

Abstract and conclusion FNE project

Responsible for the project

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Crossing the Australian Landscape: An Environmental Awakening

Abstract

In this course we ask how Australian authors describe the changes in the Anglo-Australian relationship to the environment that has taken place since colonisation began in 1788, what normative values are challenged and whether any specific influences can be identified. Very deliberately, the three novels chosen for this seminar are all written by white, male Australian authors. The novels are centred on a heterosexual relationship between two white protagonists who are undertaking journeys over Australian terrain that entail some kind of spiritual transformation. Further, we will ask whether literature can play a role in the promotion and dissemination of the idea of sustainability by describing attitudes to the physical world and modelling the consequences of an empathic or combative relationship with given environments. We will also ask whether a connection is being forged in literature between attitudes towards the environment (harbouring in descriptions of landscape) and attitudes towards the social makeup of the Australian population (harbouring in descriptions of characters). Is there any evidence of a shift towards a culture of sustainability in the writing of these novels, or do they contribute in any way towards broader concepts of cultural sustainability? The novels chosen for this course are: *Voss* by Patrick White (1957), *Dirt Music* by Tim Winton (2001) and *A Long Way From Home* by Peter Carey (2017).

Conclusion

1. What worked particularly well in this Promoting SD in Teaching project?

The novels chosen all deal with the Anglo Australian relationship to the environment but do so by reflecting on how Anglo/White Australians understand the Aboriginal Australian relationship to the environment and are all suggestive of the need to learn from Aboriginal culture, or at least to reconsider the way their culture encapsulates environmental knowledge. This theme is subtle, not obvious, but runs in tandem with themes of travel and personal development. It is this consciousness-shifting content that makes the novels interesting to literature students who might wish to understand whether or how literature can effectively promote sustainability through its operation as a form of cultural sustainability. The novels were supported by theoretical texts on literature (particularly concerning the environmental politics embedded in Romanticism) and anthropological texts helping students to understand the nature of Aboriginal cultures, beliefs, and their role in 'taking care of country'. The course started with some introductory reading on the concept of sustainability, so that students would understand the difference and the link between cultural, social, environmental and economic sustainability.

2. What were the challenges in implementing the project, and how did you face these?

I had to find ways of making clear what are in fact rather complex connections between the novels we read and the secondary sources we used to unlock their meaning.

3. What are the consequences of the project (in terms of content, didactics, or methodology)?

Didactically, the lead up to and implementation of the debates was very successful. They provided a way of activating the classroom and ensuring dialogue and the sharing of ideas through team-oriented work practices. They also allowed students to try on attitudes for size and to test their own rhetorical abilities. In terms of content, the course was built around key works of Australian literature that were chosen because they had much in common thematically and because they address the cultural aspects of attitudinal change towards the environment. While the three novels were written by prominent and highly regarded authors, Australian literature is not necessarily looked upon as a necessary part of the literary canon which BA level students need to be familiar with. This may affect the future realisation of the course as it stands. Nevertheless, one could no doubt find suitable North American literature that deals with similar themes. Were the course to be further developed, it might be more specifically aimed at MA students, who might bring a useful understanding of literary history and theory with them to the classroom. It would also be interesting to offer it as a joint endeavour with a staff member from anthropology, whose familiarity with anthropological methodology could afford useful insights into the study of the way indigenous cultures are represented. That said, the study of the novels chosen for this course was enhanced by our reading of anthropological papers, especially given that at least one of the novels dealt overtly with the politics of ethnography in the Australian context, and indeed made subtle links from this to our conceptualisation of indigenous cultures as guardians of the environment