

**ENGLISH 484.01**  
TH 2-4:30 / Healy 106

## Tragic Ecologies

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William Henry Fox Talbot, "An Oak Tree in Winter," Calotype negative and salted paper print, c. 1842-3

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Since the Greeks, tragic form has given shape to stories of irreversible and unwilling catastrophe. Starting in the Victorian era, the term ecology began to name intricate systemic interactions from which no single phenomena could be extracted without loss. With tragedy and ecology as its coordinating principles, this course in environmental humanities takes the now-irreversible climate catastrophe of our late carbon era as the starting point for surveying the literary history of disaster. How have literary writers of the fossil fuel era imagined system-wide failures, "natural" cataclysms, and calamities that seem to exceed the power of any single individual to alter them? Amid early and more recent premonitions of the world's end, might literature offer models not just for writing the disaster --but also for thinking beyond it? And could attention to the longer history of our present moment --extending our sense of the contemporary-- help us find in the jumbled relics of past thought a resource for action now?

This course will focus primarily on British literature from the Age of Coal, circa 1800 to the present. The work to be considered will be "tragic" only in the broadest sense: we'll start with theories of that form from Aristotle, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others, but spin off to

survey a variety of genres, modes, and media platforms. We'll examine pseudo-scientific treatises and geological catalogues of "deep time"; look at poetry, verse drama, film, and the novel. We'll move from unstaged Romantic plays about utopia to Victorian pastoral elegies, shipwreck poems, and triple-deckers about interconnection; from tiny, handmade books to video games that generate endlessly variable new worlds. Throughout, we will work to see nineteenth century thinking as a resource for engaging the present.

***Required Texts:***

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works* (Oxford World's Classics): 978-0199538973

Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (Oxford World's Classics): B00BSZTWM8

Emily Bronte et al., *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Early Writings* (Oxford World's Classics): 978-0192827630

Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (Penguin Classics): 978-0140435474

Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (Columbia UP), ISBN: 023116954X

*The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory* (Broadview): 978-1551111001 (You can purchase this book used online for around 22 dollars.)

***Recommended Texts:***

These are books from which we'll read significant sections. They'll be available as PDFs but if you're serious about continuing the study of English I recommend you own them. Used is cheapest.

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford UP): 978-0195198102

William Wordsworth, *The Major Works Including The Prelude* (Oxford World's Classics): 978-0199536863

***Additional Readings:***

A significant amount of our semester's reading will be posted on our course blog; these readings are marked on the syllabus with an asterisk (\*). You should plan to budget at least \$50 for printing these files in the required hard copy format. You are expected **to print the PDFs in hard copy; read everything on printed paper; and (of course) bring all secondary texts to class.** Readings marked "supplementary" are just that: not required (formally or informally) but available to you should you desire further guidance on the primary texts.

## Assignments:

### *Formal Course Work:*

**Close reading assignment (primary).** (2 pages, single-spaced.) Details for this exercise in close reading will be provided, but essentially this is an assignment in the hyperbolically slow apprehension of a textual artifact. Your task will be to take time to appreciate this object in all its dynamic specificity: terms, tips, and helpful suggestions will be provided. You are not meant to argue but to *read*: your job is to notice everything. Details to be announced.

**Close reading assignment (secondary).** (2 pages, single-spaced.) Same as above, but engaging with a secondary source of your choosing. Focus is on microstylistic details and their conceptual consequences. Details to be announced.

**Take-home mid-term.** Open book, open notes, no Googling. The mid-term is just that: a temperature-taking of your work so far, assessing your capacity to engage imaginatively and substantively with the material to this point. Less formal than an essay, more structured than a blog post. Here as always, ideas matter most. You have 48 hours to complete them, choosing from among a set of essay questions. Honor system, with enforcement.

**Seminar paper.** (10-12 pp.) This is a sustained academic argument that follows the format of a published scholarly article, if slightly shorter. You are encouraged to expand your close readings into longer, more developed and fully-researched analyses. But you should also feel encouraged, too, to generate an entirely new argument about new text(s).

### *Other Work:*

**Weekly posts to our online blog.** (250-500 words each) Every seminar participant will make regular contributions to the class blog. In keeping with the multimedia nature of the era of coal, these posts can take any form: short essays making an argument about the week's reading(s); close readings of single passages with questions appended; or sets of discussion questions in dialogue with other posts. You may also gather and present a piece of writing, art, or mass culture that you see as relating to what we've read. (In this case a word about the relation you see would be appropriate.) Be sure to vary the form of your entries, moving from criticism to questions to creative posts and remediations of archival objects. *Posts are due the night before class, no later than midnight.* All class members are required to read all posts. Schedule to come.

**Curatorial Presentation.** (No more longer than 10 minutes) Each member of the seminar will be asked to *curate* one archival object related to ecology or poetics. "Object" is understood to mean textual, aesthetic, ephemeral, and physical artifacts from the Age of Coal, roughly 1800-2015. The root of "curate" is "care," so this project asks you to learn about your object, meditate on its significance to our class

and your thinking – in short, to care for it. This assignment will involve techniques of close apprehension, fine-grained thinking, and intimate appreciation -- plus research. The results will be posted on a blog secured for this purpose. Details to follow.

**Ad-Hoc Critical Presentations.** (3-5 minutes) Individual members of the seminar may be made responsible, from time to time, for presenting one of our supplementary readings to the group; these short, informal presentations (c. 3-5 minutes) should summarize the argument's key points and critical assumptions, then offer one or two critical questions to incite discussion. This assignment is designed to exercise your ability to quickly synthesize and restate critical arguments. Part of in-class participation grade.

**Sharing of Your Research.** (3-5 minutes) At the end of the term we'll hold an informal mini-conference that will replicate the format of a professional academic conference: you will prepare a short oral presentation of your research, which you'll present to your peers; discussion will follow. Part of in-class participation grade.

### **Policy on Late Work:**

Reliability is important, and respect for our shared academic endeavor means that lateness is strongly discouraged. Papers and other assignments will be penalized the equivalent of one letter grade for each day beyond their due date, with the first 24 hour period beginning immediately. Please see me in advance if extraordinary circumstances arise. Incompletes are offered only in genuinely exceptional moments of duress, as in *Jekyll and Hyde*, when Sir Danvers Carew is clubbed randomly in the street.

### **Course Grading Policy:**

Your final grade for this course will reflect the quality of written work you produce; it will also reflect the quality of your participation in the collaborative labor of the course. Thus, your thoughtful responses to the texts, your active participation in class discussions, and your level of commitment to our shared work will all contribute crucially to your final grade. Breakdown:

Online participation (blog posts, responses):	15%
In-class participation (includes research & ad hoc presentations):	25%
Close reading assignment (primary):	8%
Close reading assignment (secondary):	8%
Curatorial Presentation:	8%
Mid-term exam:	16%
Seminar Paper:	20%

### **Absence and Tardy Policy:**

The seminar-style nature of this course makes your presence in class imperative. One absence is allowed, for any reason. After that, and without exception, a 5% penalty from

your final grade will be assessed for each absence. Five absences is an automatic failure of the course. Please don't come to class late; two late arrivals count as one absence.

### **Plagiarism:**

The absolute prohibition here should be understood, but it is here contractually made clear that academic dishonesty of any kind will result, at the very least, in immediate failure of the course. See the Georgetown Honor System website for guidelines: <http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/system/53377.html>. In all matters I expect you to observe the Georgetown honor pledge: *To be honest in every academic endeavor, and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community as we live and work together.*

### **Disabilities, Special Conditions, Etc.:**

I'm committed to providing whatever I can to help you be successful in this course. For details about medical and other dispensations, please see: <http://guarc.georgetown.edu/disability/accommodations/>; and visit me early in the term to discuss how I can help.

### **Guides for Further Study and Research:**

Thinking conceptually about literature is difficult, since it entails showing how minute textual details reconfigure concrete historical dilemmas. For your research of matters Victorian, please consult the list of resources on our class Commonplace Book. Only after exhausting these options should you bother with Wikipedia. Please stay away from online summaries not mentioned here. And as always, please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions about this material. We're in this together. I'm here to help.

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## **TRAGIC ECOLOGIES: SCHEDULE**

*Please note that because this class is experimental, our schedule and readings are subject to change. Items marked with an asterisk are available online, via our course blog.*

### **Thursday, January 14 | What is Tragedy? What is Ecology?**

Introduction: Energy regimes and plot forms.

### **Thursday, January 21 | The Passion of the World: Coordinates**

John Clare, "The Badger," "The Tame Badger," "To a Winter Scene," "To a Fallen Elm," "The Nightingale's Nest," "Songs Eternity," "The Flood," "Insects," "Nutting"\*

Richard Anderson, "The World is Dying-- And So Are You"\*

George Monbiot, "John Clare, The Poet of Environmental Crisis -- 200 Years Ago."\*

Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind"\*

Chris Jordan: *Midway: Messages from the Gyre*\*

Greg Gerrard, "Animals"\*

### Thursday, January 28 | Disaster and the Problem of Genre

John Keats, "To Autumn."\*

George Gordon, Lord Byron, "Darkness."\*

*The Dark Mountain Manifesto*\*

Bill McKibben from *The End of Nature*\*

Timothy Clarke, from *The Cambridge Companion to Ecocriticism*\*

Ursula Heise, "Lost Dogs, Last Birds, Listed Species, and the Cultures of Extinction"\*

### Thursday, Feb 4 | Pastoral

William Wordsworth, "Home at Grasmere," "The Ruined Cottage," "The Old Cumberland Beggar," "The Thorn," "Nutting," "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," "O Nightingale! Thou surely art," "Appendix A: "There is an active principle alive in all things."

Raymond Williams, from *The Country and the City*\*

Jerome McGann, from *Romantic Ideology*\*

Selected paintings, John Constable\*

[CLOSE READING DUE, PRIMARY SOURCE]

### Thursday, Feb 11 | Counterpastoral

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

Deirdre D'Alberty, "Dark Nature: A Critical Return to Brontë Country"\*

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, selections\*

### Thursday, Feb 18 | Counterpastoral II

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, cont'd

The Brontës, *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal*, selections

John Ruskin, "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century"\*

John Ruskin, "Of the Pathetic Fallacy," in *Modern Painters*\*

Selected paintings, J.M.W. Turner\*

Jane Bennett, "The Agency of Assemblages"\*

### Thursday, Feb 25 | Elegy

John Milton, "Lycidas"

Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Adonais"

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H.," "Tithonus," and selected poems

Charlotte Brontë, “On the Death of Emily Jane Brontë”; “On the Death of Anne Brontë”; Emily Brontë, “Remembrance,” “The Night is Darkening Around Me.”  
Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach,” “To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-Shore”  
Jorie Graham, “Sea Change”\*  
Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”\*  
Tim Morton, from *The Dark Ecology of Elegy*\*  
Jeremy Jackson, “Ocean Apocalypse” (YouTube)\*

**SPECIAL SESSION: Tuesday, March 1 | Counterelegy**

**Jennifer Chang:** Guest Reading and Discussion of Modern(ist) Elegy / Pastoral  
Robert Hass, “Introduction.” In *The Eco-poetics Anthology*\*  
T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*\*; Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* facsimile manuscripts\*

**Thursday, March 3 | NO CLASS; [CLOSE READING DUE: SECONDARY SOURCE]**

**Thursday, March 10 | NO CLASS; SPRING BREAK**

**Thursday, March 17 | Dark Natures**

Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*  
Richard Kerridge, “Ecological Hardy”  
Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene”\*  
Select readings on determinism TBD.

*[MIDTERM EXAMS DUE BY EMAIL FRIDAY, MARCH 18, 5 PM]*

**Thursday, March 24 | NO CLASS; EASTER BREAK**

**Thursday, March 31 | Nonhuman Times**

Thomas Hardy, “Hap,” “Neutral Tones,” “The Darkling Thrush,” “The Minute Before Meeting,” and “Afterwards.”  
Christina Rossetti, “After Death,” “An Apple Gathering,” “Echo,” “Song,” *Monna Innominata*, and *Sing Song*  
Charles Darwin, from *On the Origin of Species*\*  
Michael Madsen, dir., *Into Eternity*

**Thursday, April 7 | Nature’s Economy and the Shipwreck of the World**

Gerard Manley Hopkins, all selections in anthology  
From Bernadette Waterman Ward, *World as Word*\*  
Stephanie LeMenager, “Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief”\*  
Tim Morton, from *Ecology Without Nature*\*

**Thursday, April 14 | Future Humanisms**

Benh Zeitlin, dir. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*  
Juliana Spahr, selected poems\*  
Patricia Yeager, “Beasts of the Southern Wild and Dirty Ecology”\*  
Margaret Ronda, “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene”\*  
Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*.

#### **Thursday, April 21 | Worldmaking**

Percy B. Shelley, *Queen Mab*; *Prometheus Unbound*; *Mont Blanc*; *On Life*, “The Sensitive Plant.” *Alastor*, “Mutability”; “To a Skylark,” *A Defense of Poetry*.  
Thomas Hardy, “Shelley’s Skylark”\*  
*No Man’s Sky*, and selected reviews.\*  
Stuart Curran, “Lyrical Drama: Prometheus Unbound and Hellas”\*  
Frances Ferguson, “Shelley’s Mont Blanc: What the Mountain Said”\*

#### **Thursday, April 28 | Ending is beginning**

Class wrapup and presentations of research.

#### **SPECIAL SESSION:**

#### **Tuesday, May 3 | *Ecology, Tragedy, and the Animal: A Graduate Mini-Conference***

Mini-conference and reception. Graduate section will be presenting research projects.

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*[SEMINAR PAPERS DUE IN HARD COPY, FRIDAY MAY 6, 5 PM]*