

Sample Thesis Proposal - Literature

Gathering Bones: Gothic Midwestern Landscape in the Age of Robotics

The literary representation of landscape can often reflect the fears and cultural values of a particular society. As many cultures move into an age where robotics and drones become increasingly commonplace, it is important to look once again at the evolving definition of nature and landscape. What does our society consider to be natural? How might this definition change in the future? My thesis will address how the definition of nature has changed and, more specifically, how it has changed within contemporary Midwestern Gothic poetry and fiction. In Midwestern literature, many traditional fears, themes, and motifs are reminiscent of Victorian Gothic, but there are also new fears demonstrated, particularly in the way landscape is described.

By drawing examples from early Gothic literature, I will establish how Gothic fiction and poetry offers a particular language which poses questions about society's relationship with landscape and nature. Specifically, I will be reading and analyzing the works of Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Henry James, Charlotte Bronte, Mary Shelley, and Anne Radcliffe, all of whom give time and detail to the description of landscape within their works. Studying the representation of landscape in earlier Gothic fiction will help me to explain how contemporary Midwestern literature uses Gothic tropes, particularly in its preoccupation with silence and violence. In my study of contemporary works, I will explore how the literary representation of landscape changes as society's relationship with nature itself changes. If nineteenth century Gothic landscape offers a way to discuss fears of science, then how does contemporary Midwestern landscape illustrate current fears of technology? In order to answer this question, I will be reading poetry and fiction by Gregory Orr, Kent Haruf, Louise Erdrich, Marilynne Robinson, Ruth Ozeki, and Kent Meyer, among others. These writers explore the concept of turning to the land of the Midwest, despite its silent bleakness, after various experiences of violent loss. Do these losses reflect the larger fear of losing what is "natural" to us, losing what we believe we know? How is this fear portrayed within

literary landscape? Also, I will explore how Midwestern writers cope with these fears, whether by conservation or cultivation of this specific landscape.

This study will use ecocritical approaches to examine Midwestern literature. The first is *Ecosublime* by Hugh Lee Rozelle. Rozelle suggests that the sublime experience of nature within literature is tied to society's political relationship with nature and reflects on this relationship in post-natural landscapes. Secondly, I will draw on Tom Hillard's article, "Deep Into that Darkness Peering," which explores the concept of "ecophobia" and the gothic descriptions of landscape as representation of society's growing fear and alienation from nature. Building on Hillard's work will allow for a discussion of contemporary fears of nature in a technologically advanced era, one of robotic limbs, drones, and factory farming communities. Lastly, I will focus on Rinda West's text, *Out of the Shadow*, which addresses ecopsychology—nature as part of the "shadow" of society's psyche, and why society fears this aspect of itself. These three texts will not only allow me to recognize Gothic aspects of literary landscapes, but also to understand why these gothic elements exist.

Gregory Orr's "Gathering the Bones Together," Kent Meyer's *The Witness of Combines*, and Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation* all contain characters who turn to land, sometimes specifically farming communities, after the death of a loved one. Characters' desires to become closer to this landscape in a time of alienation is significant in regards to the changing definition of nature in a technologically advanced era. It is this method of coping, this turning to a contemporary Gothic landscape in the face of fear and loss, that I intend to explore.

Reading List

- Bimber, Bruce. "Karl Marx and the Three Faces of Technological Determinism." *Social Studies of Science*. 20.2 (1990): 333-351. *SAGE journals*. 28 Apr. 2015. Web.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2000. Print.
- Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. New York: Random House, 1966. Print.
- Crane, Milton, ed. *Fifty Great American Short Stories*. New York: Bantam Classic, 1965. Print.
- Dove, Rita, ed. *Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011. Print.
- Erdrich, Louise. *The Round House*. New York: Harper Collins, 2012. Print.
- Fox, Michael. *Agricide: The Hidden Crisis That Affects Us All*. New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Print.
- Fromm, Harold and Cheryll Glotfelty, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
- Hillard, Tom. "Deep Into That Darkness Peering": An Essay on Gothic Nature. *ISLE*. 16.4 (2009) 685-695. *Oxford Journals*. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.
- Hiltner, Ken. Ed. *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Hughes, William and Andrew Smith, eds. *Ecogothic*. Oxford: Manchester University Press, 2013. Print.
- Lloyd-Smith, Allan. *American Gothic Fiction*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004. Print.
- Meyer, Kent. *The Witness of Combines*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Print.
- Orr, Gregory. *Gathering the Bones Together*. New York, Harper & Row, 1973, Print.
- Ozeki, Ruth. *All Over Creation*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.

Radcliffe, Ann. *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*. New York: Picador, 2006. Print.

Rozelle Lee. *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from New World to Oddworld*.

Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. Print.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York: Norton & Co, 2011. Print.

West Rinda. *Out of the Shadow: Ecopsychology, Story, and Encounters with the Land*.

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007. Print.

Woodrell, Daniel. *Winter's Bone*. New York: Bay Back Books, 2007. Print.