice of a teacher or peer tutor?
- ✓ *Paraphrasing or summarizing a written source, including text from the Internet, without footnoting or otherwise referencing the source.*
When does another person’s idea supplant your own? Who “owns” an idea?
- ✓ *Copying a written source, including text from the Internet, without using quotation marks or block indentation.*

Reading Assignments

Wed., January 19th:

Big Picture, Big Questions

Genesis 1-4; Thomas Lyon, “A Taxonomy of Nature Writing”; Yokut tale, “The Man and the Owls”

Monday, January 24th:

American, Nature, and Writing

Blackwell ch. 1 article; Glotfelty (crops); Nash intro(crops)

Wednesday, January 26th:

Kolodny (crops); Merchant (crops); Crevecoeur (Gutenberg, Letters II, X, and XII); Freneau (crops); Native American proverbs (www.sapphyr.net/natam/quotes-nativeamerican.htm)

Monday, January 31st:

Self-Consciously Shaped/ing Landscape

Blackwell 118; Cooper’s *Pioneers* chs. 19-24(Gutenberg); Nash prologue (crops); Snyder, “Unnatural Writing”, (crops); Pope (crops)

Wednesday, Feb. 2nd:

Poe, “Fall of the House of Usher” (Gutenberg); Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” “Young Goodman Brown” (Gutenberg)

Monday, February 7th:

The Romantic and Transcendentalist Era

Thoreau, *Walden*

Wednesday, February 9th:

Emerson, “Nature” chs. 1-8 (Gutenberg); Whitman and Burroughs (crops); Nash, ch. 1 (c)

Monday, February 14th:

Regionalism, Naturalism, and the Western Landscape

Twain, from *Roughing It*, Part III, chs. 12 and 13 (Gutenberg); London’s *The Call of the Wild*, chs. 3-5 (G)

Wednesday, February 16th:

Clarence King, from *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (c); and Muir, from *The Mountains of CA* (c)

Monday, February 21st: no class—President’s Day

Wednesday, February 23rd:

The Preservationist Battle Begins

F.J. Turner *Frontier Thesis* (online); Blackwell: ch. 6 and 8, pg. 199+ (Pinchot)

Monday, February 28th:

An Environmental Champion

Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

*Proposed expository topics due

Wednesday, March 2nd:

Stegner, “Wilderness Letter” (online); Nash, chs. 2 and 8 (c); Blackwell, Introduction

Monday, March 7th:

Water Wars and Hierarchies of Landscape

Austin, *Land of Little Rain*

*Mid-term test in class

Wednesday, March 9th:

Ed Abbey, from *Desert Solitaire* (c); Reisner, from *Cadillac Desert* (c); Blackwell 157+; Snyder, “Coming Into the Watershed” (c)

Monday, March 14th:

The Wild West

Everett, *God’s Country*

*Expository paper due

Wednesday, March 23rd:

Stegner, essays (c); Blackwell: Bryant 121; Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest* excerpt (c)

Monday and Wednesday, March 21st and 23rd: no class—Spring Break

Glimpsing Nuclear Apocalypse

McCarthy’s *The Road*

Monday, March 28th:

Regional Awareness and an Ethic of Ecology

Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, first half; Muir, “Bee Pastures” in *The Mountains of CA* (sierraclub.org)

Wednesday, March 30th:

Sand County Almanac, second half; 1939 literary case study: Steinbeck, McWilliams, Lange (c)

Monday, April 4th:

Environmental Protest

Carson, *Silent Spring*

Wednesday, April 6th:

Blackwell: chs. 9 and 10, 318-23; Masumoto, from *Epitaph for a Peach* (c); Snyder, “Bioregional Perspectives” (c)

Monday, April 11th:

Race and Gender in Nature

Silko, *Ceremony*

*Proposed thesis for literary essay due

Wednesday, April 13th:

Terry Tempest Williams, from *Refuge* (c); Norwood essay (c); Griffin (c)

Monday, April 18th:

The Spirit of Nature

*Individualized Field Trip—no class

Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, first half; Snyder, “Smokey the Bear Sutra” (online); Jeffers (c)

Wednesday, April 20th:

John Muir Day and Earth Day—this week

Pilgrim at Tinker creek, second half; Buell excerpts (c)

Round Table—read/share your field essays; field essays due

Monday, April 25th:

Nature in the Domestic Sphere

Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, first half; Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (c)

Wednesday, April 27th:

Housekeeping, second half; *Food, Inc.*; *No Impact Man*

Monday, May 2nd:

An Engaged Response to Crisis

Abbey, *Monkey Wrench Gang*

*Literary essay due

Wednesday, May 4th:

Merchant, from *Reinventing Eden* (c); Love, “Revaluing Nature” (c); Snyder, “The Rediscovery of Turtle Island” (c)

FINAL:

TBD