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ABSTRACT

A college composition teacher carries his convictions about wilderness preservation into the classroom. Like millions of others, he is drawn to the natural world and its literature about it; however, he is not sure what this type of literature should be called. The designation of a genre of "nature writing" is problematic, summoning, as it does, vague images of watery Romanticism. Nature writing today encompasses a great deal more, including some accounting of Nature's wild and sometimes malignant side. "Literary nonfiction" is too broad and "travel literature" suggests that nature writing is mainly descriptive when it is much more. Most writing can be viewed as argumentative, including nature writing. Almost all specimens of the genre praise the beauty of the natural world, but they are also intermixed with varying amounts of blame for its destruction. This dual purpose of praise and blame indicates that nature writing functions as "epideictic" or ceremonial discourse, which at least since the time of Homer has functioned as a means of drawing readers into the writer's ethos. A number of points can be made about the importance of encouraging students to read and write about nature and the environment: (1) all people have a perspective on their interconnectedness with their environment; (2) "tree hugging" and tree clear cutting are both ideological positions that may be explored through the making of arguments; and (3) environmental literature is interdisciplinary. (Attached is a 28-item list of texts for teaching environmental writing.) (TB)

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An "Unplacid" Genre

As a resident of the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, I am at present almost exclusively an armchair lover of wild places (that is, *natural* places, not wild places in the D/FW, honky tonk sense of the phrase). I fell into this love, purely an aesthetic one at first, while growing up hiking in the forests and mountains of west Arkansas, and it was through the "nature writing" of Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Thoreau that I first began to see the ethical dimensions of the wilderness--its need for defenders. Reading the work of these writers opened windows for me, and soon I began to see wilderness preservation as one of the most--if not *the* most--important issue that we face today. As Annie Dillard writes in her essay "Teaching a Stone to Talk," "It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind." And Thoreau in Walden: "How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down?" As a teacher of college composition, I carry these (now, full-blown) convictions with me into the classroom, where I idealistically, optimistically, and perhaps naively ask my students to write about--discover--their own relationships with the natural world.

Like millions of others, I am drawn to the natural world and literature about it; trouble is, I'm not sure what I should *call* this type of literature. Perhaps I am quibbling over something that, after all, doesn't matter all that much, but the designation of a genre of "nature writing" is problematic. The term, for some, summons vague images of watery Romanticism, of butterfly chasing, tree huggers with feather pens who scribble down odes to the "placid" or "serene" beauty of nature. Though such

ED 391 161

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adjectives (though hackneyed) seem fitting on certain occasions and settings, nature can appear to be as malignant as it is beneficent, and a number of contemporary nature writers--at least those worth their paper--account for this reality. While I don't want to discount the merits of butterfly chasing (for there are many of them), the term "nature writing" is much too vague to account for the types of writing it has traditionally subsumed.

Some writings that deal with aspects of the natural world are subsumed under the larger heading of "literary nonfiction," but this heading seems much *too* large; thematically, "nature writing" may be used to describe certain works of fiction (Moby-Dick, Faulkner's "The Bear") and poetry (Jeffers, Snyder, or even Wordsworth and Dickinson). Neither does the heading "travel literature" stand up very well; this genre, as understood today, generally denotes a type of prose that is descriptive in purpose, but none of the works by Dillard or Abbey are even *chiefly* descriptive. Nor do these literary works function as pure representatives of any of the other so-called modes of discourse; rather, some of them (and most of the primary works in the bibliography below) make use of all of the modes, sometimes simultaneously.

While I have no solution, no alternate designation, it is my inclination to view practically all discourse this side of the white pages as argumentive in some way, including, as much as any other genre, nature writing. Almost all specimens of the genre praise the beauty of the natural world, but they are also intermixed with varying amounts of blame for its destruction. This dual purpose of praise and blame indicates that nature writing functions (more or less) as *epideictic* or ceremonial discourse, which

at least since the time of Homer has functioned as a means of drawing readers into the *ethos*--the dwelling place--of the writer. Hence, having students read and write about essays on nature and the environment, and especially writing their own essays on the subject, can be a powerful backdrop for learning.

I offer the following as the things I find most healthy about encouraging students to read and write about nature and the environment: 1) we are all situated in environments (natural *and* developed landscapes [Lowenthal and Meinig]) and we thus all have our own perspectives, realized or not, about our interconnectedness to the world; 2) tree hugging and tree clear cutting are both ideological positions that may be explored through the making of arguments; 3) environmental literature is interdisciplinary, and draws from virtually all fields of knowledge--not only rhetoric, philosophy, and literature, but also the sciences; and 4) it provides a window for the study of critical theory--including "ecocriticism" (which may be defined as criticism that is informed by environmental awareness), feminist criticism (including the ecofeminism of Merchant, Spretnak, Griffin, and others), cultural studies (Berry, Andrew Ross), and so on. Poststructuralists have largely ignored nature writers (and vice versa), but nature writers' criticism of the anthropocentric view of the world is an operation that is shared by the poststructuralists' decentering of paradigms.

It would be cynical to state that textbook publishers are cashing in on environmentalism, but almost every college publisher has its own composition reader on environmental issues, and the list of these textbooks is growing (Given the context of our session today--"Neglected Genres in Creative Writing Classrooms"--I should

confess that nature writing in the classroom is not as neglected as it once was.) And though Thoreau might be correct in stating that trade curses everything it handles, these textbooks are a viable alternative in the composition classroom. The short bibliography includes a few such textbooks.

A Short Bibliography of Texts for Teaching Environmental Writing

(* = readers or textbooks suitable for composition classes)

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Snyder, Gary. Turtle Island. New York: New Directions, 1974.

Spretnak, Charlene. The Spiritual Dimensions of Green Politics. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1986.

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden. 1854.

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