

**English 209:
Literature About the Environment
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11am to 12:15pm
Oddfellows #105B**

Professor: Matthew Ferrence
Office: Oddfellows 218
Office Hours: M,W 10am-11am; T, Th 1pm-3pm; by appointment
Office Phone: x4339
email: mferrence@allegheny.edu

Required Texts

1. McKibben, Bill, ed. *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*. Library of America, 2008.
2. Glotfelty, Cheryll, ed. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. U Georgia Press, 1996.
3. Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*. 1968. Ballantine, 1990.
4. Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. 1974. Harper, 2007.
5. Gessner, David. *Sick of Nature*. Dartmouth, 2005.
6. House, Silas. *Clay's Quilt*. Ballantine, 2002.
7. Krakauer, John. *Into the Wild*. 1996. Anchor, 2007.
8. Ray, Janisse. *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. Milkweed Editions, 2000.

Philosophy

A friend of mine once lamented a general sadness he felt when living in France. Eventually, he came to understand that his malaise resulted from infrequent glimpses of wildlife. This is perhaps an odd place to begin a course description more-or-less exclusive to American environmental writing, but the feeling expressed by this friend is central to the working concept of this class. There's something about America that defines itself through a relationship with wild things. As an American living abroad, this man felt the pang of vacant wildness, which reflected his own vacancy from native lands. Without wilderness, space, and community with nature – expressed overtly or implicitly – an American perhaps feels, well, not at home.

Over these next several months, we will read a wide variety of texts in an effort to better understand the intricacies of nature writing. We will consider early works that have established a literary ethos that has proven hard to shake even if, as with many origin stories, it has often been misappropriated into the collective unconscious. We will consider the current state of “eco-criticism,” a scholarly endeavor to understand literary history through the lens of human relationships with nature. And we will consider the contemporary pulse of environmental writing, where individual authors seek to forge new ground within the genre.

Meanwhile, I intend for this class to dangle in the space between critical and creative scholarship. Perhaps I take this impulse from Thomas Jefferson, himself central to American concepts of the land: the grandeur of environmental writing depends on both knowledge and an ethereal sense of awe. Thinking of it another way, environmental writing isn't about information alone. Instead, it is a rhetorical act that positions human beings in relationship to

nature via metaphor, imagery, symbolism, and general literary technique. After all, this class is about *literature* and the environment, and not just the facts of the water cycle.

Assignments and Grading

Critical Essay — 25%

To more fully engage the resonance of environmental literature, each of you will prepare a research paper that presents a detailed and careful meditation on a particularly interesting text, idea, or author from this term. “Meditation” is a purposefully chosen word in this description. Since you are entering into the study of literature, and since this course is an introduction and overview of a particular genre of American literature, it would be unfair of me to ask for THE interpretation of any text or idea. Heck, scholars who spend their lives on these issues rarely agree on THE interpretation. Instead, I’m asking you to think carefully, read carefully, and offer a thoughtful engagement with your chosen topic. But understand that your thesis certainly may be provisional or exploratory, and that such a position is a good thing. Chiefly, I want you to avoid writing simply about what *other* scholars have to say about your subject. I’m interested in your ideas, your intellect, your interpretations.

Your essay must be at least five pages long, not including Works Cited. In addition to your primary text(s), you should use at least four outside, scholarly sources. And you should follow MLA format guidelines.

Creative Essay — 10%

Since our attention in this class includes the form and craft of nature writing, I want you to generate some original environmental literature. For this assignment, I want you to enter into the midst of environmental observation and interpretation. Spend some time in a natural place, defined as you see fit. Observe. Describe. Consider. Then, outside of that space, do some general research (scientific, historical, literary) that resonates with your observations. In a careful, creative essay, blend these aspects together to help you and your readers make better sense of the world.

Scholarship Presentation — 10%

Each of you will offer a ten-minute presentation at some point in the semester. Each presentation will seek to offer critical perspective and context to the rest of the class and will serve as a touchstone for the day’s conversation. For your presentation, you will find a relevant scholarly article that examines a single work or author being discussed on your selected day. You will offer a detailed synopsis of the article’s argument, then respond to the scholarship through an analysis of the primary text at hand. You need not agree with your chosen article, but you should exercise close reading skills of the primary text to explain how and why you agree or disagree.

Reading Responses — 15%

Before each class meeting, you will prepare a 250 word reading response, intended to be informal, explorative, and even somewhat half-baked. Respond to either a single reading for the day or all the material for the day, and propose some preliminary interpretations of the material. You might write about connections between the text and other literature, or with your life, or with particle physics. Whatever strikes your fancy. The only no-no is quality judgment: don’t write about how much you like or dislike the reading. Instead, engage the

material as intensively as you can. You will likely find ideas in these responses that you can build on for your critical essay. These responses must be posted to Sakai prior to the beginning of each class period.

Attendance and Participation — 20%

As a class centered on the interpretation and discussion of literature, attendance is quite important. We will spend our time in class making meaning out of the literature we've read through the medium of group conversation. So being here and being as vocal as possible is crucial.

Illness and other unavoidable conflicts do pop up, however. Each of you may therefore miss **two** class periods without adverse affect on your participation grade. Further misses will negatively affect your participation grade, and greater than **six** misses will result in failure of the course.

Midterm and Final Exams — 20%

For each of these exams, you will be required to offer cogent written analysis of texts dealt with during our reading and class discussions. For each, you will be expected to make use of one of our critical readings as a lens of interpretation for one of the pieces of environmental literature on the syllabus. For each exam, I will offer a few choices for critical and literary sources. Thus, the exams may not be open-ended but will at least allow for some choice.

The midterm will be a take home exam, due (with no exceptions) on the date listed in the schedule. The final exam will be administered during the final exam period. Each exam will be open book, open note: interpretation is the key, not the transcription of literary fact.

Class Conduct

We will treat each other with respect in our written and verbal communication, regardless of ethnicity, gender, orientation, or religious belief. Even when offering critique of literary texts and opinions, we will be civil, gentle, courteous, and fair. Electronic devices will be neither turned on nor used while class is in session.

Your written work should be of your own design and intelligence, and it should be unique to this particular class. If you are not already familiar with Allegheny's standards of academic honesty, please review the Honor Code. Plagiarism is, of course, a serious academic offense that will result in significant penalty, up to and including course failure.

Daily Schedule

KEY: AE = American Earth; ER = Ecocriticism Reader

Part I: American Environmental Philosophy

9/1 Course Introduction; in class Bradstreet, “Contemplations;” Jefferson, “The Natural Bridge” (handout)
RECOMMENDED: Goltfelty, “Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis” (ER xv)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Turner “Cultivating the American Garden” (ER 40)

9/6 Thoreau (AE 2-36)

9/8 Muir (AE 85-103)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Byerly, “The Uses of Landscape...” (ER 52)

9/13 Roosevelt (AE 130-133); Stratton-Porter, “The Last Passenger Pigeon” (AE 192);
Boston, “Orion Rises on the Dunes” (AE 205); Darling, “What a few more seasons will
do to the ducks” (AE 224)

9/15 Leopold, from *A Sand County Almanac* (AE 266)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Fromm, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence” (ER 30)

9/20 Douglass, “The Everglades” (AE 260); Olson, “Northern Lights” (AE 323)

9/22 White, “Sootfall and Fallout” (AE 327); Eisely, “How Flowers Changed the World” (AE 337); Carson from *Silent Spring* (AE 366)

Part II: Aesthetic, Wonder, and the Children of Thoreau

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Evernden, “Beyond Ecology...” (ER 92)

9/27 Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

9/29 Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Mazel, “American Literary Environmentalism ...” (ER 137)

10/4 Zahniser, from *The Wilderness Act of 1964* (AE 392); Johnson “Remarks at the Signing
of the Highway Beautification Act ...” (AE 395); Baker “The Great Paver” (AE 377)

10/6 Snyder, “Smokey the Bear Sutra” and “Covers the Ground” (AE 473); McPhee, from
Encounters with the Archdruid (AE 493); Berry (AE 505-530)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Scheese, “Counter-Fiction to the Machine in the Garden” (ER 303)

10/11 Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (to 171)

10/13 Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (171-end)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Silko, “Landscape, Nature and the Pueblo Imagination” (ER 264)

10/20 N. Scott Momaday, “A First American Views His Land” (AE 570); Silko, from
Ceremony (AE 582); Crumb, “A Short History of America” (AE 591)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Campbell, “The Land and Language of Desire” (ER 124)

10/25 Krakauer, *Into the Wild*

10/27 Krakauer, *Into the Wild*

11/1 FILM: *Into the Wild*; **take home midterm exam due at start of class.**

11/3 FILM: *Into the Wild*

Part III: Environment Happens Here, Too

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Kolodny, "Unearthing Herstory" (ER 170)

11/8 Ray, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*

11/10 Ray, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*; Bullard, "Dumping in Dixie" (AE 725)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" (ER 3)

11/15 Meloy, "The Flora and Fauna of Las Vegas" (AE 793); Jacobs "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (AE 359)

11/17 Bass, from *The Ninemile Wolves* (AE 760); Lopez, "A Presentation of Whales" (AE 696); McKibben, "The End of Nature" (AE 718)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology" (ER 105)

11/22 House, *Clay's Quilt*; **Creative essay due**

Part IV: Post-Thoreau, Present Day

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Phillips, "Is Nature Necessary" (ER 204)

11/29 Abram, from *The Ecology of Magic* (AE 815); Pollan, from *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (AE 948)

12/1 Turner, "The Song of the White Pelican" (AE 835)

WEEKLY CRITICAL: Meeker, "The Comic Mode" (ER 155)

12/6 Gessner, *Sick of Nature*

12/8 Gessner, *Sick of Nature*

12/13 Walker, "Everything is a Human Being" (AE659); Kingsolver, "Knowing Our Place" (AE 939); **Critical Essay due**

FINAL EXAM: Monday, December 19 at 9 a.m.