

## **Level Three Module: THEORY, ANIMALS, AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

### **A module linked to Criticism and Literary Theory (Stage Two)**

#### **Department of English Literature, University of Sheffield**

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This course will offers answers to the question: if language is fundamentally “human”, what happens when we think about literature from a perspective beyond humanity’s?

Even while real animals and untouched natural spaces disappear at an increasing rate from the world, their representations resurface everywhere in cultural life. Of course, there are many well-established discourses for thinking and debating about animals and the environment, from natural history and popular science to green politics and the philosophy of animal rights. However, the very different questions about the meaning and value of “nature” that are raised by twentieth-century literature and theory are rarely heard.

This module has a very clear focus because it uses literary and theory texts to study a particular social issue (about which no previous knowledge is assumed or necessary); so it will appeal to students who like such a focused approach to applying theory. The module carries forward questions posed by some of the most politically engaged strands of LIT 204—most notably the theories of feminism and postcolonialism. We will combine enthusiastic debate with reasoned critical reflection - and issues raised by the literature and theory under discussion include: the implications of the ways in which we construct the meaning of “animal” and “nature”; how to theorise the differences of humans from the natural environment; the impact of political thinking about animals and the environment on literary studies; the importance of concepts such as race and gender in our attitudes to nature; the role of literary form in our understanding of nature and vice versa.

There will be a course pack and we will relate the theory material to three literary texts: Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, and J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, and Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams*. Students will also be encouraged to apply the discussion to literary texts from core courses (e.g. Restoration, Romantic, or Victorian literature) and the course will provide valuable contexts for studying Modern Literature and Contemporary Literature.

#### **Field Trip**

In week 8, the class will go on a field trip to either Chester Zoo or another site of animal display (in previous years there have also been trips to art galleries in London). The trip is designed to allow students the opportunity to research a particularly relevant site for the representations of nature/animals in the context of their theoretical study on the course. The trip will be discussed with students at the start of the course to ensure viability.

#### **AIMS**

The course aims to help students understand the variety of meanings that animals and nature accrue in contemporary culture, specifically through learning about theoretical writing on the topic. The course aims to develop understanding of animals and nature as both objects of representation and as subjects of meaning in themselves and the ability to analyse, explain and evaluate different types of creative writing about animals and

environmental issues. In particular we will discuss the representation of animals and nature in relation to other critical concepts, particularly gender.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

### *Knowledge*

It is expected that by the end of the course students will

1. have developed a critical understanding of theoretical ideas about nature and the animal
2. be able to discuss the relationship between the concept 'nature' and other critical concepts addressed in CLT1, particularly gender
3. be able to use their understanding of theory to analyse and explain the representation of animals and the natural environment in the literary texts discussed on the course

### *Skills*

It is expected that by the end of the course students will have

4. The ability to sustain a reasoned argument backed-up with relevant evidence; presented according to the department's criteria
5. The ability to conduct independent web-based and library research that can be used to develop and refine their individual response to course material
6. The ability to communicate their own ideas and respond to others in discussion
7. The ability to manage unsupervised group work

## **ASSESSMENT**

This module is assessed by three pieces of coursework: a mid-term essay of 1500 words (40% of marks) and, at the end of term, a short critical analysis based on a day-long field trip (presuming availability, 20%), and second essay of 1500 words (40% of marks). The essay questions and critical analysis will be designed to allow students the opportunity to write answers that meet outcomes 1, 2 and 3. Similarly this coursework will be used to monitor the extent to which outcomes 4 and 5 have been met. In this case, students should refer to the department's grading criteria which explain in detail the standards involved in academic essays. Although outcomes 6 and 7 do not explicitly form part of the weight-bearing assessment, these will be assessed continually by the tutor during seminars and through set seminar work, with feedback given on request in office hours.

## **COURSE CONTENT**

Students will be presented with a package of extracts from the works of the theorists to be discussed. These extracts will be used to illuminate discussion of the set texts as well as a selection of twentieth century literary texts that will be provided. The set texts are

**Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (London: Harvill, 1999) ISBN: 1860465838**

**J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (available online at [www.tannerlectures.utah.edu](http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu))**

**Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (London: Virago, 1979) ISBN: 0860680649**

Texts in bold will be available for purchase at the University Bookshop.

### **TEACHING**

One tutorial of one hour, in which a brief introduction to the theoretical material will be followed by small-group and open discussion and one one-hour seminar based on students' ideas about the literary texts. Over the course, we will cover material relating to each of the aims. In seminar, specific aspects from the course material will be discussed and analysed (outcomes 1, 2, 3, 6); this will give students a basis from which to develop individual responses for essays (outcome 4). Students will also be given advice on valuable avenues for independent research (outcome 5). Students will also be required to engage in a group project outside of the seminar resulting in a presentation (all outcomes).

## COURSE READING SCHEDULE

2008-09

### BACKGROUND: BELIEFS AND CONCEPTS

#### Week 1

- Class 1: Introduction and Discussion
- Class 2: Introductory Discussion: Literature, Theory and Politics—**Jody Emel and Jennifer Wolch, and Carolyn Merchant**

#### Week 2

- Class 1: Environmental Ethics and Deep Ecology— **Desjardins, Aldo Leopold, Holmes Rolston III**
- Class 2: Animal Ethics—**Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Martha Nussbaum**

### ENVIRONMENTAL THINKING AND THE POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

#### Week 3

- Class 1: The Social Construction of Nature—**Terry Gifford, Kate Soper**
- Questions from Group 1
- Class 2: Nature + postmodern theory of narrative—**Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer, Linda Vance, Ursula Le Guin**
- 200 word post on the discussion board

### ECOCRITICISM: ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT AND LITERARY STUDY

#### Week 4

- Class 1: Ecocritical theory 1—**Lawrence Buell**
- Questions Group 2
- Class 2: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS 1— from **Barry Lopez**
- 200 word post on the Discussion Board

### ECOFEMINISM: POLITICISING ECOCRITICISM

#### Week 5

- Class 1: Ecofeminism—**Val Plumwood**
- Questions Group 3
- Class 2: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS 2—**Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing***
- 200 word Post on Discussion Board

#### Week 6

- Class 1: Feminist Ecocritical Theory—**Patrick Murphy**
- Questions Group 4

- Class 2: **REVIEW AND ESSAY ADVICE**

**Week 7 \*\*\*\*READING WEEK – NO CLASSES\*\*\*\*\***

KEY CONCEPTS IN ANIMAL STUDIES: The Gaze

*Week 8*

- Class 1: Animals in the Human Gaze 1—**John Berger and Jonathan Burt**
- Questions Group 1
- Class 2: Animals in the Human Gaze 2—**Steve Baker**
- Questions Group 2

*Week 9*

- Class 1: Becoming Animal 1: **Deleuze and Guattari / Jason Urpeth in Animal Philosophy**
- Questions Group 3
- Class 2: Becoming Animal 2: Herzog, *Grizzly Man* (Textual Analysis 3, from video library) and more on **Deleuze and Guattari / Urpeth** 200 word discussion board post

*Week 10*

- Class 1: Significant (Animal) Otherness 1—**Jacques Derrida and David Wood**
- Questions Group 4
- Class 2: Field Trip: The Animal Gaze Exhibition

*Week 11*

- Class 1: More on Derrida and Wood; Field Trip Reflection
- Class 2: No class

*Week 12*

- Class 1: TEXTUAL: ANALYSIS 4—**J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (via WebCT link to the Tanner Lectures in Human Values site)**
- 200 word discussion board post
- Class 2: Reflection
- 200 word discussion board post

## ASSESSMENT

Answer one of the following questions with reference to at least two theoretical texts, one of which should be from the course pack. For the purposes of this assessment an essay or extract from an essay in the pack constitutes one theoretical text. To illustrate your arguments, you may use any examples from any literary or cultural texts of your choosing. Please consult the Theory Essay Guidance notes on MOLE before beginning your essay.

1. Consider how central environmental concerns and any cultural response to them should be in the English Literature curriculum.
2. Write an essay that introduces and explains the importance for the literary/cultural critic of at least two of what you consider to be key issues in the field of "environmental ethics".
3. 'It is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the 'real' thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier' (Kate Soper). Write an essay that explains the conflict between a belief in the physical reality of nature and the idea that "nature" can never be separated from our conceptions of it.
4. Examine how the issue of gender complicates thought about the representations or theorisations of nature.
5. 'One of the major contributions of postmodernism thus far has been to challenge us to recognise that all human knowledge is essentially narrative, just a story in the making' (Linda Vance). Examine the importance of considering 'narrative' when thinking about the representation of the natural environment.
6. Examine Lawrence Buell's argument that critics of environmental writing should be attuned to writers' "dual accountability" to the aesthetic and factual realms.
7. Explore ways in which any creative text(s) develop or extend the scope of debate about nature and the environment in the theoretical material you have read.
8. To what extent does its basis in determined political or ethical commitment compromise the analysis of cultural texts from an environmental perspective?
9. 'Like the unconscious, the nonhuman also articulates itself by means of various "dialects", and neither requires volition to do so' (Patrick Murphy). Explore the extent to, or ways in which the theory you have studied suggests that nature is a signifying system in its own right.
10. If you wish to write on a topic not covered here, this may be possible, but you must get approval for your idea from me first. You must formally submit your proposed essay question/topic in an email at least two weeks before the essay deadline. You should also include brief details of the authors and themes you intend to write on. I will then either approve, amend, or reject your title. Your essay will not be marked if its subject has not been approved.

## ASSESSMENT 2

**You must complete sections one and two. The two sections will be graded separately: section one will be worth 20% of the overall module mark; section two will be worth 40% of the overall module mark.**

**Section 1 is based on the course field trip to *The Animal Gaze*, an exhibition at London Metropolitan University ([www.animalgaze.org](http://www.animalgaze.org)).**

**In this section you must write on any one of the theoretical texts set in weeks 8-12. That is, the works by Berger, Burt, Baker, Deleuze and Guattari, and Derrida.**

**In section 2 you should answer one of the questions with reference to two or more theoretical texts, at least one of which should be from the set texts in weeks 8-12 of the course. For one of these two theoretical texts you may write on a theorist you have written on in Section 1, but must not substantially repeat your material. If you like, to illustrate your arguments, you may use examples from any literary or cultural texts of your choosing.**

### **SECTION 1: REPORT (1000 words maximum)**

Write a report in which you use your experience on the field trip together with the theory studied on the course to critically reflect on the relations between humans and animals. You may decide to discuss a particular artwork, but should also feel free to consider any other aspects of the exhibit such as explanatory texts; advertising and supplementary resources on the web; how exhibits are displayed; or your own experience as a viewer.

Your report should consider how the theory you have studied affects your interpretation of the representation of animals or human-animal relations. It should also consider how the experience of viewing the exhibit affects your understanding of the theory studied. The report should therefore engage directly with at least one theory text studied in the second half of the course but may also draw on other theoretical material. One key task will be to carry out the research while on the field trip that is necessary to decide what aspect of the exhibit you will choose as your text.

The report should consist of the following sections:

(continues)

1. Explain what artwork or aspect(s) of the exhibit you have chosen to consider as your text and initially outline how and why you made this choice. (100-200 words approx)
2. Choose one or two claims from the theoretical texts studied and reflect on a) how they affect your interpretation of the art exhibit AND/OR b) how the experience of the artwork(s) led you to think critically about the theory (600-700 words approx)
3. Write a brief critical reflection on your experience of the field-trip as intellectual inquiry (100-200 words approx). For example, you might consider a particular difficulty you encountered when looking for particular examples that related to the theory and how you overcame it.

## **SECTION 2: ESSAY (1500 words maximum)**

1. 'The animal scrutinises [humankind] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension' (John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals', p. 5).

1a) Explore the ways in which humans' difference from animals is presented in the theoretical texts you have studied.

**OR**

1b) Discuss the importance of the theme of vision in the thinking about animals in these texts.

2. 'Any understanding of the animal [is] inseparable from knowledge of its cultural representation' (Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, p. 4). Offer a reading of a cultural text or texts to exemplify or critique Baker's argument.

3. Write an essay that explores some of the ways in which an understanding of history has been brought to bear on our understanding of animals.

4. What do you consider to be the most important insight(s) of Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal writings? Explain your choice by discussing in detail some key concepts from the extracts you have read.

5. Write an essay that critically discusses, with examples chosen from your own consideration of the ways animals are represented, Derrida's main thesis in 'The Animal that therefore I Am (More to Follow)' (pp. 252-4).

6. 'As if, for example, instead of throwing people into ovens or gas chambers (let's say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell' (Derrida, 'The Animal that therefore I Am (More to Follow)', p. 245). Discuss some of the implications of the ways in which the use or abuse of animals is characterised.

7. Discuss the importance of the issue(s) of sympathy and/or empathy in the theoretical texts you have read.

8. Discuss how a creative text or texts of your choice offer a different perspective from those found in the theoretical debates that we have examined on the course.

9. '[Animal Rights advocates] focus largely on practices affecting denumerable individual animals... [environmentalists] deal with ecosystems, with ways of promoting healthy balances between different species' (David Wood 'Thinking with Cats', p. 289). Explain what you see to be the most relevant similarities and differences between theoretical writing that focuses on issue of animals and that which takes the environment as a whole as its focus.

10. Consider to what extent theoretical writing about "nature" is useful for understanding human-animal relations (or *vice versa*).

11. How coherent are the categories "human" and "animal"? Answer this question by discussing their use in the theoretical texts on the course.

12. Examine the relationship between the theoretical consideration of animals and one of the following social or theoretical imperatives race/racism; post-colonialism; gender; class.

13. Examine the relationship between the theoretical consideration of animals and another social or theoretical imperative (for example, race/racism; post-colonialism; gender; class).

14. If you wish to write on a topic not covered here, this may be possible, but you must get approval for your idea from me first. You must formally submit your proposed essay question/topic in an email at least two weeks before the essay deadline. You should also include brief details of the authors and themes you intend to write on. I will then either approve, amend, or reject your title. Your essay will not be marked if its subject has not been approved.