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**ENG 389W**

**Poetry and the Natural Environment: Towards a Sustainable World**

Given the historically close relationship between the lyric form and pastoral life, our images of nature and our understanding of poetry have mutually shaped one another. The poetic voice can be used to celebrate nature’s otherness or to inscribe nature with human concerns; often, both of these impulses can be noticed in a single poem. In this course we will explore how poetry has become, from the Romantic period through the contemporary era, the site of a philosophical contemplation about the *relationship* between man and nature. We will ask questions such as: are we observers of the natural world around us, or an organic part of it? Is nature a civilizing force, a place of solace and seclusion, or a Darwinian embodiment of a disordered world, “red in tooth and claw?” Why is nature so often gendered female in poetry, and how has this trope changed over time? How do poets understand—and perhaps even help to conserve—“wild” nature when it has become increasingly hard to find?

Particularly in the latter half of the course, we will think deliberately about what role poetry can play in helping us to strive for a more sustainable world. Is it true—as W. H. Auden famously wrote—that “poetry makes nothing happen,” or can the poets studied in this course be understood as promoting action towards environmental stewardship and justice? What does poetry do for us, and for our understanding of nature, that other forms of thinking and writing cannot? In short, how does the history of nature poetry—and its contemporary iterations as ecopoetry—help us to think about issues of environmental sustainability, and in what ways does poetry itself sustain us in the world?

All of these questions will be explored through close attention to the imagery, language, form, and tone of the poems we encounter. The main objective of the course is to slow down and pay attention to what poets and poems can teach us—and to learn ways of articulating this knowledge, both in discussion and in writing.

**Assignments and Grading:**

The course is designed to provoke both regular and cumulative reflection about the development of nature poetry and its relationship to environmental sustainability.

In addition to **making contributions to class discussion** each week, you will be asked to complete **a series of short written reflections**, one on each poet we encounter. These reflection papers (1-2 pages) will be due at the beginning of each week. You may use the reflection questions listed in the reading schedule below as your guide when writing these short papers, and you should back up your reflections with *specific textual evidence* from the poems themselves. We will practice how to quote from poetry and how to analyze poems in class, and we will have regular discussions about what constitutes a compelling argument about a work of poetry.

You will also complete a **final paper** (10-12 pages) at the end of the semester, designed to cover the work of multiple poets and to address questions about the kinds of contributions poetry can make towards creating a sustainable world. You may draw upon your short reflection papers in composing this longer final paper, and we will have a conference in which we will discuss which secondary resources might be useful in helping you to construct your arguments. (A list of some useful critical texts on ecopoetry and environmental writing is included at the end of the reading schedule below.)

The grade breakdown is as follows:

Reflection papers: 40% (This is a cumulative grade for 10 total 1-2 page papers, each worth 4% of your overall grade. You must submit a paper 10 of the 13 weeks listed below.)

Final paper: 30%

Participation in discussion: 30%

**Reading Schedule and Reflection Questions:**

Week One

William Wordsworth, “The Prelude” (two-part version from 1799)

Reflection questions: How does Wordsworth articulate nature’s role in his personal and poetic development? What “gifts” does nature give him, and how does he understand his debts or obligations to his beloved surroundings? How does his relationship to nature change from earliest childhood to young adulthood? What aspects of Wordsworth’s relationship to nature seem particular to him or to his time, and what aspects resonate with you today?

Week Two

Emily Dickinson, poems 5, 122, 124, 128, 129, 130, 121, 214, 239, 258, 288, 311, 314, 315, 318, 328, 449, 465, 520, 632, 978, 986, 1138, 1255, 1395, 1400, 1463, 1581

Reflection questions: Dickinson’s poetry is famously short and often inspired by her local surroundings. In their brevity, do her poems find ways to be as expansive and encompassing in their conception of nature as Wordsworth’s, if not more so? What is the relationship between the natural world and divinity and/or mortality in Dickinson’s work? How might questions of gender and gendered notions of authorship play into her articulation of this relationship?

Week Three

Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken,” “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” “Into My Own,” “A Dream Pang” (these are poems set in the woods); “Flowering Gathering,” “Rose Pogonias,” “Mowing,” “The Last Mowing” (these are poems about mowing); “Design,” “After Apple-Picking,” “Hyla Brook,” “The Oven Bird,” “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” “Desert Places,” “The Most of It”

Reflection questions: What kinds of metaphors, spaces, or ideas seem to recur across this selection Frost’s work, and why does the poet seem drawn to these motifs? Frost wrote that poetry “begins in delight and ends in wisdom,” so what forms of wisdom do his poems seem to offer us? What emotions other that delight seem to prompt the poems into existence, and what other feelings do they evoke? In what ways can some of Frost’s work be understood to be not only about nature, but also about the creation of poetry itself?

Week Four

William Carlos Williams, “Trees,” “Spring and All,” “The Pot of Flowers,” “Young Sycamore,” “The Rose,” “The Red Wheelbarrow,” “Nantucket,” “Flowers by the Sea,” “The Yellow Chimney,” “Pastoral,” “To Elsie,” “The Boticellian Trees,” “The Yachts”

Reflection questions: Williams’ poetry is more often rooted in urban settings than in the countryside in which we normally tend to locate nature poetry. Do you think his poetry can still aptly be described as “nature poetry,” and why or why not? What other terms might be used to describe the ways that he invokes elements of the natural world in his poems, and how do his stylistic choices—in his shorter imagist poems or in his longer lyrics—contribute to your sense of Williams’ conception of the environment?

Week Five

H. D., *Sea Garden* (all poems)

Reflection questions: In what ways does H. D.’s collection upend your expectations for a group of poems about flowers? How would you describe the specific environment she evokes in these poems, and what purpose seems to motivate her particular stylistic and descriptive choices? What do the poems tell us about how the relationship between nature and femininity has been conceived in the past, and about how it might be conceived differently?

Week Six

Wallace Stevens, “Anecdote of a Jar,” “The Snow Man,” “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” “Six Significant Landscapes,” “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” “The Idea of Order at Key West,” “A Postcard from the Volcano,” “Autumn Refrain”

Reflection questions: Unlike the previous poets we have studied, Stevens does not seem particularly rooted in specific places as a poet. In what ways, then, does natural imagery seem to inspire or animate this group of poems? What conceptions of the imagination and its capabilities emerge from Stevens’ evocations of the sea, animals, landscape, etc.? Does nature sustain the imaginative mind in these poems, or does the poetic imagination help to sustain and expand our conception of nature itself?

Week Seven

Elizabeth Bishop, “The Map,” “At the Fishhouses,” “The Fish,” “The Armadillo,” “The Sandpiper,” “The Moose”

Reflection questions: Most of these poems are focused on animals. Why do you think Bishop returns to the figure of the animal, and how would you describe the pose or attitude of her speakers in relation to the creatures that appear in these poems? To what purposes is description put in Bishop’s poems, and does the resulting conception of the natural world seem distancing, intimate, or both?

Week Eight

Derek Walcott, “Return to Dennery, Rain,” “A Sea-Chantey,” “Islands,” “The Castaway,” “A Tropical Bestiary,” “Oceano Nox,” “A Far Cry From Africa”

Reflection questions: Based upon these poems, how would you describe Walcott’s relationship to his homeland of St. Lucia, or to the Caribbean as a region more broadly? How is the notion of “home” understood by the poems’ speakers, and what is its relationship to “land?” To what thematic and poetic purposes is the imagery and language of water put in Walcott’s work? What is the relationship between the colonial history of the Caribbean in these poems and the notions of place—whether rooted in land, sea, or both—that emerge?

Week Nine

Lucille Clifton, “the discoveries of fire,” “flowers,” “song,” “africa,” “earth,” “new bones,” “roots,” “i once knew a man,” “the killing of the trees,” “water sign woman,” “blessing the boats,” “the mississippi river empties into the gulf,” and all untitled poems in packet

Reflection questions: Clifton’s early poetry largely centers around the urban lives of African-Americans, but these poems highlight her frequent use of natural imagery. To what purposes does she put the tradition of nature poetry, and in what ways might she be reinventing it? What do you make of some of the recurring motifs in her poetry: bones, gardens and fields, blackness and whiteness, the concept of history, the power of naming, the role of the unnamable? How does the earth, in its various forms, sustain both the weight and the power of the past? How do the questions of environmental justice that arise in some of these poems intersect with other forms of justice?

Week Ten

Robert Hass, “On the Coast Near Sausalito,” “Fall,” “Maps,” “Measure,” “Meditation at Lagunitas,” “The Image,” “The Beginning of September,” “Natural Theology,” “On Squaw Peak,” “Iowa City: Early April,” “Interrupted Meditation”

Reflection questions: What kinds of stories—historical or personal—are encoded in the Northern Californian spaces of Hass’ poetry? Hass’ poems revisit many of the themes covered in the course so far: nature as a kind of religion, nature’s relationship to poetic creation, the natural landscape and its relationship to memory and loss. How does Hass freshen or make new these thematic concerns? What is the relationship between the local and the universal in these poems, and how might the poems contribute to a discussion about the importance of a sustainable environment?

Week Eleven

Elizabeth Bradfield, *Approaching Ice*

Reflection questions: What is the effect of this collection’s sustained interest in polar exploration, and in ice imagery? How do the poems, stylistically and thematically, work to encourage you to think about those aspects and regions of the earth with which we are least acquainted? Given the importance of polar regions in any discussion of climate change, how do you think this collection might be understood in relation to matters of environmental sustainability?

Week Twelve

Mary Oliver, *Red Bird*

Reflection questions: Oliver’s poetry commands both critical respect and a wide audience. Why do you think her poems appeal so broadly? In what ways might the *apparent* simplicity of these poems point us towards ideas about the natural world that are complex or ethereal or both? What is the relationship between the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, or the earthly and the divine across this collection? In what ways do Oliver’s speakers find a sustaining meaning—or a sustaining mystery—in their natural surroundings? What ideas do some of the poems further about urgent matters of sustainability and environmental responsibility?

Week Thirteen

Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem*

Reflection questions: Why can’t the speaker of this poem seem to bring himself to write a nature poem? In what ways does the very concept or term “nature” need to be re-thought according to Pico’s poem, and how does the poem cause us to question behaviors, expectations, or stereotypes that we might mistakenly believe to be “natural?” Does the poem have a place in the lineage of nature poetry that we have been studying, or is it a response—a necessary corrective—to this tradition? Both?

Final, cumulative reflection paper (10-12 pages) due at the end of the semester.

Recommended critical texts:

Stacey Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*

Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and the Literary Imagination*

Camille T. Dungy, *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (Introduction)

John Elder, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*

John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*

Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*

Robert Hass, *What Light Can Do: Essays on Art, Imagination, and the Natural World*

Louise Westling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*

Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*