

Literature and the Environment: Between Eden and Apocalypse

Spring 2016 / English and Env. Studies 294-02 / TR 1:20-2:50pm / Old Main 001

Contact Information

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Office Hours: TR 3-4:30pm, or by apt.

Course Description

The most famous celebrity resident of Arcadia is Death.

Joyelle McSweeney, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults*

Since colonization, American literature has often imagined nature as either a pristine Eden, dangerous wilderness, or some combination thereof. From *Walden* to *The Walking Dead*, our literary landscapes tend to blend the paradisaical and post-apocalyptic, the threatened and the threatening. In this course, we will consider the place of place in an eclectic array of American texts. We'll begin with a few foundational readings, but quickly depart for stranger shores: westerns, sci-fi, postmodern poetry. As we travel, we'll ask a wide range of questions about genre, form, and identity, but we'll pay particular attention to the way each artwork employs what Leo Marx calls a "pastoral design" to mediate competing impulses towards the environment. Coursework will include reading responses, two short essays, a presentation and a final project. Creative writers (or those so inclined) will have the opportunity to write creatively for certain assignments. Non-majors are enthusiastically invited, but be aware we'll be wearing our literary analysis hats on this hike.

Course Goals

- establish a vocabulary for discussing, writing, and asking questions about of literary texts
- gain experience using a critical framework to study literature in general
- define and complicate *the pastoral* as a framework in particular
- develop proficiency in the writing of literary criticism
- experiment with other kinds of writing, including the literary essay, fiction and poetry
- practice writing as a *process* that involves research, drafting, and redrafting based on feedback

Required Texts

Weekly reading/screening/listening (available digitally on Google Drive)

Harryette Mullen, *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary*

Joe Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy's*

Lorine Niedecker, *Lake Superior*

John D'Agata, *About a Mountain*

Cathy Park Hong, *Engine Empire*

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*

Assignments

Participation

20% of overall grade

Response Papers (1 page each)

20%

Presentation	10%
1st Essay (4-5 pages)	15%
2nd Essay (4-5 pages <i>or</i> 6-8 page revision)	15%
Final Project (7-10 pages)	20%

Participation

Participation means completing the reading and speaking up in class, but also listening, asking questions, and putting good-faith effort into in-class activities including writing exercises, group work, and peer paper workshops. Be respectful of your peers and intellectually generous, or your grade will suffer, and everyone will be annoyed.

Response Papers

For all the full books we're reading, and some of the shorter excerpts, you will write a one-page response paper. Each will be due *both* on Moodle *in hard copy* by class time. Specific due dates are on the calendar. I've assigned 10 papers, but will only count 8. I'll drop your lowest grade, even if that grade is zero, and also give you a pass on the week of your presentation. We'll talk more specifics about the content of these papers during the second week of class. Be warned: if you don't give me a paper copy of these, you forfeit your opportunity for feedback.

Presentations

Along with a partner, you will present on and guide discussion of a text once during the semester. This will involve generating discussion questions, following-up on your peers' response papers, and bringing in any useful supplementary materials. You will sign up for a particular text early in the semester. Further guidelines will be posted online and discussed in class.

Essays

For your first essay, you will write a 4-5 page piece of literary analysis. You may think of it essentially as a longer, more developed response paper. For your second paper, you will have several options: (1) write another 4-5 page literary analysis paper, (2) revise and expand your first 4-5 page paper into a 6-8 page paper, or (3) write a 4-5 page piece of creative nonfiction like Crase, Biss, D'Agata, or Thoreau. For any assignment, you may use one of your response papers as a jumping off point. Further instructions are forthcoming. If you have questions, let's talk *well before* the due dates.

Final Project

Your final project can take a variety of forms: a 7-10 page literary analysis paper; 7-10 pages of creative nonfiction, fiction, or poetry inspired by our inquiry; or a multimedia project, such as a video, website, music, or a performance. We will discuss the project's requirements at length in class, and briefly share what we're working on during the final week of classes. I will provide prompts if you're struggling to decide on a topic or format. Again, I'm very happy to talk ideas or requirements, so please come see me if you're struggling.

Attendance

This class is based largely in discussion. As such, if you miss class, you're not the only one affected by your absence. That said, you're allowed *three absences* without penalty. Any absence after 3 will result in lowering your final course grade a "half-letter" per absence. (4 absences turn an A to an A-, 5 turn that to a B+, etc.) Any more than 5 absences will result in you failing the course (an A

becomes an F). Also: please be on time! I know we are all run late sometimes, but don't make it a habit. Excessive instances of lateness (either in frequency or duration) will convert to absences.

Late Work

I don't accept response papers after the due date. Late essays will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. an A turns into an A-) for every 24-hour period it is late. I'm happy to grant exceptions to these rules, but only with good reason *and* well in advance. If you need an extension for something, or know you will, get in touch with me *at least 24 hours before* the deadline.

Our Calendar

Note: Contents *will* shift during transit.

Week 1

R 1/21 *First Class*
Introductions, Expectations, Our Schedule

Week 2

T 1/26 Marx, [Machine in the Garden, Ch. 1](#)

R 1/28 [Virgil, Frost, Powell](#)

Week 3

T 2/2 RESPONSE PAPER 1 DUE
[Thoreau, *Walden* excerpts](#)

R 2/4 [Thoreau, "Walking"](#)

F 2/5 *Last Day to Add/Drop/Audit*

Week 4

T 2/9 RESPONSE 2 DUE
[Niedecker selections](#) (PDF)
Niedecker, "Lake Superior" (*Lake Superior* 1-6)
Niedecker, "Lake Superior Country -- a Journal" (*Lake Superior* 7-27)

R 2/11 PRESENTATION 1
Crane, "Niedecker and the Evolutional Sublime" (*Lake Superior* 28-49)
Leopold, "On a Monument to the Pigeon" (*Lake Superior* 70-74)

Week 5

T 2/16 RESPONSE 3 DUE

Jurassic Park

R 2/18 PRESENTATION 2
Jurassic Park, con't.
Emerson, *Nature* (excerpt)

Week 6

T 2/23 RESPONSE 4 DUE
Mullen, 1-57, incl. intro
Poetry Foundation, "[The Snowed-in Life](#)" (15-min podcast)

R 2/25 PRESENTATION 3
Mullen 58-122

Week 7

T 3/1 RESPONSE 5 DUE
Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy's*, through "Feb 1, 1997" (about half)

R 3/3 PRESENTATION 4
Wenderoth, *Letters to Wendy's*, to end

F 3/4 FIRST ESSAY DUE

Week 8

T 3/8 RESPONSE 6 DUE
D'Agata, 1-133

R 3/10 PRESENTATION 5
D'Agata, 133-200

Week 9 Spring Break

T 3/15 *No Class – Spring Break*
R 3/17 *No Class – Spring Break*

Week 10

M 3/21 *Midterm Grades Due*

T 3/22 Eula Biss, "No Man's Land"
Sherman Alexie, "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven"

R 3/24 Hong, first section (Ballad of Our Jim)
Frederick Jackson Turner (excerpt)

Week 11

- T 3/29 RESPONSE 7 DUE
Hong, second section (Shangdu, My Artful Boomtown!)
- R 3/31 PRESENTATION 6
Hong, third section (The World Cloud)

Week 12

- M 4/4 SECOND ESSAY DUE
- T 4/5 Jarmusch, *Dead Man*
McSweeney on the Necropastoral (excerpt)
- R 4/7 RESPONSE 8 DUE
McCarthy, first half

Week 13

- T 4/12 PRESENTATION 7
McCarthy, second half
- R 4/14 Whitehead, "Friday"

Week 14

- T 4/19 RESPONSE 9 DUE
Whitehead, "Saturday"
- R 4/21 PRESENTATION 8
Whitehead, "Sunday"

Week 15

- T 4/26 RESPONSE 10 DUE
Newsom, *Divers*
Share Final Project Ideas
- R 4/28 *Last Class – Wrap-up*
Newsom, *Divers*, con't.
Virgil, Eclogue IX

Week 16 – Finals Week

- Sat 5/7 Final Project Due by 11:59pm