LCIBY020

Climate-Changed Literature? On Reading, Misreading, and Unreading Texts We Once Knew.

Reading like a Tree.

What can literature do in an era of climate change? Has literature itself been changed, unbeknownst to us? Has it become unreadable, i.e. has it become impossible for us to take up a book of Romantic poetry, an eighteenth-century novel, a Shakespeare play, a nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, without feeling a sense of irresponsibility? What can we do as readers, critics, writers, when “the world is burning” (W. S. Merwin) and the tools that used to be ours seem outdated in the face of the present conflagration? In his book-length essay The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (2016), Amitav Ghosh argues that the novel, as we know it, is not up to the task of representing the impending ecological catastrophe. We need new genres, new structures, maybe even new words. Literature is not to become extinct, but to adapt. But has it at all done so? For some time now, writers of climate fiction seem to have taken up the challenge, and enrolled the climate into their apocalyptic, or post-apocalyptic, plots. But is climate-change merely yet another scenario? What if climate-change were challenging the very contours of representation? The very possibility that we thought we had of “tell[ing] ourselves stories in order to live” (Joan Didion)? What if it threatened, or invalidated, the very possibility of narrative, and as such was not only “unthinkable,” to take up Ghosh’s word, but unamenable to aesthetic representation as well?

In fact, climate change is far from a new concern for literature, which has repeatedly and variously attempted to give palpable forms to the threat of biotic extinction in the age of the Anthropocene. And enmeshed as we have been in certain ways of reading, we have ignored it. Now is the time to go back and uncover how climate change has been interwoven in the texts we have (mis)read. Reading “all literature” as “climate-change” literature (J. A. Brown) means to unread it, and come to terms with what Timothy Clark has called literature’s “emergent unreadability.”

The purpose of this seminar is to try to (un-)read – or unlearn how we have read in order to read anew – an array of texts in the light of today’s understanding of climate-change. Because the national scale of analysis that frames our practice of literature no longer holds in a world where global warming threatens the planet as a whole, we will also explore non US literatures; because climate change challenges the disciplinary divide between literature and its “others,” we will also venture into nonfictional essays, philosophical texts and scientific reports.

This year, the focus of this seminar will be on trees, plants, and vegetable life that we will take as our guides and companions in our literary wanderings. North American letters will be our main terrain but some sessions will be co-taught with Prof. Thomas Dutoit’s seminar at Université de Lille, which takes up the same questions through – mostly British – paths.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- A survey of 19th-century US literature, canonical and non-canonical, from an anthropogenic perspective. Measure the impact of
- Acquire the method of textual commentary (in particular, how to balance close reading and argument).
- Acquire some familiarity with secondary sources: how to use them? How to discuss them in relation with the text under study?
- Improve oral and written linguistic skills and acquire specific vocabulary.

EVALUATION:

- Oral participation: 25% (includes team work presentation)
- Mid-term assignment: 25% - Written Paper. Team work.
- Final assignment: 50% - One section of a written paper.

CLASSES SHARED with U. of LILLE will take place in room 115.
SCHEDULE


2. Wednesday, Jan. 29: “O Pioneers!” James Fenimore Cooper and Deforestation


Further readings:

3. Wednesday, Feb. 5 –Ecogothic Approaches. NO CLASS. Group Assignment.
Team work with Lille students.

Primary Sources: Choose ONE.

Secondary Sources:


Primary sources:
- WORDSWORTH, William, “The World is Too Much With Us” (1907) and other poems.
- HOPKINS, Gerard Manley, “Binsey Poplars,” “God’s Grandeur” (1877)

Secondary source:
5. Wednesday, Feb. 26: Versions of the Wilderness. Nathaniel Hawthorne & Mary White Rowlandson

Primary Sources:
ROWLANDSON, Mary White. A Narrative of The Captivity and Restauration of Mary Rowlandson. 1682. Selections.

Further Reading:
MICHELET, Jules. La sorcière. 1862. Selections.


DICKINSON, Emily. Selection of poems.

Secondary Source:


RUSKIN, John, “Introduction,” “Moss,” and “Root” from Proserpina (1865-74)

Further Readings:
COOPER, Susan, Rural Hours (1850) Selections.
WHITE, Gilbert, The Natural History of Selborne (1789) Letters 1-6; 63-66 (7-17; 229-235)

8. Wednesday, March 18: Queer Ecocriticism?

JEWETT, Sarah Orne. “A White Heron” (1886)

9. Wednesday, March 25. Cross-Species Encounters

Primary Source:

Secondary Source:

10. Wednesday, April 1—SHARED SESSION. This session will consist of students from Paris and Lille conversing, based on guidelines to be announced.

BREAK
11. Wednesday, April 22- Interwoven &c.

Primary source:

Secondary sources:


**Classroom Conduct**: Basic rules of classroom etiquette will be expected in this course. Please silence cell phones in class and do not text during class time. If you want to use your laptop to take notes, refrain from checking email, facebooking, and otherwise multi-tasking during class time. Multi-tasking interferes with a student’s ability to focus and distracts other learners in the vicinity. **Punctuality and regular attendance** are important. **You will also be expected to have read the documents before coming to class.**