

John Johnston
English/CompLit
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Ecocriticism and Green Studies

Project Summary

Some years ago I read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Though shocked and appalled, I still wanted to believe that the ecological damage by pesticides that she describes, while egregious, was only one result of an exploitative and wasteful economic system, and the selfish, irresponsible attitudes that go along with it. In retrospect, I confess that I may have sought to protect myself from the shock by "experiencing" the issue as more of an intellectual problem, vacillating between what I thought was the "realist" and liberal progressive path of amelioration, of gradual change brought about by education and raising the consciousness of the general public, and the radical, more "idealistic" (or cynical) view that only widespread ecological catastrophe would force our leaders to undertake the sweeping and systemic changes that are necessary for a truly healthy relationship with the environment. Later, reading more from the new field of "ecocriticism," I learned that these two paths and their contrasting attitudes were, of course, deep-rooted and widely discussed. They are reflected, for example, in the opposition between 'reformist' environmental criticism and the deep ecology movement, and Carolyn Merchant's "Two Recovery Narratives" in *Reinventing Eden*. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, before the Piedmont Project faculty workshop I had envisioned the course I would teach on ecocriticism as differing from what I habitually teach only in intellectual content; hence, we would read texts, discuss ideas, and the students would write essays and take at least one exam. At the same time, I was nagged by the obvious, almost overpowering fact that the ecological crisis that had given rise to ecology, ecocriticism and green perspectives had so visibly worsened, and the scale of the problem become so frightening and mind-numbing, that it could hardly be treated as one academic course or topic among many. Although I was certainly aware of the shift to the idea of sustainability, the workshop made me realize how truly important this shift really is. It's not simply a matter of mainstream culture finally beginning to

catch on and catch up, but a solution in progress that could eventually --indeed will have to-- mobilize us all. So I began to rethink the course. While discussion of global climate change in the classroom can be thorny and complex, the specific steps that have been and can be taken for sustainability are easily grasped and often ready to hand. In fundamental ways, this focus on specific practices seems to displace or at least blunt the opposition mentioned above, shifting our attention to accomplishable actions --individual and collective, little and large --that can put us on the path to a responsible and caring future.

Essentially, I have tried to build this shift into the course on "Ecocriticism and Green Studies" that I plan to teach in the Spring. Although we will talk about sustainability from our first day and throughout the semester, the first and middle parts of the course will center on scientific, literary, and cultural material clearly related to ecological and green perspectives. The third and concluding part of the course will engage us with sustainability directly, through reading and discussion and the students' individual experiences. Every student will have a sustainability project, and the final assignment (an essay or personal journal) will insure that he or she reflects seriously on this engagement.

English 368/CPLT 389 - Ecocriticism and Green Studies

Spring 2011

Professor John Johnston

TuTh 10-11:15

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Building/Room #

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Course Description:

We live within a mounting sense of ecological crisis. An acute awareness that human actions are seriously damaging the earth's basic life support systems --and the consensus in the scientific community is that soon this damage will become irreversible-- gives weight and urgency to our current reflections on how American society and indeed the human species can and even must learn to live responsibly within the complex mesh of living beings that inhabit the planet. Ecocriticism and green studies have emerged in large part as a response to this crisis. As interdisciplinary academic perspectives,

they can provide a stimulus to action and a valuable forum for the exchange of ideas and information.

This course is an attempt, first, to introduce these new studies, and second, and more importantly, to build outward from them toward the idea and realization of sustainability. The first part of the course introduces the basic terms and concepts of ecology and several themes taken up by ecocriticism and green studies; the second part considers a select body of exemplary literary texts (Shakespeare, romantic poetry, and nature writing) within an ecocritical frame, and challenges us to follow suit with a contemporary American novel and two contemporary films. In part three the readings expand across additional institutional frameworks, from anthropology, philosophy and holistic science to questions of the viability of our economic system and what role new technologies can play in reversing current environmentally destructive practices. Part four brings us, inevitably, to the critical and transcending question of sustainability: what course of action will lead to a viable future for human life on this planet. Individually and collectively, how do we confront the ecological crisis in a responsible and caring way?

A word about course methodology. Like most academic courses, this one will involve reading, discussion, and writing (and a brief exam on terms and concepts). At the same time, as we move through the semester, more of the work will be carried out collaboratively, in networks and small groups. The hope is that, in small ways to be sure, we can learn and practice strategies that will be necessary for confronting the more urgent task that lies before us as inhabitants of a planet in crisis.

Required Texts:

The Ecocriticism Reader, ed. Glotfelty and Fromm (U. of Georgia) [ER].

The Green Studies Reader, ed. Laurence Coup (Routledge), [GSR].

Ecology: a Pocket Guide (revised and expanded edition), Ernest Callenback (U. of California) [EPG].

Gain: A Novel, Richard Powers (Picador) [G].

The Revenge of Gaia, James Lovelock (Perseus Books) [RG].

Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto, Steward Brand (Viking) [WED].

The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, The Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability, James Gustave Speth (Yale U. Press) [BEW].

The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift, Andres R. Edwards (New Society) [SR].

Essays, poems, and chapter excerpts to be distributed as pdfs [pdfs]

Course Requirements:

A short exam on key terms and concepts; two essays, totaling 12 pages minimum; a final essay or personal journal on sustainability; and full participation in class discussion as well as work in collaborative networks and groups, which will include brief oral reports or presentations. More than 3 unexcused absences will reduce your grade, more than 5 will result in a failure. The final grade will be weighted as follows: the two essays count 20% each, the exam counts 15%, the final essay or journal 20%, and class participation 25%. To receive the full 25% for class participation you must read and prepare the assignments before the dates listed below, contribute regularly to class discussion, provide help and interest in collaborative work with fellow students, and initiate a sustainability project (which can be small and simple or more ambitious).

Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Jan 13 - Course Introduction

Part 1: Ecology and Ecocriticism

Jan 18 - *Ecology*, Callenback [EPG], pp. 3-58; "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," White [ER]; "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," Howarth[ER]; "The Uses of Landscape," Byerly[EPG].

Jan 20 - *Ecology*, Callenback [EPG], pp. 58-100; "Deep Ecology," Arne Naess, and "The Deep Ecology Movement," Bill Devall [pdfs]; "The Social Construction of Nature," Gifford[GSR], pp. 173-176.

Jan 25 - *Ecology*, Callenback [EPG], pp. 100-165; "Green Cultural Studies," Jhan Hochman, [GSR], pp. 187-192; "Global Capitalism and the End of Nature," Joel Kovel, and "Reinventing Eden," Carolyn Merchant [pdfs]; "Culture as Decay: Arnold, Eliot, Snyder," Elder[GSR], pp. 227-234.

Jan 27 - **Short Exam on terms and concepts**; excerpt from *The*

Earth's Biosphere, Vaclav Smil [pdf].

Part 2: Literary Texts and Two Films: Ecocritical

Perspectives

Feb 1 - The Green World in Shakespeare: passages from *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, and *The Winter's Tale*[pdfs] ; "Shakespeare's Three Natures," Danby [GSR], pp. 84-87.

Feb. 3 - continue above.

Feb 8 - Romantic nature poetry: William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," excerpt from "The Prelude"; John Keats, "To Autumn"; Persy Bysshe Shelley, "Ode to the Westwind"[pdfs]; "The Green Language," Williams, [GSR], pp. 50-58; "The Ode 'To Autumn' as Ecosystem," Bate [GSR], pp. 256-261.

Feb. 10 - continue above.

Feb 15 - Nature writing: "Remembering Pan," D.H. Lawrence[GSR], pp. 70-72; excerpt on a dying wolf from *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold; Chapters 1 and 2 from *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species*, Freeman House [pdfs].

Feb 17 - **Essay 1 due.** Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Chapters 1-6 [pdf].

Feb 22 - "Ecocriticism and the Novel," Head[GSR], pp. 235-240; *Gain*, Powers [G], pp.1-146.

Feb 24 - continue *Gain*, pp. 146-234.

Mar 1 - finish *Gain*, pp. 234-405.

Mar 3 - Class debate on the ecocritical merits of two films: *Blade Runner* and *Avatar*.

Mar 8 - 10: Spring Break. No class.

Part 3: Green Reflections and Critical

Consciousness

Mar 15 - "Bali: The Value System of a Steady State," from Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*; "The Ecology of Magic" and "Animism and the Alphabet" from Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*[pdfs];

Mar 17 - "The Three Ecologies," Felix Guattari [pdf].

Mar 22 - *The Revenge of Gaia*, James Lovelock [RG], Chapters 1-5. pp. 1-105.

Mar 24 - continue Lovelock, Chapters 6-9, pp. 106-159.

Mar 29 - **Essay 2 due.** *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto*, Brand[WED], Chapters 1, 4-5, pp. 1-24, 75-168.

Mar 31 - continue Brand, Chapters 6-7 and 9, pp. 169-233, 275-302.

Part 4: Sustainability

Apr 5 - *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*, Speth[BEW], Chapters 6-9, pp. 126-195.

Apr 7 - continue Speth, Chapters 10-12, pp. 199-237. Discuss sustainability projects.

Apr 12 - *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift*,

Edwards[SR], Chapters 1-4, pp. 1-96.

Apr 14 - continue Edwards, Chapters 5-7, pp. 97-140.

Apr 19 - Class presentations on sustainability projects.

Apr 21 - **Last class.** Course evaluation. Final thoughts.

May 2 - **Final Essay or Journal due.**