Seminar 2: Animals and Nature in U.S. Literature

Dr. Catherine Parrish

Fall 2017

Fridays, 9:30-10:45 and 11:00-12:15

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. The Puritans believed in Nature as “God’s book,” where the elect could carefully and laboriously trace out their progress towards salvation. In his *Journal*, 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 over a century of warfare in Virginia and New England. The Enlightenment (with its attempts at scientific objectivity, its attention to exploration and classification), followed by Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism, all in turn brought marked shifts in how we “read” and understand nature and non-human animals, and our own place in the world.

In this Seminar 2, students will be responsible for leading class discussion. Each student will give a presentation on a secondary source. Each student will write two short essays, and then write a long (14-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:

Native American creation stories

John Smith, from *A Description of New England*

Edward Taylor, “Upon a Wasp Chilled with Cold”

Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” and “Of Insects”

John James Audubon, “Bald Eagle”

Alexander Wilson, “Ivory-Billed Woodpecker” (*American Ornithology*)

From *Journals of Lewis and Clark*, “Grizzly Bears”

William Bartram, “Ephemera,” “Crystal Bason,” “Encounters with Alligators”

 (*Travels Through North and South Carolina*)

William Cullen Bryant, “To a Waterfowl,” “The Prairies”

Frederick Douglass, from *The Heroic Slave*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, from *Nature*

Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden*

Emily Dickinson, poetry

Carolyn Spofford, “Circumstance”

Walt Whitman, “Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking,” “A Noiseless Patient Spider,”

 “I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing”

Jack London, *The Call of The Wild*

From *Black Elk Speaks*

William Faulkner, “The Bear”

Alice Walker, “Blue”

Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,” and

 *Ceremony*

Berndt Heinrich, from *Ravens in Winter* and *Animals in Winter*

Terry Tempest Williams, from *Refuge* and *Red*

*Pax* by Sarah Pennypacker

Contemporary poetry: selections from Robert Hayden, Elizabeth Bishop, Mary

 Oliver, Henry Taylor, Joy Harjo, Rita Dove, Sherman Alexie, Natasha

 Trethewey, and Maria Melendez.