The Theme of Nature in World Literature:
The Precautionary Principle in the Literature Classroom

presented by:

Cheryl M. Clark, Ph.D.
Professor of English
Miami Dade College, Wolfson Campus

From the Renaissance onward, western literature has seen an evolution in attitudes towards the natural world, as documented in literary selections. From an ur-Romantic awareness of nature’s blessings and sublimity, to a more ambiguous recognition of nature’s dangers, to the more recent return of seeing nature as a hieroglyphics for comprehending human life, the literary tradition serves as a compelling record for helping students become aware of nature as an equal partner in ensuring and enriching planetary – and human -- survival.

Engaging students through readings, class discussion, and writing assignments will foster an intellectual environment where the Precautionary Principle can find roots. Students will be able to absorb the idea of “Do No Harm,” and be able to carry this ethical precept with them throughout their academic and professional lives.

This teaching model is designed to be a semester-long project to supplement and/or complement a thematic approach to LIT 2120, Survey of World Literature.

As presented, teaching “The Theme of Nature in World Literature” will contribute to our students acquiring Learning Outcomes #1 (Communicate effectively), #5 (Demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultures), #7 (Demonstrate knowledge of ethical thinking), #9 (Demonstrate an appreciation for aesthetics), and #10 (Describe how natural systems function).

Reading List:

Petrarch, “Ascent of Mount Ventoux”
Rousseau, The Confessions
Wordsworth, “Westminster Bridge”
D. Wordsworth, The Grasmere Journals
Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”
Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind”
Keats, “To Autumn”
Hopkins, “Spring”
Frost, “After Apple Picking”
R. Bridges, “London Snow”
Yeats, “The Wild Swans at Coole”
Emerson, “On Nature”
Thoreau, Selections from *Walden*
W. Stevens, “Idea of Order at Key West”
Neruda, “Ode to the Tomato”
Bishop, “The Fish”
M. Moore, “The Fish”
Kunitz, “The War Against Trees”
Roethke, “Cuttings” & “Cuttings [later]”
D. Thomas, “Fern Hill”
A.R. Ammons, “The City Limits”
Arnold, “Dover Beach”
Bly, “Snowbanks North, the House”
W.C. Williams, “Spring and All”

Sample Lessons:

**Early Visions of Nature.** One class session could focus on Petrarch’s noteworthy “Ascent of Mt. Ventoux,” an early Renaissance piece that documents the “rediscovery” of the natural world, following the medieval preoccupations with all things otherworldly. Course discussion could trace the genesis of this attitude in Petrarch’s creative insights appearing in his more famous Canzoniere, the sonnet sequence of love poems to his paramour, Laura. An essay assignment could invite students to analyze Petrarch’s attitudes towards nature, and how this experience helped “open his eyes.”

**Romantic Attitudes.** Several class sessions could trace the thread of how the natural world is presented in works by English Romantic writers, including William Wordsworth, his sister, Dorothy Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. A writing topic would ask students to compare and contrast the varying expressions of nature in these selections.

**Awareness of Seasons: Connectedness with the Natural World.** A few class sessions would explore writings that focus on seasonality in the natural world. Writers discussed could include Keats’s “To Autumn,” Hopkins’s “Spring,” Frost’s “After Apple Picking,” Robert Bridges’ “London Snow,” Williams’s “Spring and All” and Yeats’ “The Wild Swans at Coole.” A writing assignment could ask students to compare and contrast these works.

**American Transcendentalism.** This group of sessions would feature Emerson’s essay “On Nature,” and selections from Thoreau’s *Walden*. An essay assignment could ask students to consider American attitudes towards nature as compared with those of European writers.

**The Modernists: Ambiguous Attitudes towards Nature.** These sessions would consider the Modernists and how their attitudes towards nature reflect a change from earlier writings, namely, how the element of ambiguity becomes pronounced. Writers featured could include Stevens, Williams and Thomas. The essay assigned could ask students to analyze their choice of writer, and discuss the attitudes as presented.
Themes: Elements of the Natural World—The Fish. These class sessions could feature specific themes addressed in literature, such as writers who deal with elements of the natural world. The class could consider Bishop’s poem “The Fish” along with Moore’s “The Fish,” analyzing similarities and differences.

Mid-Century Writers: Redefining and Revisioning Nature. This group of sessions could consider some of the more renowned writers of the mid-century, and explore the changing attitudes towards nature, as literature approaches our own contemporary times. Writings considered could include Kunitz’s “The War Against the Trees,” Roethke’s “Cuttings” and “Cuttings [later],” Ammons’s “The City Limits,” and Bly’s “Snowbanks North of the House.”