

EngL 8200: Ecocriticism and American Literature

Th, 3:35-6:05 pm
Lind 207A
3 credits
Spring 2008

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Course Description

Although the term “ecocriticism” most often refers to literary criticism concerned with the relationship between literature and the environment, here we will be defining it broadly as “a form of critical inquiry that asks how scholars and critics of literature, language, and communication can contribute to the tasks of protecting biological diversity, minimizing human health risks, and using resources sustainably.” This means not only that we will be exploring the interdisciplinary landscape between literary criticism, rhetorical criticism, and communication studies but also that what “ecocriticism” is will remain an open question throughout the course. Among the questions we will be asking are: Is ecocriticism a theoretical orientation, critical method, or interdisciplinary approach? What are its theoretical foundations and foundational texts? What other critical methods has it adopted and/or modified? How has ecocriticism engaged, and been engaged by, various discourse communities? What success has it had at fulfilling its purpose? Students will read work by a variety of prominent ecocritics, explore some of the more trenchant criticisms leveled at them, and examine several case studies in the application of ecocriticism to American literature. Requirements include: attendance and participation, weekly reading responses, leading discussion, a literature review, and a final project on ecocritical theory and/or practice.

Course Web Site

<http://www.moodle.umn.edu/>

Objectives

What questions will the course help you to answer? How will you grow in knowledge and understanding? What intellectual abilities will the course help you to develop?

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- recognize, understand, and connect basic facts and concepts involved in the study of environmental literature and culture
- collaborate with others to increase your knowledge and understanding of these facts and concepts
- analyze and evaluate the moral and ethical challenges involved in the practice of ecocriticism in a multicultural and global society
- communicate your ideas effectively in writing and in speaking

Texts

What reading materials will help you to pursue the goals of this course?

1. Greg Garrard. Ecocriticism. New York: Routledge, 2004. ISBN: 0415196922 (\$19.95)
2. Dana Phillips. The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. ISBN: 0195137698 (\$26.00)
3. Robert Finch and John Elder, eds. The Norton Book of Nature Writing. College Edition. New York: Norton, 2002. ISBN: 0393978168. (\$39.95) [hardcover edition is titled Nature Writing: The Tradition in English, ISBN: 0393049663]
4. Henry David Thoreau. Walden. 1854. (any edition)
5. Aldo Leopold. A Sand County Almanac. New York: Oxford UP, 1949. ISBN: 0195007778. (\$12.95)
6. Ruth Ozeki. All Over Creation. New York, Penguin, 2003. ISBN: 0142003891. (\$15.00)

Grades

How will I evaluate the nature, quality, and progress of your learning?

I will award grades in this course according to the University of Minnesota's Uniform Grading Policy:

- A: achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements
- B: achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements
- C: achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect
- D: achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements
- F: represents failure and signifies that the work was either:
 - completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit, or
 - not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an "I" (Incomplete)

I will also award pluses and minuses, with the highest possible grade being an "A." Grades of "A," "B," "C" (including "C-") may be applied to a Graduate School degree program.

I will assign an "I" (Incomplete) only when a written agreement exists specifying when the work of the course will be completed. In most cases, the deadline for completion will be the beginning of the following semester; only in extraordinary circumstances will the deadline extend beyond this. If a student receiving an incomplete has not successfully completed the work of the course after one year, I will replace the "I" with a final A-F grade.

Grades will be assigned in terms of a percentage of possible points according to the following standards:

	B+ >= 87%	C+ >= 77%	D+ >= 67%		
A >= 93%	B >= 83%	C >= 73%	D >= 63%	F < 63%	
A- >= 90%	B- >= 80%	C- >= 70%			

I may choose to grade more generously, but I will not raise my standards above these. If at any time you have concerns about your grade, please do not hesitate to contact me. All grades are based on the quality of work submitted, not on hours of effort.

University Policies

What University policies apply to this course so that you will have a safe, productive, and fair environment for learning?

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment by or toward a member of the University community is prohibited by Board of Regents policy. Complaints about sexual harassment should be reported to the University's Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, 419 Morrill Hall.

Classroom Conduct

All students at the University have the right to a civil, productive, and stimulating learning environment. In turn, instructors have a responsibility to nurture and maintain such an environment. Lively, even heated, discussion is not disruptive behavior. Both instructors and students have a fundamental obligation to respect the rights of each other and an equally fundamental obligation to respect the instructional setting as a place for civil, courteous behavior. Students who disrupt the educational process because of discourteous, threatening, harassing, or other aggressive behavior will be removed from class.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. If you have a disability, please contact me and/or Disability Services (180 McNamara Alumni Center, [612] 626-1333 TTY/voice) to schedule an appointment with a Specialist. All requests will remain confidential. This syllabus is available in alternative formats upon request.

Student Academic Integrity and Scholastic Dishonesty

Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty.

Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own can result in disciplinary action. Any student found guilty of scholastic dishonesty in this course can be assigned a penalty up to and including an "F" or "N" for the course and be reported to the University's Office for Student Academic Integrity. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, please ask.

Course Requirements

What will you be doing to pursue the goals of this course?

To succeed in this course, you must complete the following requirements, which are worth a total of 1,000 possible points. For more information on this point system, see the section on grades.

1. Attendance and Participation (100 points): The word "seminar" derives from the Latin *seminarium*, or "seed plot," a place or thing in which something is developed or cultivated. For all of us to develop our knowledge and skills with regard to our subject will require equal amounts of independent study and collaborative learning. Each week we will assemble for 2-½ hours (with a 15-minute break), bringing with us the results of our independent reading, thinking, and writing. Even more than other kinds of courses, seminars are intended to be places where everyone works together to broaden our knowledge and deepen our skills. As a result, I expect only the best of what you have to offer. Your mind, your courtesies, and your sense of humor should all be operating in top form. Your regular attendance and active participation are, therefore, required. If you know in advance that you are going to be absent on a particular day, please let me know.

To help us get started, I would like you to submit a 1- to 2-page *intellectual autobiography*, explaining who you are, where you've been, and where you're going. I am particularly interested in the intersection of your physical travels with your intellectual ones. Please also explain your expectations for this class and how I can help you fulfill them. Use this as an opportunity not only to enlighten me about your personal story but also to establish your own focus for the semester. Please bring your autobiography to the second class meeting. It will not be graded, but its submission will count toward your attendance and participation score.

2. Reading Responses (100 points): Another important part of this course is the series of reading responses you will write over the course of the term. These responses will allow you share your written thoughts with other students in the class, and they could also help you to develop one or more of your papers.

Each response should be 300-600 words long (the equivalent of 1-2 printed pages) and should be a thoughtful, considered reaction to one or more of the texts we are reading for that week. Your reading responses should be based primarily on your own attention to and engagement with the texts, but I also encourage you to engage the responses of other students by posting follow-up responses.

Reading responses should be submitted to the "Discussion Forum" section of our Moodle site by 9 a.m. every class day, unless otherwise noted. Because we all need time to read and process these responses before class, late and missing responses will receive no credit. Please plan your reading accordingly.

At the end of the semester, I will grade your responses according to the following scale:

- A: frequent and courteous participation, with mature and thoughtful insights
- B: above average participation and insight
- C: moderate participation and reasonable insight

3. Leading Discussion (100 points): For two class meetings, you will work with another student to lead class discussion of the text(s) assigned for that day. You may approach this assignment in any way you wish, but you will be expected to provide a 15-minute introduction and to direct our conversation in the ways you find most appropriate. Discussion leaders should consult with me before they plan their presentation and submit a discussion guide by email instead of their normal reading responses.

4. Literature Review (200 points): To broaden your understanding of ecocriticism and American literature, as well as the understanding of other class members, I would like you to select a book/dissertation, journal, or comprehensive web site and write a 1,200-1,600 word (5-6 printed pages,

double-spaced) review of that resource. Your review will be due on March 13, the class before Spring Break. Each kind of review will require a slightly different approach, as follows:

Book/dissertation review: Your review should identify the work's author, title, and publication information; describe its purpose and content; and evaluate its worth to you, your fellow students, and/or its intended readers.

Journal review: Your review should identify the journal and its location(s) in the University Libraries, explain how long it has been published and how often it appears (monthly, quarterly, etc.), describe its editorial mission, summarize the contents of a sample issue, and characterize (as best you can) the kind of intellectual and/or disciplinary community it serves (and has thus helped to create). To do this, you certainly need not read every article the journal has ever published (!), but you should scan a representative sample from its earliest issue to its latest, looking for continuities and changes in editorial focus, the authorship and subject of articles, and the structure of each issue (if applicable).

Web site review: Your review should identify the site's author/owner and URL, describe its purpose and content, and evaluate its worth to you, your fellow students, and/or its intended users.

5. Final Project (500 points): I will work individually with each of you to develop a final project appropriate to your interests and the goals of this course. This may be a traditional seminar paper, 16-24 pages long, or it may take some other form, such as

- a research prospectus for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation
- a review essay on a major theme of this course, similar to what you might submit for an oral or written preliminary exam
- a web-based, collaborative, or mixed-media project

Whatever the project, it must represent a publishable example of ecocritical theory and/or practice, the creation of which is a key objective of this course. I would be disappointed if you did not make plans to use this final project to fulfill some other academic goal—whether that be a programmatic requirement, a conference presentation, a dissertation chapter, a journal article, a professional report, or some other worthy achievement.

A detailed three-page proposal for your final project is due on March 27. This proposal should consist of a one-page summary of your intended subject and method and a two-page annotated bibliography of 6-8 key books and/or articles related to your project. (Your annotations need not be extensive; 50-100 words each is a good target.) The project itself is due on May 8. I would be happy to review abstracts, outlines, and partial or complete drafts, with sufficient notice. Late projects will be accepted only by prior arrangement.

Papers

How should you write and format your papers?

Your papers should be focused, well-organized, and free of errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. This includes both reading responses and printed papers. I have little patience with what might be termed "postmodern prose"; I expect your writing to be nothing less than a model of brevity, clarity, and style. We will discuss the conventions of academic writing further in class, but for an example of how *not* to write for this course, see the Postmodernism Generator, a system for generating random text from recursive grammars, at <http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo>. I also expect you to place your ideas in conversation with those of other scholars; when you do so, you should use whatever citation style is appropriate to your discipline and/or needs (MLA, APA, Chicago). Please do not mix styles or create your own citation method.

All papers must be written on a word processor, proofread, and spellchecked. Pages should be double-spaced with one-inch margins, numbered in the upper right-hand corner, and stapled in the upper left-hand corner. Your name, the course number, my name, and the date should appear at the top left of the first page, and the title should be centered on the next line. *Do not include a separate title page.* Please keep a copy of everything you write. I also encourage you to print your papers on the reverse sides of previously used, recycled paper.

Contact Me

How can you contact me to help you learn?

The best way to contact me is immediately after class; I would be happy to meet with you briefly to answer a question or to elaborate on a point made in class. To contact me at other times, feel free to call me at my office, send me email, or stop by during my office hours. If my office hours are inconvenient for you, please let me know, and we can arrange to meet at another time. Even if you do not have a specific question, I encourage you to stop by my office at some point during the semester, so that I can get to know you better as a person and so that we can talk in more detail about the subjects that interest you. The main reason I am here is to help you learn and grow, so please take advantage of this opportunity and come see me. **My contact information appears at the top of this syllabus.**

Course Schedule

How is this course structured to develop your knowledge, understanding, and abilities throughout the semester?

This schedule is subject to change, so if you miss a class you should check with a classmate for the most current information. Lecture notes, handouts, and additional readings will be available on our web site.

1. Introduction to Ecocriticism

1/24 **Welcome**

1/31 **Ecocriticism: Historical Overview**

Read: Anne Milne, "Ecocriticism"; Richard Kerridge, "Environmentalism and Ecocriticism"; David W. Orr, "What Is Education For?"; Robert Scholes, "Learning and Teaching"; Stephen Katz, "How to Speak and Write Postmodern
Review: Global Environmental Outlook, "Summary for Decision Makers"; Green Facts, "Scientific Facts on Ecosystem Change"; Postmodernism Generator; related web sites for "Environmental Communication"
DUE: Intellectual Autobiography

2/7 **Ecocriticism: Thematic Overview**

Read: Greg Garrard, Ecocriticism; Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism"

2/14 **Ecocriticism's Critics**

Read: Dana Phillips, The Truth of Ecology; Michael P. Cohen, "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique"; Michael P. Branch, "Sick of Being Sick of Nature"; David Gessner, "Sick of Nature"

2. Ecocritical Readings of Classic Environmental Literature

2/21 **Columbus to Thoreau**

Read: from The Norton Book of Nature Writing: White, Crèvecoeur, Bartram, Wilson, Lewis, Audubon, Catlin, Emerson, Darwin, Cooper; Daniel J. Philippon, "U.S. Environmental Literature Before the Twentieth Century"

2/28 **Thoreau's Walden**

Read: from The Norton Book of Nature Writing: Thoreau; Thoreau, Walden (any edition); additional articles, TBA

3/6 **Thoreau to Carson**

Read: from The Norton Book of Nature Writing: Whitman, Powell, Clemens, Thaxter, Burroughs, Muir, King, Wright, Seton, Porter, Austin, Luther Standing Bear, Beston, Krutch, Peattie, Olson, Teale, White, LeSueur, Dubos, Maclean, Steinbeck, Carson; additional articles, TBA

3/13 **Literature Reviews**

DUE: Literature review

3/20 **Spring Break**

3/27 **Leopold's Sand County**

Read: Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*; additional articles, TBA
 (Note: prospective grad students in English may join us for this session)
 DUE: Final Project Proposal

3. Emerging Issues in Ecocriticism

4/3 **Animals**

Read: from *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* and additional articles, TBA

4/10 **Identity and Environmental Justice**

Read: from *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* and additional articles, TBA

4/17 **Film: Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold, *Blue Vinyl* (2002; 98 mins.)**

Read: Arlene Plevin, "Home Everywhere and the Injured Body of the World: The Subversive Humor of *Blue Vinyl*"

4/24 **Place: City, Suburb, Rural, Wilderness**

Read: Jenny Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A." (Parts 1 & 2); 1,000 Friends of Minnesota, *Voices for the City: Minnesotans Writing about the Cities and Towns They Love* (2003); from *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* and additional articles, TBA

5/1 **Food & Fiction**

Ruth Ozeki, *All Over Creation* (2003); additional articles, TBA

5/8 **Last class: Dinner**

DUE: Final paper