

ENGL 209: LITERATURE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

Prof. John MacNeill Miller
Office: Oddfellows 230
Office Hours: T Th 3–4pm
 W 12:00-2:30pm
 (and by appointment)
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Oddfellows 203
M W 3 – 4:15pm

Try to be one of those people on whom nothing is lost!
—Henry James, “The Art of Fiction” (1884)

Course Description

Who or what counts as an “environment”? Why do we think of some issues as environmental instead of social? And why do we call it “the environment,” anyway? This course seeks to answer those questions through readings in the cultural traditions that have shaped Anglo-American approaches to the environment. We will analyze a wide variety of texts, both artistic and practical, that condition our encounters with the natural world. We will also venture out into “the environment” ourselves in order to evaluate how representations of nature emphasize some elements of the environment at the expense of others. The course will conclude with independent research into the cultural importance of local creatures, as we reconsider our position as citizens of a broader interspecies community with its own complex history and significance.

Learning Outcomes

Students who successfully complete ENGL 209 will be able to . . .
. . . identify major movements and themes in Anglo-American writings on the environment.
. . . reflect on and articulate their own experiences of their natural and cultural environments.
. . . use the skills of analysis and interpretation to pull out significant information embedded in both the natural world and in human responses to it.
. . . recognize and engage with nonhuman members of their local biotic community.

Required Texts

All the readings on the course schedule are required. It is only necessary to purchase (or rent, or borrow) **specific editions** of some of our texts, however.

You **MUST** obtain the following editions for this course:

McKibben, Bill, ed. *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*.
Library of America, 2008. [ISBN: 978-1598530209]
Sinha, Indra. *Animal’s People*. Simon & Schuster, 2009. [ISBN: 978-1416578796]

Other readings and course media will be posted to Sakai.

Course Requirements

Graded Assignments

Final grades are determined on the basis of regular participation, two short tests, and regular short writing assignments. Final grades will be calculated by weighting assignments as shown below.

10% Participation

20% Tests

10% Test ONE (forty-minute “mid-term”)

10% Test TWO (forty-minute “final”)

70% Writing Assignments

15% “Nature of Fundraising” Paper

15% “Representing Responsibility” Paper

20% “Natural History and Cultural History” Paper

20% Nature Journals

Policies

Your presence and participation are expected in every class.

The participation grade reflects the type and frequency of student participation. Those students who arrive well-prepared every day, who regularly comment on and respond to others’ questions (including mine), and who offer their own incisive contributions can expect an A in participation. Students who generally arrive well-prepared and make a clear effort to participate in class each week can expect a B in participation. Students who come to class having done most of the reading, and who occasionally pitch into the conversation with relevant comments, can expect a C in participation. Students who show up, but rarely say anything relevant can expect a D in participation. Students who do not show up regularly, or who never say anything relevant to the conversation, will receive an F in participation.

If you are concerned or simply curious about your current grade, you should come to see me during office hours to talk about it. I do not calculate grades upon request.

Late assignments are dropped by one grade interval (A- = B+, B+ = B, B = B-, etc.) for each class they are late.

Missed quizzes cannot be made up. Unexpected absences on quiz days result in a score of 0% on the quiz. If you inform me of an unavoidable absence well in advance, however, I will not count the quiz in your final grade calculation.

Incorrectly formatted assignments risk being dropped by one grade interval, especially if the formatting results in a shortened assignment.

All assignments must be turned in both online (through the Sakai site) and in hard copy in class. Assignments turned in on-time online will be counted as “on time,” but they will not be graded until I receive a hard copy.

Every student should familiarize himself or herself with the Allegheny Honor Code. Drawing on someone else’s original thinking or writing without attributing that work to its source is plagiarism. Plagiarism, like other forms of cheating and academic dishonesty, constitutes a violation of the honor code. Violating the honor code will result in a 0% on the assignment—and may also result in a failure of the course alongside other more serious academic repercussions.

Computers, cell phones, etc. are not permitted in class, except insofar as they are functioning as e-readers.

Expectations and Exceptions

Course policies are designed to make this class run smoothly. In order for a teacher to do his or her job effectively (see **Learning Outcomes**) and deliver the best course possible to students, students must hold up their end of the bargain (see **Course Requirements**). Having this syllabus in your possession and choosing to remain in this course constitutes a kind of contract, both among all students and between every individual student and the instructor. You break these rules, or ask for exceptions to them, at your own risk.

If you do end up needing an extension or other exception, you are much more likely to get it by **speaking with me about it as soon as you think you may have an issue**. Emergencies and unexpected situations arise—of course—and it is your duty to inform me of them as soon as possible, so that we can work together to make sure they do not disrupt your individual work or our work as a class. While I will try to inform you when you accumulate too many absences or late arrivals, or are in any other way no longer a member in good standing of this class, following the rules is finally your responsibility.

If you need to get in touch with me, feel free to email me or to come to my office hours. I check my email regularly during normal work hours (8am – 5pm). If I receive an email from you during that window, I tend to respond as soon as possible—often immediately, or within an hour or two of receiving it. Emails that arrive at other times may take longer to receive a response. You are also welcome—no, encouraged!!!—to come and speak to me during my office hours.

Students with disabilities who believe they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact Disability Services at 814-332-2898. Disability Services is part of the Learning Commons and is located in Pelletier Library. Please contact that office as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely manner.

As with any other absence, if you need to miss class due to a religious observance, please let me know in advance so we can make arrangements to ensure that your absence does not adversely affect your standing in this class.

Last but not least: this world we share can be a grim, gruesome place. The authors, artists, and thinkers we encounter in class are trying to make sense of the world by representing it. They are also, in their own ways, historically bound, flawed human beings. In their work, then, they may represent facets of life that some people find disturbing or overwhelming, and they may do so in ways that strike us now as inadequate, offensive, or even unethical. Please prepare yourself accordingly. If you find that something you encounter in a text or that we discuss in class profoundly and pathologically unsettles you, I would like to know about it. Nevertheless, I am not a trained mental health professional. If such a case arises—and I hope it never does—I encourage you to seek the guidance of our counselors at the Counseling Center on the third floor of Reis Hall. They can be reached at (814) 332-4368 during work hours, or after hours through Campus Security: (814) 332-3357.

Course Schedule

Non-bold, non-italic items denote readings to be completed in preparation for class.

Bold items denote in-class activities or events.

**Starred, italic items* denote assignments due on a certain day.

“*AE*” indicates that a reading can be found in the *American Earth* reader.

“*SK*” indicates that readings can be found on Sakai.

All assignments and due dates may be subject to change.

Unit 1: Attending to the Environment

W 1/18 SK: Elton John and Tim Rice, “The Circle of Life” (1994)
Captain Planet PSAs (~1990-92)

Introductions

Assessment Quiz

Nature Journals Assigned (Darters and Hellbenders divided)

M 1/23 *AE*: John Burroughs, “The Art of Seeing Things,” 146-59 (1908), and “Nature
Near Home,” 168-71 (1919)

Environmental Literacy Quiz

Syllabus Quiz

Unit 2: Early Environmental Aesthetics

W 1/25 SK: Edmund Burke, from *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our
Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)

**Darters: Journal Entry 1 Due*

M 1/30 SK: William Gilpin, “On Picturesque Beauty” (1782)

- W 3/8 Sakai: John Muir, From *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, 85-9 (1867)
Val Plumwood, "Being Prey" (1999)
**Darters: Journal Entry 4 Due*

Unit 8: Whose Environment?

- M 3/13 *AE*: Alice Walker, "Everything Is a Human Being," 659-70 (1989)
- W 3/15 Sakai: Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), Letter to the Big Ten (1990)
**Hellbenders: Journal Entry 4 Due*
***The Nature of Fundraising" Paper Due*

****SPRING BREAK****

Unit 9: The Earth and the Globe

- M 3/27 Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (2009), Editor's Note–Tape Six
- W 3/29 Indra Sinha, *Animal's People*, Tape Seven–Tape Eight
"The Nature of Fundraising" Paper Returned
**Darters: Journal Entry 5 Due*
- M 4/3 Indra Sinha, *Animal's People*, Tape Nine–Tape Twelve
- W 4/5 Indra Sinha, *Animal's People*, Tape Thirteen–Tape Fourteen
**Hellbenders: Journal Entry 5 Due*
- M 4/10 Indra Sinha, *Animal's People*, Tape Fifteen–Tape Nineteen
- W 4/12 Indra Sinha, *Animal's People*, Tape Twenty–END
"Representing Responsibility" Paper Assigned

Unit 10: Rethinking Aesthetics and Advocacy

- M 4/17 Sakai: Jenny Price, "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A." (2005)
"Natural History and Cultural History" Paper Assigned
- W 4/19 Sakai: Juliana Spahr, "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2005)
Test TWO
Assessment Quiz Revisited

M 4/24 Rsrv: Trey Parker, dir., "Smug Alert!," ep. 141 of *South Park* (2006)
**"Representing Responsibility" Paper Due*

W 4/26 Rsrv: Theodore "Dr. Seuss" Geisel, *The Lorax* (1971)

M 5/1 **Course Conclusion and Wrap-Up**
"Representing Responsibility" Paper Returned

*** "Natural History and Cultural History" papers are due at the beginning of our exam period on Tuesday, May 9 at 7pm. Papers must be turned in in hard copy to my mailbox in Oddfellows 205. Papers not received at that time will be penalized per day they are late. Papers that are never received, or received after grades are due, will receive a 0%. If you would like feedback on your final paper, please email me to arrange a way to receive it.*