

Professor Nancy M. Thompson  
Course meets Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, 10:10-12:00  
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## **HUMANITY, SCIENCE AND NATURE IN THE WEST**

### **Course content:**

In this class we will focus on the long-standing tension between scientific and technological advances and our relationship to the natural world. We humans are inquisitive beings, eager to improve on the status quo, but progress often comes at a cost. Times of great social change encouraged nostalgia for the old ways and feelings of loss for an earlier, simpler way of life. We can see this in our own day: we are living in an era of unprecedented progress, but we pay a price in warming seas, scarcer resources, and loss of biodiversity. Our technologies have changed our lives radically, but they have left us out of touch with the natural world.

Where do we fit in the natural scheme of things? The question is not new. Human beings have often felt that they were, or should be, a part of nature, and yet they felt alienated from it, and their feelings were reflected in their art, philosophy, and literature. As we examine their responses, which varied in different cultures and at different times, we will put them into a historical perspective which will help illuminate the concerns of our own time.

### **Goals for the course:**

In group discussions and writing assignments, you will:

- demonstrate your ability to read and comprehend significant primary source documents and to explain how they illustrate abiding human concerns
- compare and contrast the cultural responses to perennial questions about the role of scientific knowledge and humanity's relation to the natural world
- assess the way that ideas about these issues have changed over time and in different historical periods
- employ the historical method in assessing and utilizing primary source documents to develop an understanding of humanity's historical relationship with the natural world

### **Course methods:**

This course is a seminar. While I will introduce you to some of the essential historical background for the eras we will cover, your learning is dependent on your active participation in class discussion. I may also offer occasional in-class credit/no credit writing assignments. It is important, therefore, that you prepare for class by carefully reading the selections and studying any images for the day. Most of the assigned texts are fairly short, but some of them are challenging, so allow yourself plenty of time for reading and reflection. Please write down any

questions and bring them to class. By discussing any issues together, we will all reach a better understanding of the readings and the people who produced them.

**Texts:**

Readings and images are available electronically. Please see course schedule for details. Bring assigned readings and images to class as print-outs or on cell phones or other electronic devices on the day they are to be discussed.

**Grading:**

Your final grade will be based on:

- your regular participation in discussion and in-class exercises (25 pts)
- an oral presentation on one of the authors to be discussed (25 pts)
- a final essay exam on July 28 (50 pts)

**Academic dishonesty:**

Be aware that I do not tolerate plagiarism. I reserve the right to question you on anything you've written. Use your own words. Give credit where it is due. Plagiarists will fail the course.

**Attendance:** You are expected to attend every class meeting. Poor attendance affects your grade and your performance in this course.

**Disabilities:** Students who need disability-related accommodations should meet with me privately to discuss their needs.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

PLEASE NOTE: I will offer guides (identified by date) for the assigned reading. The questions on the guide are the basis for discussion and in-class writing.

Week I: The Classical and Medieval/Renaissance Legacy

July 4: Introduction: Reading historical documents; Bronze Age technology and the rise of cities

July 5: Origin stories, divinity and progress

Readings: *Genesis* (Creation, Tower of Babel), Hesiod

July 6: Classical Greece and Rome: nostalgia for a "lost" past: the bucolic tradition in classical literature; humanity and the state of nature

Readings: Aristotle; Polybius; Theocritus, Virgil's "First Eclogue"

July 7: Medieval man and nature; Neoplatonism; monastic flight from the world, man as a microcosm

Readings: Abelard, Goliardic poetry, St. Francis

Visual sources: medieval gardens; Renaissance landscapes

Week II: The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment

July 11: A new world view; the rise of modern science

Readings: Copernicus, Francis Bacon

July 12: Skepticism and confidence

Readings: Descartes, Marlow

July 13: The new science and society; the beginnings of industrialization

Readings: Voltaire, Rousseau

July 14: Nostalgia revisited: early modern pastoral poetry and art; gardens

Readings: Pope, Blake, Crabbe

Visual sources: Pastoral art, gardens

Week III: Nineteenth century Europe

July 18: Industrialization and its consequences, empiricism and the idea of progress,

Readings: Buckle, Mary Shelley

July 19: Romanticism in art and literature

Readings: Percy Shelley, Wordsworth,

Visual sources: Pastoral art, gardens

July 20: Classifying nature;

Readings: Humboldt, Darwin

July 21: Europeans in America: exploration and colonialism

Readings: Jefferson

Week IV: The nineteenth century in America

July 25: Industrialization and the intellectual response; Transcendentalism

Readings: Emerson, Thoreau,

July 26: Westward expansion, urbanization; the closing of the frontier

Readings: Whitman, Turner

Visual sources: Hudson River school paintings

July 27: Early environmentalism and debates over resources

Readings: Roosevelt, Muir

July 28: Final exam