

American Landscape in Literature



(Image from *Edward Scissorhands*, dir. Tim Burton)

Course: English 429.01

Location: H 326 B

Time: MW 4-5:15 p.m.

Instructor: Nicole Seymour, Ph.D.

Office location: UH (University Hall) 440 / 657.278.2713

Office Hours: M 1-2, W 1-3 and by appt.

Course Description and Goals

“Landscape” is both a noun and a verb. This course will explore this seemingly-simple point in depth, through a wide variety of forms, genres, and perspectives – ranging from nineteenth-century classic nature writing to a twentieth-century African-American memoir to twenty-first-century documentary. We will also, with a nod to our sunny environs, spend some time thinking about Southern Californian landscapes in particular. We will focus on the idea that landscapes *shape and are shaped*; that they tell us who we are (and aren’t), and that processes of construction, whether physical or conceptual or both, help produce them.

Throughout the course, we will ask questions like:

What constitutes a landscape? How do we know where it begins and ends?

What sorts of trends/tendencies do we see in representations of American landscapes across time?

How do different forms, genres, and perspectives convey different information about landscapes?

As an advanced English course, 429 will require you to build on and further develop your skills in writing, critical thinking, textual analysis, discussion participation and leadership, and research. The reading load is not unreasonable, but will be more significant than a lower-division course. Please see the schedule below and plan accordingly.

Required Texts

(Purchase from the bookstore, Powells.com, etc.)

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (ISBN 978-0-345-32649-2)

T.C. Boyle, *When the Killing's Done* (ISBN 978-0-143-12039-1)

Eddy Harris, *Mississippi Solo* (ISBN 978-0-805-05903-8)

Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (ISBN 978-0-374-53387-3)

All other readings are listed below and will be available online or in class. *Please always bring the assigned reading – in hard copy or on iPad/laptop etc. – and any related notes with you to class.* So, for example, after reading the Kolodny for 1/26, you would need to either print it out and bring it with you to class, or bring a device on which you can pull it up.

Course Requirements

Participation: 20 points (details below)

Leading class discussion with partners: 20 points (details below)

Response papers: 5 @ 8 points each = 40 points (details below)

Final Paper: 20 points (details TBA)

Participation

Participation entails verbally contributing to class-wide conversation frequently, satisfactorily completing in-class work, and working productively with your classmates. You will receive a midterm participation grade out of 10 points and a final participation grade out of 10 points (20 points total). If you want to know how you're doing on participation before your midterm grade – or at any other time in the semester – please come see me. If you have any other concerns about participation (social anxiety, etc.), please also see me.

Attendance

I will not take attendance in this course. However, if you do not attend class regularly, you will obviously miss out on opportunities to earn participation credit (and, of course, to LEARN STUFF). I

can also guarantee that you will do better on your written assignments if you attend class regularly. My final plug: if you're on the fence grade-wise at the end of the semester, a stellar record of attendance and participation may help you. (A less-than-stellar record, however, will not hurt you in this regard.)

If you are absent and want to know what we covered, you must check the syllabus, contact a classmate, and/or come to my office hours. *I will not respond to emails that fall into the category of, "What did I miss today?"*

Leading class discussion

For this requirement, you and a partner will lead class discussion for at least 15 minutes at the beginning of the class period in question. Available texts have single asterisks (*) below.

You do not need to prepare any formal materials such as a Powerpoint, though you are welcome to do so if you like. While you and your partner will work together as you see fit, you will be evaluated individually on your professionalism and effectiveness as a discussion leader. In other words, you will not be penalized if your partner(s) is not up to snuff.

The grading criteria I will use is as follows:

Was the presenter on time?

Was s/he prepared?

Were his/her discussion questions or topics effective in stimulating class discussion?*

Did s/he display critical thinking? (Offering interpretations or arguments as opposed to merely summarizing the piece, etc.)

Did s/he manage the discussion effectively? (Attempting to engage all participants, balancing questions and responses, etc.)

*Helpful hint: the question, "What did you guys think of the reading?" is usually met with blank stares and awkward silence.

Response Papers

At five points in the semester, you will produce a short paper (200-400 words) in response to a reading. You will turn it in on Titanium BEFORE the class in which we discuss the reading in question. For example, if you choose to respond to the second half of Isherwood's novel, you must turn your paper in by 4 p.m. on Monday, March 16 to receive credit.

Your response will center on a “keyword” of your choice. It can be as obvious or obscure as you like. You can write anything you want about the relationship between you, that word, and the text. For example, let’s say your keyword is “disability” for Mairs. You might discuss how her text changed the way you think about disability, or how the concept functions in her text, etc. etc.

The grading criteria I will use is as follows:

- ___ Does the writer identify and focus on a keyword?
- ___ Does the writer meet the word length requirement?
- ___ Does s/he demonstrate deep engagement with the text in question?
- ___ Does s/he demonstrate critical thinking? (Avoiding plot summary, going beyond surface reactions, etc.)

Technology Policy

Please refrain from using your cell phone during class time. I also ask that you use iPads and laptops for class purposes only – namely, for reading or taking notes. We will occasionally take quick breaks in this class – at which time you may use your gadgets for non-class purposes.

Course Schedule (subject to change)

Part I: Foundations

Week 1:

Wed. Jan 21

- Introductions
- Syllabus and signups

Week 2:

Mon. Jan 26

- Campus as landscape – Visit from Facilities Planning and Management
- *Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (selections on Titanium; read before class)
- American landscape painting (look at in class together; www.artmuseumgr.org/art/past-exhibitions/masterpieces-of-american-landscape-painting/)

Wed. Jan 28

- *Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” (online at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf>; read before class)
- Ken Burns, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*, “Going Home” episode (watch excerpts in class together)

Week 3:

Mon. Feb 2

- *Fred E. H. Schroeder, *Front Yard America: The Evolution and Meanings of a Vernacular Domestic Landscape* (selections on Titanium; read before class)
- Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (excerpts screened in class)

Part II: Nature/Landscape Writing

Wed. Feb 4

- Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” (online at <http://thoreau.eserver.org/walking.html>; read before class)
- **Professor Seymour at conference; no in-class meeting. Respond to discussion questions posted on Titanium forum. Details/directions there.**

Week 4:

Mon. Feb 9

- *Aldo Leopold, “A Land Ethic” (online at http://www.waterculture.org/uploads/Leopold_TheLandEthic.pdf; read before class)

Wed. Feb 11

- *Idra Novey, “On Returning to My Hometown in 2035” (online at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/246982>; read before class)
- *John Galvin, “On First Seeing a U.S. Forest Service Aerial Photo of Where I Live” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/246018>; read before class)

Week 5:

Mon. Feb 16

- **President’s Day; no class**

Wed. Feb 18

- Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (read to 1/3)

Week 6:

Mon. Feb 23

- Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (read to 2/3)

Wed. Feb 25

- *Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (finish)

Part III: Southern California as Landscape

Week 7:

Mon. Mar 2

- *Jenny Price, "13 Ways of Seeing Nature in LA" (on Titanium; read before class)
- Thom Anderson, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (excerpts screened in class)

Wed. Mar 4

- Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (read to 1/3 before class)
- Thom Anderson, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (excerpts screened in class)

Week 8:

Mon. Mar 9

- Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (read to 2/3 before class)

Wed. Mar 11

- *Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (finish before class)

Part IV: Contested Landscapes

Week 9:

Mon. Mar 16

- T.C. Boyle, *When the Killing's Done* (read to ¼ before class)

Wed. Mar 18

- T.C. Boyle, *When the Killing's Done* (read to ½ before class)

Week 10:

Mon. Mar 23

- T.C. Boyle, *When the Killing's Done* (read to ¾ before class)

Wed. Mar 25

- T.C. Boyle, *When the Killing's Done* (finish before class)
- **Professor Seymour at conference; no in-class meeting. Respond to discussion questions posted on Titanium forum. Details/directions there.**

Week 11:

Spring Break – No Class

Week 12:

Mon. Apr 6

- Eddy Harris, *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (read to 1/3 before class)
- Final paper assignment distributed

Wed. Apr 8

- Eddy Harris, *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (read to 2/3 before class)

Week 13:

Mon. Apr 13

- *Eddy Harris, *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (finish before class)

Wed. Apr 15

- *Nancy Mairs, "Writing West: A Reclamation Project," from *Waist-High in the World: A Life among the Nondisabled* (on Titanium; read before class)

Week 14:

Mon. Apr 20

- *Eli Clare, "The Mountain," from *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (on Titanium; read before class)

Wed. Apr 22

- *Sarah Jacquette Ray, "'Maimed away from Mother Earth': The Disabled Body in Environmental Literature," from *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (on Titanium; read before class)

Week 15:

Mon. Apr 27

- **Paper proposal due on Titanium**
- Library Visit

Wed. Apr 29

- **Bibliography due on Titanium**
- Workshop on incorporating secondary sources

Week 16:

Mon. May 4

- **Peer review of final paper drafts**
- Evaluations

Wed. May 6

- Wrapup and goodbyes
- *David Thomas Smith, *Anthropocene* photo-collage series (look at in class together;
<http://www.david-thomas-smith.com/ANTHROPOCENE>)

*****Wed. May 13: Final paper due on Titanium by 6:50 p.m.*****