

San José State University
Humanities and the Arts/Department of English
English 254: Conservation Classics, Spring 2020

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Office Hours:	Tues: 2-4; Thurs: 1:30-2:15
Class Days/Time:	Tuesday: 4:00-6:45
Classroom:	FOB 104

Course Description:

What is environmental literature? Why are many of the selected books considered classics? What is their significance today? Why are certain terms important for our understanding of these texts: Place, landscape, ecology, nature, environment, the anthropocene, ecocriticism? These seminal American environmental texts exemplify different discourses of nature (mythological, philosophical, scientific) and literary genres (nonfiction, narrative, poetry). We will discuss how each writer views the natural world; the place humans assume in the environment; the role of literature in helping us understand the environment and human impacts.

The organization of this course is roughly chronological. We will discuss the historical and political contexts in which the writing was produced (environmental history) and consider how different discourses inform our perceptions of environment—from the philosophical to the political and from scientific to poetic.

Readings in this course will help each student develop an historically informed and textually sensitive perspective on contemporary environmental issues and theories.

“From the beginning American writing has concerned itself with the story of people and the natural world. . . ‘Environmental writing’ . . . takes as its subject the collision between people and the rest of the world, and asks searching questions: . . . Is it necessary? What are its effects? Might there be a better way?” — Bill McKibben

“Once we lose our fear of being tiny, we find ourselves on the threshold of a vast and awesome universe which dwarfs—in time, in space, and in potential—the tidy anthropocentric proscenium of our ancestors.” Carl Sagan.

Course Learning Outcomes:

- To appreciate the historical and contemporary significance of the field of environmental literature.
- To understand the importance of American “conservation classics,” books that are seminal to our appreciation of nature, place, and the environment.
- To consider the relationships between/among nature, literature, and science.
- To consider how literature helps shape our understanding of the world and, in turn, our role in today’s imperiled environment.
- To consider how various genres address environmental awareness.

The Student Learning Outcomes of the Department of English and Comparative Literature are that students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;
2. show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American and World Literature;
3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
5. articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Required Texts/Readings:

Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*, 1903 (online, excerpts)
Robinson Jeffers, Selected poems (PDF)
John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, 1941
Rachael Carson, *Under the Sea Wind*, 1941
Aldo Leopold, *Sand Country Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, 1949 (Oxford 1989)
Wendel Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 2004 + essays
Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, 1991
Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, 2017

Additional essays noted on syllabus or, on occasion, sent to all students.

Book groups—Groups will select one book:

Mary Oliver, Selected poems

Camille Dungy, *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*

John Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*

Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*

Helena Maria Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* or *Desert Solitaire*

<https://www.hcn.org/articles/opinion-a-look-at-what-abbey-desert-solitaire-means-in-these-trying-times>

Rachael Carson, *Silent Spring*

“Every good book should be reread as soon as it is finished. After the sketchiness of the first reading comes the creative work of reading.” (Gaston Bachelard)

Course Requirements and Assignments:

1. **Book groups, 25%:** In groups of 3-4, please select one book from the list (dates of presentations are on the syllabus). The group will read and discuss the book together outside class (although I will give you some time to meet in class). The group will give a 30-40 minute presentation on the book and relate it to the reading of the day and other topics in the course. Please hand in an outline of your group’s major points (2 pages).

Your group will engage the class in what is most significant about the book you read in relation to central themes in the course. The team will decide what you want the class to focus on, what your pedagogical goal is, and how you will achieve that goal—how you will engage the class in the material. You might decide to bring in outside materials or handouts. You might choose to present a short lecture (being sure each of you speaks) and then lead discussion. You might want to try something innovative such as a case study or a class role play. Your goal is to relate the text you read to relevant material in the class.

2. **Weekly Response Papers, 25% (graded 1-4):** Each week (except when presenting material in bookgroup and when co-teaching) write a 350-500 word response (typed) to the reading, turned in at the beginning of class (**10 total**). Occasionally there will be an assigned focus for your response, but usually it will be open. **Suggestions:** look closely at an issue, topic, or section of a text; reflect on your own feelings, experience, and reactions to issues and ideas; discuss the writing itself—why or why not is it stylistically impactful; link a text to other texts in and out of our course; think about your life, political position and action plans for the

future vis a vis the material. Your goal is to engage the material and put some of your thoughts down on paper before coming to class.

Your response papers will often serve as springboards for discussion. I'll often ask you to tell us about what you've written.

- 3. Co-teaching, 12.5% (graded 1-4, presentation and paper):** During one class of the semester, students will present on the day's reading at the beginning of class—ask questions that engage; discuss specific issues in the text that are relevant today—tying to specific news items; and introduce at least ONE critical essay on the book/author/issues. Please come with an outline of your points and engage the class for 15 minutes—discussion, opening reading, lecture, etc.
Please hand in a 2-3page paper on your best idea.

- 4. Final paper, 25% (letter grade—see below): Option A:** a relatively traditional research paper, focused on one of the semester's texts, writers, or theoretical concerns, 10-12 pages. Paper topic proposals (2 pages) are due by April 22—Earth Day! No later. Please discuss your topic with me that week or before.

Option B: a piece of nature writing, targeted toward a specific publication (such as *Orion* or *Terrain.org*). This could be a memoir; an exploration of place; a focused examination of an issue, concept, or object; or some other example of narrative scholarship.

- 5. Class participation, 12.5%:** Active participation in all discussions; insightful responses to peer's comments; curiosity about the text, author, and issues; all texts in hand during class.

At the heart of any good graduate seminar is discussion, both in-class and, of course, outside class in book groups and beyond. As a full participant, you should come to class with texts read and questions formulated. Please respectfully consider all viewpoints and ask thoughtful questions about your peers' responses. All of this will enter into a participation grade. More specifically, I will evaluate your participation grade as follows:

Excellent, 4: Someone who has been a reliable and constant positive force in class, who has not missed classes, who poses questions about the reading, who responds thoughtfully to other students' comments. Oral presentations are lucid, to the point, well-rehearsed.

Good, 3: Someone who has been a reliable and constant positive force in class but may have missed one or two classes. Oral presentations are clear, mostly to the point, perhaps a little rough.

Adequate, 2: A mostly positive force in class but sometimes unprepared. Someone who has missed a few classes. Oral presentations are serviceable, might be more focused, might need more practice.

Unprepared, 1: Someone who has not contributed because of poor attendance and poor participation and poor preparedness. Oral presentations not fully rehearsed, unclear.

In grading your final paper, I consider the following in assigning grades:

A and A-: A superior piece of writing. The topic focused, the language sharp, and the writing free of grammatical errors. The piece has originality and style, is elegant, thoughtful and persuasive. If research is included, it is relevant and clearly cited.

B+ and B: A good piece of writing, solid and clear. But it may lack the innovation and sharpness of the top category. The point is clear but could be supported with additional details. There may be minor spelling, typographic, and/or grammatical errors. But it is interesting enough to hold a reader's attention. If research is included, it is mostly solid and the paper draws from the research.

B- and C+: This response may be too broad or unsupported. Examples may be general rather than specific. There may be grammatical errors. The central idea may not be fresh. The writing may be wordy and vague. If research is included, scholarship might not be relevant, fresh or focused on the topic and hand. Citations may be infrequent, general.

C and below: These essays are unfocused, without a sharp thesis. Examples are general or the essay lacks examples. Research is not thorough. There may be serious grammatical errors. If research is included, sources may be general, unfocused, not cited properly.

Determination of final grade will depend on completion of work noted under "Course Requirements and Assignments": Full participation in bookgroups and group presentation; 10 response essays; final essay and active class participation.

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: *A+/A/A-* = excellent; *B+/B/B-* = above average; *C+/C/C-* = average; *D+/D/D-* = below average; F = failure. *Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.*

Classroom Protocol

I expect students to come to class on time; to refrain from texting or using computers for anything but assigned texts; to keep iPhones off the table, tucked firmly away; to actively engage in discussion; to listen politely and attentively to peers; to respond thoughtfully.

University Policies

Please see syllabus information web page at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo>

Schedule

January 28: Introduction.

Each student will introduce him/herself with a 3 minute power point, brought to class on a flash drive (If you are on campus early, please bring to my office before class). Mention one environmental issue that is important to you. 4 slide limit.

Seeing: "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Wallace Stevens,
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45236/thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-a-blackbird>

Introduction to Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*: "The Pocket Hunter," 63-80.
https://books.google.com/books?id=tkYLAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ViewAPI#v=onepage&q&f=false.

February 4: Aridity and Ecology, The Owens Valley: "That is the West's ultimate unity: aridity," Wallace Stegner, *SMW*, 15.

Reading: *The Land of Little Rain* (1901), "The Scavengers," "Shoshone Land," "The Basket Maker," "Nurslings of the Sky"
https://books.google.com/books?id=tkYLAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ViewAPI#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Annie Dillard, "Seeing" (PDF)

Barry Lopez, "Landscape and Narrative" and "The Stone Horse" (PDFs)

Consider how Austin, Dillard, and Lopez describe the landscape. Recommended reading, *The Ford*, Mary Austin (development vs. preservation).

February 11: "Breaking Through," Steinbeck, Jeffers, Ricketts and Campbell.

Reading: Selected poems by Robinson Jeffers; Toni Jackson, "The Hawk and the Rock"; NEH Jeffers Teachers' Guide. (PDFs)

"So What if we're Doomed," Brian Calvert

<https://www.hcn.org/issues/49.12/essay-climate-change-confronting-despair-in-the-age-of-ecocide>

Note: Feb. 21-22 Jeffers Festival in Carmel.

February 18: Exploration and exploitation: Pearls, Marine Life, Hunting, Mining.

Reading: Ecology, "3-4 approaches," by Ed Ricketts (PDF); Afterword, *Log from Sea of Cortez*, "About Ed Ricketts" (read this before reading *Log*); *Log from Sea of Cortez*, chapters 1-14.

September 2019 issue of *The Smithsonian*:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/ship-sent-john-steinbeck-epic-ocean-voyage-may-ride-again-180972847/>

“Anecdote of a Jar,” Wallace Stevens,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/14575/anecdote-of-the-jar>.

Moriarity JR (1965) The discovery and earliest explorations of Baja California. *J. San Diego History* 11.

<http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/1965/january/index-43/>

“And the entire history of the West, when we hold at arm’s length the excitement, the adventure, the romance, and the legendry, is a history of resources often mismanaged and of compelling conditions often misunderstood or disregarded,” Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West*, 19.

February 25: Ecological holism: “from the tidepool to the stars.”

Reading: *Log from Sea of Cortez*, complete.

“Literary Studies in the age of Environmental Crisis,” Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, 1996 U. of Georgia P.

Book group I: *Cannery Row*, an ecological novel.

March 3: Marine ecology/ecological activism: Rachel Carson

Reading: *Under the Sea Wind*. Film on Carson.

Bookgroup II: *Silent Spring*

March 10: Land Ethic

Reading: Introduction and *A Sand Country Almanac* + essays “On a Monument to the Pigeon,” “Red Legs Kicking,” “Thinking Like a Mountain,” “Cheat Takes Over,” and Part III.

Michael J. Lannoo, “Introduction” from *Leopold’s Shack and Ricketts’s Lab: The Emergence of Environmentalism*, 2010; “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” William Howarth in Glotfelty and Fromm; Philippon, Daniel J. “Introduction: The Ecology of Influence” and “The Call of the Wild: Aldo Leopold and the Wilderness Society.” *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2004. (PDFs)

Book group III: *Under the Feet of Jesus*

March 17: Land Use

Reading: *Hannah Coulter*; "A Letter to Wendell Berry," Wallace Stegner (PDF)

Bookgroup IV: *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*,

March 24: Ecofeminism

Reading: *Refuge*, 3-140.

Bookgroup V: Mary Oliver's poetry

April 7: The body and the environment

Reading: *Refuge*, complete; "When Women were Birds," Williams (PDF)

Bookgroup VI: African American nature poetry

April 14: Forests

Reading: *The Overstory*

Debate between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot over forest management (PDF)

April 21: Activism

Reading: *The Overstory*

Bookgroup VII: *The Monkey Wrench Gang* or *Desert Solitaire*

April 28: Activism, 2020

Reading: *The Overstory*

David Thomas Smith, Anthropocene photo-collage series look at in class together; <http://www.david-thomas-smith.com/ANTHROPOCENE>

Bibliography:

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Gaard, Greta and Murphy, Patrick. *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism. Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, Urbana/Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1998.

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Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, Chapel Hill: Uni. of North Carolina Press, 1975.

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Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007.

Murphy, Patrick. *Literature, Nature, Other: Ecofeminist Critiques*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.

Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.

Rigby, Kate. *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*, Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2004.

Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*, New York: Knopf, 1995.

Short, John R. *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment*, London/New York: Routledge, 1991.

Snyder, Gary (1990), *The Practice of the Wild*, San Fransisco: North Point Press, 1990.

Westling, Louise. *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender and American Fiction*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996.