

English 393B: Environmental Criticism

Spring Semester 2014

Instructor: Lowell Duckert

Email: Lowell.Duckert@mail.wvu.edu

Meeting Time: 1:00-2:15 PM TR

Meeting Place: Woodburn Hall G16

Office: Colson Hall 319

Office Hours: 2:30-5:30 PM T and by appointment

Office Phone: (304) 293-9700

What is environmental criticism? Cheryl Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” The seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell might have put it this way: “a green thought in a green shade.” Environmental criticism has been difficult to define; yet its relation to modern social activism means that it must be carried out – and *urgently*, at that. So how does a “green thought” arise, what work does it do (or fails to do), and what is the role of literature in the process? We will explore the tensions between place/space, human/nonhuman, nature/culture, local/global, green/multicolored, and life/matter (amongst others), and furthermore challenge these terms’ stability. Over the course of the semester, we will read premodern to modern literature alongside several prominent ecological theorists (representing ecofeminism, queer ecology, postcolonial ecocriticism, dark ecology, political ecology, and more). Our goals are (1) to investigate what environmental criticism *is* and *does*, and (2) to discover the complications and joys that arrive when we theorize how physical place affects the imagination. Overall, you will understand how literature theorizes ecology as much as ecological theory informs literature, thereby revealing literature’s potential to reshape contemporary environmental issues.



Amy Stein, *Domesticated*

Learning Objectives:

1. to examine the rich relationship between place and the imagination: what is commonly referred to as ecopoetics
2. to make thematic connections across works of art, investigating (and interrogating) key concepts like nature, ecology, the human, apocalypse, wilderness, and agency
3. to help you improve your writing through close readings and critical analysis of literature
4. to introduce you to contemporary methods of studying English literature within an ecocritical frame
5. to critique anthropocentric (human-centered) modes of our age in order to imagine an ethics that accounts for our enmeshment with all things, one that might offer alternative futures besides catastrophe.

Required Books: (available from the WVU Bookstore)

The Future of Environmental Criticism, Lawrence Buell

Ecocriticism, 2nd ed., Greg Garrard

Prismatic Ecology, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

Storming Heaven and *The Unquiet Earth*, Denise Giardina

Requirements (more details to come**):**

1. *The basics*: attend class; participate in discussions; complete readings and assignments on time. Be prepared for some difficult reading, ranging from ecotheory (Bruno Latour, Michel Serres, Timothy Morton) to the texts themselves (a seventeenth-century pamphlet on air pollution, for example). The challenge, I assure you, will be mutual—I would not have it any other way, for one, but I expect us to grapple with the readings, pose more questions than answers, and engage in spirited conversation.
2. *Eco-journals* are weekly responses (at least one page, single-spaced) in which you will meditate on the entwining between the environment and the imagination—not only in that week’s works, but also in your own day-to-day experiences. I would like you to pick a place in which to compose (local or not, built or otherwise) and stick to that site throughout the semester. Be creative; be personal. In general, your responses are meant to ask (intelligent) questions about that week’s reading and, I hope, enlarge your own sense of enmeshment. I will provide extensive feedback.
3. *A short paper* (5 pages) on Giardina’s novels, environmental degradation, and our trip to Kayford Mountain (more below).
4. *A midterm paper* (10 pages) that places literature in conversation with one or more ecotheoretical modes and a current environmental issue of your choice. I would like you to choose a keyword (Garrard), color (Cohen), or both.
5. *Final paper*: an article-length paper (20-25 pages) worthy of publication that builds on your midterm research.
6. *Peer-editing participation*: Once this semester I will assign you a peer-editing partner who will offer constructive criticism. I will ask you to compose a short write-up for your peer (and ultimately me).

Grading Rubric:

Participation and attendance in class	15
Peer-editing exercise	10
Eco-journals	20
Short paper	15
Final paper (includes midterm)	40
Total	100

Kayford Mountain Field Trip:

Because one of the course objectives is thinking about how literature's ecotheorizations can influence current environmental policy, we will join the Keeper of the Mountains Foundation atop Kayford Mountain – a controversial mountaintop removal (MTR) site – at some point during the semester. I am currently working out our travel plans. If you have any reservations about this trip, or feel unable/unwilling to join for *any* reason, please do not hesitate to tell me. I will gladly assign you a different task.

Attendance Policy and Code of Courtesy:

I define “present” as arriving on time with your cellphone silenced; bringing the appropriate book to class; giving me your full attention; and remaining in the room until the class ends. Laptops are allowed only for note-taking purposes. I will allow **three** absences—after that, your grade drops a letter for each additional absence (for example: an A becomes a B). **Late work will not be accepted.** At six absences, you fail the course. You may not take an incomplete. If you foresee a scheduling conflict, please notify me as soon as possible.

Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty of any kind will be treated as a serious offense. In most cases, you will fail the course. You can find more on the Student Conduct Code (III.B.1) at http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office_of_student_conduct/student_conduct_code

Statement of Social Justice:

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. **Any attempt to disrupt the nondiscriminatory environment of this class will not be tolerated.**

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see <http://diversity.wvu.edu>.

Contact:

I encourage you to take advantage of my office hours (information above), and feel free to email/call me at any time. Never hesitate to ask a question, express a doubt, or request clarification. Make sure that your MIX email address is operational; I will frequently notify you about what to read for a given day, and I will occasionally post documents online.

Schedule of Readings (to be continued**):**

This is a unique course. Due to the small size of the class – an advantage, I believe – I will assign shorter primary texts that speak to *your* interests along with secondary readings from *Prismatic Ecology*. Thus we will move *organically* through the semester. We will (thought) experiment. The first few weeks, however, are firmly set in order to help situate you:

Weeks 1 and 2: 1/14, 1/16, 1/21, 1/23

Lawrence Buell's *Future* (introduction to the multiple modes of ecocriticism)

Weeks 3 and 4:

Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (introduction to ecocriticism's multiple themes, paired with shorter texts of your choosing that exemplify said themes)

Week 5 (for example):

Ecocatastrophe: Giardina's *Storming Heaven* and Eileen Joy's "Blue" from *Prismatic*, followed by a field trip to Kayford Mountain

Week 6 (for example):

Non/human voices and the violence of silence: Bernd Herzogenrath's "White" from *Prismatic*; Bruno Latour and Émilie Hache's article on sensitization; and sections of Annie Dillard's *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Week 7 (for example):

Queer ecology: Timothy Morton's "Queer Ecology" and parts of *The Ecological Thought*; Robert McRuer's "Pink" from *Prismatic*; selections from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

While slightly open-ended, the course will be rigorous nevertheless. I encourage you to see this class as an *opportunity* to explore, and to be challenged, in ways you are perhaps not accustomed to. I look forward to our future discussions.