

EN2D0/3D0: Essay 1 questions, 2022-23

Essays of either 3,000 words (Level 5) or 4,000 words (Level 6) are due at noon on Tuesday, 17 January 2023 (Week 2 of Term 2). Note that the following topics are intended to offer only suggested directions for your own thinking and research; feel free, indeed encouraged, to adapt them or develop your own topic in consultation with me beforehand. Note too that you are able to write on primary texts outside the syllabus.

1. “Nature’s independence *is* its meaning – without it there is nothing but us” (Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*). Write an essay about the symbolic crisis that McKibben identifies, exploring critical and/or alternative perspectives on his end-of-nature thesis.
2. Critically evaluate contemporary debates on the naming and periodisation of ‘the Anthropocene.’ What are the implications of this term, vs. some of its proposed alternatives (Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Growthocene), for an understanding of the geological era in which human action acquires decisive planetary force?
3. Compare the presence of the *commons* in Clare’s writing to that of *wilderness* in Thoreau’s. What does a comparative reading suggest concerning the relative constructions of ‘nature’ in the British and North American contexts?
4. Discuss Raymond Williams’s notion of ‘green language’ as a response to the dialectical relations between country and city. How might we read the co-determining presence of urban and rural in works that appear to focus on either one or the other?
5. “We don’t yet have an adequate language to talk and act and analyze as if humans and the rest of nature mutually constitute each other” (Jason W. Moore). Write an essay analyzing the discursive inadequacies to which Moore draws attention, and/or explore examples where these limits are creatively overcome.
6. Eco-critique I: Analyse and evaluate one or more critical readings of any of the works on the syllabus, exploring its implications for questions of theory and methodology with respect to the field of ecocriticism.
7. Kate Soper has argued that one legacy of the Cartesian distinction between mind and body is an implicit down-grading or marginalization of the (gendered, raced) body: as a result, “the excluded body returns to subvert the humanity-nature distinction,” acting as a “return of the repressed.” Explore this dynamic as reflected in any of our works.
8. Write an essay on walking as eco-praxis, with attention to the ways geography, race, gender, sexuality and/or disability may inflect a politics of the pedestrian.
9. Eco-critique II: Develop an eco-reading of any apparently non-‘environmental’ text (on or off the syllabus).
10. Explore the intersection of scientific and cultural discourses with regard to the

production of environmental knowledge in the work of Carson and/or Leopold.

11. “Perhaps the future of ecological poetry is that it will cease to play with the idea of nature. ... We will lose nature, but gain ecology” (Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*). Discuss, with examples, Morton’s speculation on a future ecological mode for poetry (or other genres of eco-writing).
12. Write an essay on the production of waste, detritus and/or pollutants as material and symbolic by-products of modernisation, in any of the works on the syllabus.
13. Write an essay comparing nineteenth-century and twentieth-century representations of birdlife as a focal point for registering environmental change.
14. Adapt and explore any of the following ecological terms for the literary analysis of environmental writing: ecozone, bioregion, ecoregion, ecosystem, biome, ecotone, climax community, cosmopolitan diversity, endemism.
15. Edgelands: investigate the interstitial and apparently marginal or overlooked zones between one environment and another, including built and ‘natural’ environments, as a focus for ecocritical analysis.
16. Literary topographies: analyse the (formal, historical, political) aspects of writing about forests, deserts, moorlands, mountains, rivers, coasts, wetlands, glaciers or oceans.
17. Black natures: analyse the raced dimension of literary representations of the ‘wild’ or wilderness in light of the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, modern colonialism and/or contemporary discourse around Black Lives Matter.
18. Queer environments: examine the extent to which non-normative sexualities inform the construction, exploration and/or appropriation of extra-human nature.
19. Discuss the emerging genre of clifi as a response to the problems of representing climate breakdown in literary form.
20. “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”). Write an essay on the role of mourning in the environmental imaginary of our time, assessing both its benefits and its limitations as a response.