

Senior Seminar: Animals and Nature in U.S. Literature, Spring 2020
Dr. Catherine Wilcoxson
MW 12:30-1:45 Bunce 332

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as an “earth-centered approach to literary studies” which analyzes the relationship between literature and our physical environment. The first wave of ecocriticism emerged in the 1960s, following the publication of Rachel Carson’s environmental classic *Silent Spring*, emphasizing nature writing, which chronicled the physical world and the lives of non-human animals. The second wave of ecocriticism, starting 20 years later, engaged in breaking down distinctions between the human and the nonhuman world, and exploring the complex intersections between the environment and culture.

This course starts with European American attempts to make sense of the unfamiliar and threatening wilderness, where some feared Satan might be in league with Indians and witches, plotting to destroy them. Calvinists believed in Nature as “God’s book,” where the elect could laboriously trace out their progress towards salvation. John Winthrop wrote of a “great combat between a mouse and a snake” in Watertown (“in the view of divers witnesses”): in the unexpected victory of the mouse, he found “this interpretation: that the snake was the devil, the mouse was a poor contemptible people which God had brought hither, which should overcome Satan here and dispossess him of his kingdom” (*Norton A*, 178). The Native Americans they encountered, of course, understood nature, property, and natural resources in a very different way, which led to centuries of broken treaties, warfare, and genocide. The Enlightenment (with its attempts at scientific objectivity, its attention to exploration and classification), followed by Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism, each brought marked shifts in how we “read” and understand nature and non-human animals, and our own place in the world.

Students are responsible for leading class discussion and will give presentations on secondary sources. Each student will write short pieces of analytical writing leading up to one long (10- to 12-page) research paper in several stages, starting with a research paper proposal, followed by a draft, an annotated bibliography, and the final version.

We will read works chosen from the following list:

Short pieces online, from Native American creation stories, Audubon, Alexander Wilson, Lewis and Clark, William Barton, various Transcendental writers, Carolyn Spofford’s, “Circumstance,” short stories from Jack London; as well as contemporary poets, and the following complete works:

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Pax by Sarah Pennypacker

Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward