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Drop-in hours: Tu 1-2pm; Th 11:30am-12:30pm

### ENGL/ENVI 262: Victorian Nature Writing

What is “nature writing,” and how is our sense of the balm that nature can provide tied to legacies of the Victorian period? This class considers these questions through a combination of readings, field trips, and scholarly and creative explorations of your own relationship to the natural world. Although “nature” is not only plants, the nineteenth-century British fascination with plants makes them an excellent organizing motif. From exploring the globe for exotic specimens to fill out London’s Kew Gardens collection to devising flower dictionaries to send encoded messages to their beloveds, Victorians engaged with plant life in myriad ways. Readings for the course will cover many genres, and may include poetry (John Clare, Gerard Manly Hopkins), children’s books (Beatrix Potter, Frances Hodgson Burnett), travel writing (Isabella Bird, Mary Kingsley), novels (Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells), evolutionary science (Charles Darwin), and horticulture (John Loudon, Gertrude Jekyll). We will consider this work within key historical frames including extractive imperial practices, scientific systems of classification, the question of wild versus domesticated spaces/species, and gendered norms that shaped affective responses to nature. And we will put ourselves into nature—taking long walks together, visiting gardens and Como Conservatory, and observing, sketching, and writing about local natural environments. The class aims to offer some critiques of Victorian worldviews, imperial structures, and strategies, while still locating hope. How might the Victorians’ deep attention to the natural world inspire and sustain our own relationships to nature’s wonders and its fragilities? (*This course satisfies the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century British requirement on the English major. First-day attendance required.*)

#### Course Policies

**Attendance and Participation:** You may miss up to three class periods without penalty. You are **not** required to disclose details of health issues to me or to proffer documentation for your absences. There are no make-up opportunities for in-class activities; however, there will be daily group notes you can access, and I am always happy to talk with you outside of class about any questions you have about the material. Because this is a discussion-based class, regular contributions to our conversations are necessary for you to get full participation credit. Please bring copies of the assigned texts with you for reference daily. All this said, I do not expect you to come to class ill! Please reach out for support if you are facing prolonged issues that will impact your attendance.

**Class Notes:** Class participation also involves shared note-taking. Each day, I’ll assign two students to take notes in a google doc in our shared class notes folder. By working together, you can fill in each other’s gaps. Any student is free to add anything they like to those notes. Notes will provide access to key points of discussion for anyone who is absent as well as create a shared reference for the class. I expect everyone to be a note-taker at least twice during the term, though on any given day if you are not up to it when I ask, you can take a pass.

**Due Dates & Flexibility:** First and foremost, please reach out if you are feeling overwhelmed by your assignments or schedule. Second, all work should be turned in as hard copy or in the appropriate assignment dropbox in Moodle. *Please do not email work to me.* Finally, specific policies:

- **Field Journal:** These are informal places for you to make notes, observations, and sketches, as well as respond to specific prompts. Notes here will serve as starting points for in-class discussions and for some more formal pieces of writing. I will collect journals on days assignments are due. You cannot turn journals in late, but you may skip one journal assignment at any point and still get full credit for this portion of the course. (Skipping more than one will result in a lower grade on this portion of the course.)
- **Essays and visual project:** Life happens, and its complexities can affect our ability to meet deadlines. Thus, you can invoke the **LIFE HAPPENED** clause once for any of the three essays/projects on the syllabus and receive an automatic four-day extension. No explanations are necessary. Simply write “life happened” on your paper when you turn it in. For more prolonged instances of life happening, please talk to me in person.
- **Final project:** This must be turned in on time (no extensions), so that I have time to grade them by the time final grades are due for the term.

**Contacting me:** I am always happy to meet with you to talk about ideas, readings, assignments, courses, papers-in-process, or anything else that would be useful or interesting. Please stop by my office during drop-in times. If your class schedule conflicts with my drop-in hours, send me an email or see me before or after class to schedule a time to meet. You can expect that I will generally answer email within 24 hours—sometimes less than that during the week, perhaps a bit longer on the weekend.

**Electronic Devices** are encouraged for bringing PDF/web versions of documents to class for reference or for facilitating your reading/discussion or note-taking. Please be considerate of classmates in using these devices in ways that will not distract others.

**Accommodations:** I am committed to providing assistance to help you be successful in this course. Reasonable accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. If you are not sure how to begin working to get accommodations, let me know and I can help!

### Assignments

Field Journal assignments: 10 prompts (20% total) (9-10 entries = A; 8 entries = B; 7 entries = C)

Observing Essay (15%)

Interpreting Essay (15%)

Visual Project (20%)

Final Reflection (10%)

In-class participation: being an active member of discussion, contributing questions, active listening, taking class notes at least twice (20%)

### Course Calendar

all materials available via links/PDF on Moodle, except Darwin, Hardy, and Potter books;  
schedule subject to change as needs arise

Tuesday, September 3. Course introductions. What is Victorian? Nature writing as feeling. **Journal assignment (in class):** What is a time you remember having feelings about/in response to nature—fear, awe, wonder, excitement, repose, etc.? What made you feel that way?

Thursday, September 5. Nature writing as observing. **Read:** Preface and Chapters 1-2 of *The Voyage of the Beagle* (Darwin). **Journal assignment:** spend 30 minutes in one outdoor spot where you can pay attention to something the natural world. Make thorough notes in your journal about what you observe. (This might include bullet points, sketches, disjointed sentences or disconnected

paragraphs, etc. I really mean NOTES. No arguments required.) What do you see on a macro level and a minute level? Does anything change over the time that you are there, either about the place or about your understanding of it? What brings about those changes?

Tuesday, September 10. Theorizing our responses to nature. **Read:** §1-10 and 21-24 and 34-36 from “The Moral of Landscape” (Ruskin). **PLEASE NOTE:** today will be a walking class. Bring your phone, your journals, and something to write with, as well as your notes on Ruskin. **Meet at my office (204 Old Main) instead of in our classroom** to lock up anything you don’t want to carry as we walk. **Walking assignment:** garden photography (no talking! walk and look!). After class: upload at least three to five photographs to the google slides folder; put your name in the footer of each slide. No need to write anything else.

Thursday, September 12. Nature writing as interpretation. **Read:** “The Nature of Nature Writing” (NYT) and Chapter 3 of *The Voyage of the Beagle* (Darwin). **Journal assignment:** choose one photo (your own or someone else’s) and spend thirty minutes writing in your journal about that image. You should aim to do two things in this entry: (1) notice and discuss details; (2) talk about why this photo speaks to you (which may include details from the walk itself). **For discussion:** in what ways does nature writing depend upon human perspectives? Come to class prepared to discuss ways you see Darwin writing in ways that are like (or unlike) those described in the NYT article.

Tuesday, September 17. Childhood and wonder in nature. **Read:** “Our Field,” J.H. Ewing and *Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* and *Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher* (Potter). **For discussion:** What makes these children’s works? What makes them nature writing? Where is the intersection?

Thursday, September 19. **Read:** Intro to “Appreciating” with “Rain” (Meynell) and “High Waving Heather” (E. Brontë). **Journal assignment:** Go back to the place where you spent 30 minutes writing for September 5, and use the Merlin Bird ID app to record what’s twittering away there. As you write in your journal, consider: (1) how does listening, instead of looking, change what you notice? (2) if you approach the place with a desire to experience wonder, what do you notice? Observing Essay assigned.

Tuesday, September 24. **Read:** *The Voyage of the Beagle* (Darwin), chapters 4-12 (pp 83-204). **For discussion:** It might be easy to find ways that Darwin’s work is different from the poems and children’s work we’ve considered that focus on wonder. How/where are they similar?

Thursday, September 26. Author study: John Clare and northern rural life. **Read:** Collection of Clare poems (focus TBA) **For discussion:** how (if at all) does it affect your reading of Clare’s work to know that he is a working-class writer from the north of England (i.e. not the wealthy landowning counties or the cultured city of London)?

Tuesday, October 1. John Clare continued. (focus TBA) Observing Essay due.

Thursday, October 3. Travel writing: vistas. **Read:** excerpts from *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (Bird), *The Indian Alps and How We Crossed Them* (Mazuchelli), and *Travels in West Africa* (Kingsley). **For discussion:** what is the value of such works for armchair travelers (that

is, those who cannot explore on their own)? How might you compare the work/perspectives of these three writers? What might Ruskin say about such travel writing?

Tuesday, October 8. Travel writing: collecting. **Read:** excerpts from *My Home in Tasmania* (Meredith) and *The Voyage of the Beagle* (Darwin), chs 20-21 (pp. 291-332). **Journal assignment:** Make a list (bullet points are fine) of ways Darwin's writing (any of the chapters you've read so far) is like or unlike that of any of the travel writers we've been reading this week. Include page # references for relevant details (no quotations necessary). **For discussion:** How would you characterize these writers variously in terms of the scientific approaches they take? (These may or may not be questions of gender in their perspective.)

Thursday, October 10. Travel writing: collecting vistas. **Read:** *Recollections of a Happy Life* (North) and follow the Moodle directions for browsing her paintings. **For discussion:** choose one of North's paintings that you would like us to discuss. Come prepared with an idea about what makes this painting interesting, or a question you'd like to ask the class about it. Assign Interpreting Essay.

Tuesday, October 15. [[hold for field trip; reading/writing TBA] **Journal Assignment:** field trip notes]]

Thursday, October 17 – FALL BREAK, no class

Tuesday, October 22. Intro to "Popularizing Science" with excerpts from *The Study of Plant Life for Young People* (Stopes) and Chapter V from *Mary Barton* (Gaskell) **For discussion:** How do you understand the role of amateur collectors in forwarding Victorian sciences of nature?

Thursday, October 24. **Read:** *British Sea-weeds* (Gatty) (with articles about Victorian seaweed collecting (see Moodle links). **For discussion:** How do these seaweed images compare to the botanical paintings and drawings we've seen so far? Interpreting Essay Due.

Tuesday, October 29. Colonial plant collecting and the growth of Kew Gardens. **Read:** TBA. Assign Visual Project

Thursday, October 31 Victorian Women Gardeners. **Read:** Introduction to "Domesticating," excerpts of "Color Schemes for Flower Gardens" (Jekyll) and TBA (Louden) with additional Jekyll text/images (TBA). **Journal assignment:** What does gardening mean to you? (You may choose to reflect on your own ideas compared to those of Jekyll or Loudon, or you may think about how your ideas of gardening have changed throughout this semester, or you may reflect on what gardening has meant to you at various points in your life, or anything else.)

**Journal assignment** for *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: use your journal to make notes as you read this novel. There's no specific assignment here, just record your impressions, page numbers that seem important, details you want to talk about in class, etc. We will use your journal notes in class to focus our discussions, and I will collect them at the end of this novel.

Tuesday, November 5 **Read:** *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Hardy) Phase I The Maiden. Visual Project plan due

Thursday, November 7 **Read:** *Tess of the D'Uberilles* Phase II Maiden No More and Phase III The Rally

Tuesday, November 12 **Read:** *Tess of the D'Uberilles* Phase IV The Consequence

Thursday, November 14 **Reading/Project work day NO CLASS**

Tuesday, November 19 **Read:** *Tess of the D'Uberilles* Phase V The Woman Pays

Thursday, November 21 **Read:** *Tess of the D'Uberilles* Phase VI The Convert. Visual Project due.

Tuesday, November 26 **Read:** *Tess of the D'Uberilles* Phase VII Fulfillment

Thursday, November 28 – THANKSGIVING, no class

Tuesday, December 3. Nature and preservation. **Read:** “Dress in Relation to Animal Life” (Lemon), 170-76, “The Victorian Women Whose Writing Popularized Watching Birds Instead of Wearing Them” (Meier), and “When Kingfishers Catch Fire” and “Binsey Poplars” (Hopkins) Assign Final Reflection.

Thursday, December 5 **Journal assignment:** Reflection in-class prep/activity.

Tuesday, December 10 [[hold for field trip; reading/writing TBA **Journal assignment:** field trip notes]]

**Wednesday, December 18 – Final Reflection due**