

English 171H: Literature of Science and Nature
“Wild and Wonderful”

Fall Semester 2016

Instructor: Lowell Duckert

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Meeting Time: 1:00-2:15 pm TR

Meeting Place: Armstrong Hall 119

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Office Hours: 2:30-5:30 pm T and by appointment

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Green (rust) belt, Buffalo River, New York

Environmental historian Roderick Frazier Nash defines “wilderness” by weighing its difficulties: “Wilderness . . . is so heavily freighted with meaning of a personal, symbolic, and changing kind as to resist easy definition.” It has been a contested term for a more critical reason than his lexical one admits, however: for assuming a place – pristine nonhuman nature – untouched by pollutive human culture. Starting with this objection, our class exposes trans-historical troubles that “wilderness” presents: of gender and race (as white masculine space); of temporality and nationality (as a nineteenth-century American term); of aesthetics (as beautiful or sublime, affective realms of the *wondrous*); of biodiversity (the weirdness and mystery of *wild-life*); of misanthropy and pessimism (especially when faced with climate change and steadfast faith in scientific mastery); of disenfranchisement and displacement (including indigenous peoples and the poor); of access (packaged for ecotouristic consumption); of sanctification (Judeo-Christian nostalgia over lost paradise); and of utility (as a commodifiable resource worthy of con- or pre-servation). We will ask *who* creates “wilderness” and *for whom* that definition benefits, the trademark inquiry of environmental justice. Yet while opposing *some* definitions of wilderness we will embrace *others*. Across literary genres and time periods – poetry, non/fiction, and film; medieval to the modern – we will track wilderness’s attractions and joys, witness wilderness as an *event* full of flourishing, emergence, and resurgence shared between humans and nonhumans both. Desiring this wonderful capacity, we may even begin to wonder about alternative democratic, economic, and ethical futures for the wild things amongst – and within – us.

Learning Objectives:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. describe and discuss the complex relationship between literature, science, and nature
2. construct thematic connections across works of art by examining (and critiquing) key concepts like wilderness, vitalism, the human, the sublime, technology, and catastrophe.
3. create and revise experimental writing assignments that demonstrate close readings and critical analyses of literature
4. evaluate interdisciplinary methods of studying English literature, thereby testing the limits of said disciplines in order to imagine a methodology that accounts for our enmeshment and ethical engagement with “endless forms” (as Charles Darwin put it) textual and embodied

Required Books: (available from the WVU Bookstore; please note the exact edition specified)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Norton, ed. Simon Armitage)

Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings* (Penguin)

Denise Giardina, *The Unquiet Earth* (Ballantine)

Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Anchor)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Penguin)

M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (Penguin)

Cheryl Strayed, *Wild* (Vintage)

Requirements:

1. *The basics:* attend class; finish assigned readings on time; participate in discussions. I expect you to be prepared for every meeting, which means that you need to pose thoughtful questions and ideas to the group. This is not a straightforward lecture course: whether or not you meet these criteria determines how many participation points you receive. Difficult terrain lies ahead, but the challenge, I assure you, will be mutual. I want us to grapple with the texts, engage in spirited conversation, and pose more questions than answers.
2. *Wilderness journals* are weekly responses (approximately one page, double-spaced) in which you will meditate on the relationship between environment and imagination. I would like you to pick a wilderness area of any size – be it your junk drawer, the forest near your home, some mold – return to it throughout the semester, and note the weekly changes you observe. How does this ecology make you think differently (or not) about the concept of “wilderness” – e.g., the indistinguishability of rural from urban? Be creative; feel free to be personal. Each submission will be graded pass/fail according (1) to length and (2) relevance to the reading: i.e., if you cite and expand on the text rather than simply summarize it. In general, your responses are meant to ask intelligent questions about that week’s reading, provide a study guide for the midterm exam, generate ideas for your final paper, and, I hope, address your own sense of enmeshment.
3. *Complete* a midterm examination (in class).
4. *Compose* a final paper (5 pp.): the final assignment, “Wild Time,” asks you to place one of our required texts – a (past) work of art – in conversation with a current environmental issue of your choice. An excellent (A) paper follows these criteria: demonstrates an advanced level of literary analysis, engages and cites text throughout, puts forth a sophisticated and compellingly innovative argument, and contains few or no grammatical or mechanical errors.

Grading:

Participation and attendance in class	20
Weekly reading responses (wilderness journals)	25
Midterm examination	25
Final paper	30
Total	100

Attendance Policy and Code of Courtesy:

I define “present” as arriving on time with your cellphone silenced; bringing the appropriate book to class; giving me and your peers your full attention; and remaining in the room until the class ends. Laptops are allowed only for note-taking purposes. I will allow three absences: after that, your grade drops a letter for each additional absence (e.g., an A becomes a B). Late work will not be accepted. At six absences, you fail the course. If you foresee a scheduling conflict, please notify me as soon as possible. Incompletes will be considered only if you apply to me before the end of the term; once I agree, we will negotiate the conditions under which the grade of “I” will be changed to a letter grade and sign a contract. Incomplete work will be submitted before the last day of class of the following semester (at the latest).

Academic Integrity:

The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the West Virginia University Academic Catalog: <http://catalog.wvu.edu/undergraduate/coursecredittermclassification/#academicintegritytext>. Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me before the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

Inclusivity Statement:

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. Any attempt to disrupt the nondiscriminatory environment of this class will not be tolerated. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services: (304) 293-6700. For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see <http://diversity.wvu.edu>.

Contact:

I encourage you to take advantage of my office hours (information above), and feel free to email/call me at any time. Never hesitate to ask a question, express a doubt, or request clarification. Make sure that your MIX email address is operational; I will frequently notify you about what to read for a given day, and I will occasionally post documents online.

Schedule of Readings (subject to change):

Week One

R 8/18 Introductions

Week Two

T 8/23 William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”; Roderick Frazier Nash, “Prologue: The Condition of Wilderness” (online)
R 8/25 Henry David Thoreau, “Ktaadn” from *The Maine Woods* (1864); John Muir, “A Wind-Storm in the Forests” from *The Mountains of California* (1894); Aldo Leopold, “Thinking Like a Mountain” from *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) (online)

Week Three

T 8/30 Krakauer, *Into the Wild*
R 9/1 Krakauer

Week Four

T 9/6 Krakauer
R 9/8 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Week Five

T 9/13 *Gawain*
R 9/15 *Gawain*

Week Six

T 9/20 Cavendish, *The Blazing World*
R 9/22 Cavendish

Week Seven

T 9/27 Cavendish
R 9/29 Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Week Eight

T 10/4 Shelley
R 10/6 Shelley

Week Nine

T 10/11 Shelley
R 10/13 Midterm exam

Week Ten

T 10/18 Shiel, *The Purple Cloud*
R 10/20 Shiel

Week Eleven

T 10/25 Shiel
R 10/27 Giardina, *The Unquiet Earth*

Week Twelve

T 11/1 Giardina
R 11/3 Giardina

Week Thirteen

T 11/8 No class: Election Day
R 11/10 No class

Week Fourteen

T 11/15 Strayed, *Wild*
R 11/17 Strayed

Week Fifteen

No class: Fall Recess

Week Sixteen

T 11/29 Strayed
R 12/1 Individual conferences (optional)

Week Seventeen

T 12/6 Class conclusion; final paper due W 12/14 at 1:00 pm (day of scheduled exam)