**COMPOSTION AND RHETORIC III – THEMES AND GENRES (ENGL 103)**

**FALL 2021**

**Instructor: Richard Astro (**[**astro@drexel.edu**](mailto:astro@drexel.edu)**)**

**Office hours: Monday 10-12 and Wednesday 1-3 via Zoom**

**Course objectives:**

**First and foremost, this is a writing course. By the time you join this class, you will have completed two terms of writing at Drexel (or at another college or university), and so you will have already gained a reasonably proficiency in recording your thoughts about this or that subject on paper. You should be able to write without grammatical errors and in a style that is pleasing to the reader. In this class, you’ll focus your writing on a single subject in which you’ll work to write increasingly in-depth prose as we move from one essay to another. That subject is the environment, and it’s as important and compelling a subject as virtually anything on earth. We’ll talk about and you’ll write about climate change, industrial pollution, nature and wilderness, and about preservation and conservation. To provide context to what you’ll be writing, we’ll read and talk about some great books – Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower,* and Ash Davidson’s *Damnation Spring*. And we’ll watch a couple of excellent films: *Into the Wild* and *The Day After Tomorrow*.**

**What is “the environment”?  What is “environmental literature”?  What is its purpose?  What is the role of “literature” in the human relationship with our environment?   What kinds of questions does environmental literature ask?  What kinds of questions do we ask of environmental literature? In this course, we’ll begin to tackle some of these questions.  To do so, we could cast a wide net to include texts written as early as a thousand years ago, from all corners of the globe, and in any number of languages**

**But given that we only have ten weeks, we will limit our examination (with a couple of exceptions) to twentieth and twenty-first-century texts written in the United States in English. These parameters should not imply clean boundaries or authority; genre boundaries are as fluid as the boundaries of language and national identity, and so the texts we’ll read certainly should not be taken as comprising THE environmental “canon.”  In other words, what is not included in our list demands as much notice as what is on it. But we must begin somewhere.**

**There are few if any issues that are more prominent today than those dealing with the environment. The dangers of climate change, industrial pollution, and the despoilation of our remaining natural resources threaten not only our personal comfort, but the well-being of the entire planet. Climate change is the ultimate wicked problem; it defies straightforward solutions and communication. During much of the past thirty years or so, climate communication focused on science, and we have made significant gains in terms of awareness.**

**Somehow, though, while we pay lip service to the need to reverse course and fix things, we really don’t do much about it. Perhaps it’s because climate chaos seems almost unimaginable. Perhaps reviewing statistics about the amount of carbon dioxide and methane in the air we breathe doesn’t seem really threatening. Perhaps we don’t have either the patience or the requisite knowledge to be able to understand what climate scientists tell us. The reality is that the challenge of transitioning citizens’ awareness into engagement in meaningful climate conversation and action remains a profound problem**

**And that’s where literature about the environment comes in. Put simply, it’s one thing to learn statistics about how many people died in an environmental disaster. It’s another to know one person who actually died in one. Novels, short stories, poetry and film do just that. This is ecocriticism: the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where we analyze texts that portray environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature.**

**When the narrative arts (fiction and poetry, for example) address key challenges of climate communication, they make problems more immediate and concrete. Writers can connect people’s (in)actions to the places and communities where the effects of climate change are most intensely felt. Artfully crafted stories transport us to another reality, indeed to another person’s reality, in ways that rhetorical communication does not. Experiencing climate change through literature deepens understanding and fosters empathy**

**And that’s what we’ll be doing in this class. Will we change the world? Hardly! But if we dig in and really work to understand what novelists, poets and essayists tell us about the natural world, we’ll emerge with a heightened sensitivity to environmental issues and be able and willing to do our small part to avoid a climate apocalypse.**

**Schedule:**

**Sept. 21 – Introduction and an overview of what we’ll do this term**

**Sept. 28 –Thoreau, Marsh, White and Burroughs (Natural History, essay #1 assigned)**

**Oct. 5 – Leopold and Berry. Team Projects Assigned (Natural History essay due)**

**Oct. 12 - Wilderness – Abbey, *Into the Wild.* Team Projects Assigned**

**Oct. 19 – A Case Study: The Desert– Williams, McPhee and *Desert Solitaire***

**Oct. 26 – *Damnation Spring*, Carson (essay #2 due)\***

**Nov. 2 – Guest presenter – Rick McCourt, The Academy of Natural Sciences**

**Nov. 9 – Climate Change – McKibben, Lopez, etc.**

**Nov. 16 – Environmental Justice - *Parable of the Sower* and Bullard (essay #3 due\*\*)**

**Nov. 23 – Happy Thanksgiving**

**Nov. 30 – Team Project Presentations**

**Dec. 7 – Team Project Presentations due**

**\*Ash Davidson, the author of Damnation Spring, will be speaking to another of my classes. If you’re free at the time of her appearance, you certainly should come. If not, I plan to record her presentation and play it during our class. More about this during our first class meeting.**

**\*\*We’ll discuss in class, but essentially this means writing your own response to environmental issues. Those issues include climate change (obviously!), wilderness preservation, nature more generally, citizen science, environmental justice, and so on. Your point of reference should be *Writers on Earth*. Many of the writers in the book are younger than any of us, but they do a good job of identifying issues and using literary techniques to deal with them. There’s passion in them, and they all share is Greta Thunberg’s plea that “our house is on fire.” But remember that it’s all not fears and tears. There’s a great deal of hope as well.**

**Texts:**

**Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968)**

**Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993)**

**Ash Davidson. *Damnation Spring* (2021)**

**Elizabeth Kolbert, *Writers on Earth* (2019)\***

**Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (1996) \*\***

**Bill McKibben, ed. American Earth (2008)\*\*\***

**Films:**

***Into the Wild* (2007)\*\***

***The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)**

**\*This very short book is a guide for essay #3**

**\*\*You can choose to read the book or watch the film or both!**

**\*\*\* This is the Library of America volume. The last time I looked, Amazon was selling it for $29 and the Library of America from $35. All of the other books can be purchased on line or in bookstores.**

**Readings from *American Earth***

**Henry David Thoreau – *Huckleberries* (pp. 26-36)**

**George Perkins Marsh – from *Man and Nature* (pp. 71-80)**

**John Burroughs – *The Art of Seeing Things* (pp. 146-158)**

**Aldo Leopold – from *A Sand County Almanac* (pp. 266-294)**

**Rachel Carson – from *Silent Spring* (pp. 366-376)**

**Lynn White Jr. – from *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (pp. 405-412)**

**John McPhee – from *Encounters with the Archdruid* (pp. 493-499)**

**Wendell Berry – *Preserving Wildness* (pp. 516-530)**

**Barry Lopez – *A Presentation of Whales* (pp. 696-715)**

**Bill McKibben – from *The End of Nature* (pp. 718-724)**

**Robert Bullard – from *Dumping in Dixie* (pp. 725-736)**

**Terry Tempest Williams – from Refuge (pp. 739-759)**

**Assignments:**

**Natural History essay (10%) - In this assignment, you will use the devices we observe in natural history and travel literature to write your own description of a place.  Practicing the modes we identified in the writings of Crevecoeur, Jefferson, and Thoreau, you will write about a local place, such as the campus, Fairmont Park, the Schuylkill or Delaware rivers, your own backyard.**

**Essay #2 (30%) – on a topic of your choice from a list to be supplied in class.**

**Essay #3 (30%) – By this time in the term, you should have developed you own personal response to the nature writing and the environmental issues we’ve been discussing all term. Using the essays and poems in *Writers on Earth* as guideposts, this is your opportunity to share your thoughts, your fears, your hopes about the global environment. In other words, this is your opportunity to write a piece of ecocriticism.**

**Team Project and final essay (30%) – I’ll divide the class into groups of three or four. Each group will examine a major environmental issue or event in American life and examine it and a novel, a group of poems or a work on non-fiction about it. We’ll see how literature helps us understand the issue or event more deeply, more personally.**

**Course Policies:**

**How to Know What Is Expected of You:  You are responsible for knowing what is expected of you and keeping apprised of your own progress. Become familiar with this syllabus. A copy is available for your reference on Blackboard. Changes to the syllabus may occur due to class interest or scheduling problems. I will inform you of any changes in the announcement section of Blackboard. Therefore, be online frequently. Remember that this is a hybrid class so that half of your work is on line.**

***Attendance & Late Work*: This course combines lecture and discussion as well as what you’ll be doing in the hybrid portion of the class on line, so regular attendance and class participation are essential. Attendance will be taken throughout the term. One unexcused absence is permitted; thereafter final grades are lowered five points for each absence. All assigned work must be completed on time and no late work will be accepted.**

***Format:* Papers must be submitted on time and in Microsoft Word format. DO NOT submit pdfs because I can’t write on them easily. Use 12-point type, one inch margins, and a readable font. Essays must be submitted in Blackboard. Do not submit emails since they are easily lost or misplaced.**

***Plagiarism*: All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course.  Sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented. In cases where plagiarism has been clearly established, an “F: will be the term grade.**

***Success:*  I am committed to ensuring each student’s success in this course, but you have to help me by coming to talk with me if you experience problems, from course materials or discussions in the classroom, to challenges with my style of teaching or difficulty meeting syllabus expectations.**