

Introducing Sustainability Topics with Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” and Richard Powers’ “The Seventh Event”

Lesson Plan

Student Learning Outcomes / Experiences

Students will:

- Identify, define, and apply *sustainability* principals to the reading of works of short fiction.
- Explain how environmental, social, and economic systems interact to foster or prevent sustainability.
- Connect the project of sustainability education to literary studies by explaining the *social function* of art/literature.
- Analyze the role of environmental sustainability in the promotion of comprehensive justice and equity.
- Create a collaborative project that involves active learning and ties a literary work to one of the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) or an alternate sustainability framework.
- Demonstrate proficiency in the analysis and interpretation of a literary work that can be connected to a problem of sustainability.
- Improve skills in written and oral expression.
- Understand concepts of plot structure, point of view, narrative voice, inter-textual reference, and allegory.
- Define appropriate questions critical readers may ask of texts.

- Increase digital information literacy by exploring topics of climate-change impacts, social inequalities, species preservation, extinction, and biodiversity.
- *Leverage up*: investigate the disproportionate impact of environmental harm on specific populations in the U.S. and around the world, then propose a solution that involves contacting a political representative.
- Compare representations of the world in literary and scientific modes via word, image, and data sets.
- Self-assess their change agent skills and work towards developing new ones.

Backwards Course Design Framework (Wiggins & McTighe, *Understanding by Design*)ⁱ

We recommend thinking through curricular design by following a *backwards design* process-oriented model which is more conducive to learning models and less concerned with content coverage. Using this method, course designers begin with the intended outcomes for the learning experience. By clarifying these goals, educators can plan pedagogical activities that will represent milestones on the path to the major themes and concepts of the unit. Larger projects are thus scaffolded or well-supported by smaller low-stakes tasks that allow for experimentation, revision and opportunities for growth.

Consider: How will my students be different after this course/unit? (Goals)

- Students will understand *sustainability* as an environmental/social /economic project.
- Students will think of *storytelling* as one mode of representation that can have real-world impacts.

- Students will have a deeper understanding of narrative voice, point of view, and plot structure and, therefore, be more skilled in literary interpretation.
- Students will know that they are empowered to make a difference through their own sustainability-informed knowledge and choices.

What do I want my students to think/do by the end of this course? (Learning Activities)

- Students will read works of literature, a scholarly article (depending on level), and use materials in various digital formats.
- Students will think and write about their personal views on environmental / social / economic aspects of sustainability.
- Students will grapple with dilemmas within the fictions they read, and real-world counterparts relevant to sustainability challenges so they appreciate the relationship between setting goals and working towards (often imperfect) solutions.
- Students will increase their sense of belonging to a group by participating in an active learning collaborative project with their peers.
- Students will create a project that demonstrates the relationship between a literary work and real-world problems and construct a plan for change they can carry out of the classroom and into the world.

How will I know that learning has happened? (Assessment)

- Students will have studied and demonstrated knowledge of sustainability frameworks through the completion of a presentation, quiz, poster, recorded peer interview, or structured group activity.

- Students will have written a successful argumentative essay engaging the theme of *dilemmas* and involving the practice of close reading, that has gone through peer review and a revision process.
- Students will have completed a final group project in which they have identified a real-world sustainability challenge and tied it to themes within either Le Guin's or Powers' story or to another work of literature recommended in this book.
- Students will have written both pre-project and post-project reflections in which they comment on (1) initial impression and (2) how their views on and opinions about finding climate solutions have changed.

Learning Activities

The following directives are not meant to be prescriptive. We offer a variety of options for teaching sustainability through the study of Le Guin's and Powers' fictions or other works of literature mentioned in this chapter or book as a whole.

Students will become acquainted with a variety of sustainability frameworks, or more simply, with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. If the educator wishes to provide multiple options, we recommend a *jigsaw* activity to facilitate viewing a shared problem (climate change/ imperiled earth) from multiple perspectives and from differing standpoints while empowering students to take ownership and demonstrate expertise on a particular sustainability approach.

Jigsaw Activity Directions:

Each student takes responsibility for explaining a different sustainability framework (numbered 1-5) to their small group. The student may or may not agree with the argument and has the opportunity to make that decision independently before the groups are formed. The student

engages critical thinking, first by identifying the assumptions the system proposes, then, by paraphrasing the approach and judging its validity. Each student, now as expert, presents the framework to the small group and notes the reactions of all voices in the group. The initial group will have a representative for each of the five frameworks. Next, five new groups are formed, one for each of the five frameworks. This group of *experts* then discusses the reactions they recorded on the part of their peers and decides whether their common framework was well received and would provide a useful lens for reading literature. At any one time (with five groups of five), at least five people are talking, rather than just one. There is less performance pressure on the speaker who is in front of a small group, and the classroom or virtual space feels highly active and engaged.

Introducing students to the facts of global warming by using *Drawdown*, *En-Roads*, or other materials will ensure that they have a sound understanding of the plight of the planet. It is crucial, however, to guard against an overwhelming *gloom and doom* approach to such charged and frightening information. For this reason, most sustainability frameworks point to the truths of environmental catastrophe yet focus on finding solutions. Most students will be energized and inspired by this orientation. Large, complex problems will become more manageable when broken into smaller action items, such as the “targets” specified for each of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

For learning activities using an ecocritical approach to Le Guin’s and Powers’ stories, we recommend a pre-writing assignment in which students identify themes and topics related to sustainability that they find meaningful. Each student will write an essay on a *dilemma* featured in one of the stories and addressed by characters within the story. This essay will go through a series of scaffolded steps: instructor checks the proposed essay thesis and outline; a peer editor

provides structured feedback on an initial draft (clear thesis; centered paragraphs; correct citation format; convincing argument; questions for further development). The student uses the formative feedback to revise and reshape the essay. Students will complete a review of sustainability materials including videos, podcasts and interactive websites. Finally, each student will fulfill a particular role as he/she/they participate in a collaborative group project that connects sustainability themes from the story to real-world problems the students identify in their geographical region or the world. Students will have opportunities for independent reading, research, writing and reflection. Their final project, however, a collaborative essay, powerpoint presentation, video, or podcast, will emphasize cooperation and “partnerships for the goals” (to quote SDG #17) by which human and planetary thriving might be achieved.

Advanced students may be assigned Ursula Heise’s “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Eco-criticism” as an introduction to the field. Many ideas from this article, including the difference between deep and social ecology, the blind spots with regard to the romanticization of the natural world, the individual experience of certain people with traumatic associations, and the impact of governmental policies and protections on so-called *wilderness* areas and, by extension, demographic groups, can be productively introduced to students.

Heise introduces *social ecology*, a theoretical approach that began in the 1980s, in terms of the following questions:

- In what ways do highly evolved and self-aware beings relate to nature?
- What roles do language, literature, and art play in this relation?
- How have modernization and globalization processes transformed nature?
- Is it possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisites for such a change?ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, Heise's notion of *social ecology* follows an intersectional approach:

- Consideration of factors such as gender, race, class, ability, place, etc.
- “Nature” as concept becomes a site of contested meanings.
- Increased focus on urban spaces
- Social engagement: examination of the impact of civic and corporate actions and policies on the environment and society
- Environmental justice: address social inequalities and works for access and protections for all through antiracist, anti-ableist, and anti-classist policy advocacy and development.
- *The Commons*: questioning how commonly held resources are shared and maintained.
- Insistence upon the *Triple Bottom Line*: Companies are asked to consider People, Planet, Profit

If available, students may enjoy applied learning experiences by visiting a local art museum to investigate themes and visual expressions of sustainability topics. Or they might interview community partners in their region who work on sustainability projects from green building, to energy conservation, to local farming, to educational support for women and girls, etc. They might also visit community-based organizations or wilderness locations and assess progress towards sustainability solutions or contact their local political representatives to press for legislative action.

Suggested Learning Activities for “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

- Demonstrate a close reading of the opening paragraph and ask students to identify poetic features including sound and rhythm.
- Contrast the initial fairytale/fantasy scene with the abrupt change in tone as the story continues.
- Ask the students how they experience inhabiting the position of reader as the narrator addresses the audience directly.

- Discuss the concept of a *dilemma* and introduce William James’s pragmatic utilitarian philosophy.
- Ask the students to explain or research the terms *social contract*, *scapegoat*, *martyr*, *utopia* and *dystopia*.
- Direct students to journal about an experience of *othering* and/or objectification (theirs or another’s) as represented by the child in the basement.
- Define allegory (if necessary) and ask students to suggest ways of reading the child in the basement as a figure for “the dilemma of the American consciousness” and how that might be translated to a real-world situation of unsustainable exploitation, inequality, or other type of “invisible” or naturalized suffering.
- Provide poems such as Rhina Espillat’s “Bra” or Charles Bukowski’s “The Great Escape” or Hart Crane’s “Episode of Hands,” for discussions of workplace conditions to expand discussion of inequality theme.
- Encourage students to *leverage up*: to investigate the disproportionate impact of environmental harm on specific populations in the U.S. and around the world, then propose a solution that involves contacting a political representative.

Suggested Learning Activities for “The Seventh Event”

For an entry into discussion, ask students to select or assign one of the epigraph quotes from each section, all of which happen to be authored by men from the global north. In a seated classroom, students might pull slips from a hat and so arrange themselves in small discussion groups. Allow students to reflect individually on the meaning of the quote for themselves and on how to connect this brief passage to larger themes from the story before they pair, square, and share or otherwise join the larger conversation.

6. *The world shall perish not for lack of wonders, but for lack of wonder.* Haldane
5. *Every luxury must be paid for, and everything is a luxury, starting with the world.* Pavese
4. *In the long run, we are all dead.* Keynes
3. *We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage.*
Leopold
2. *We are not unified.* Rilke
1. *When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.*

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Discuss the fractured format of the story and the reverse narration in play as the storyline follows the evolution of a friendship between two lifelong colleagues while the numbered sections count backwards to the “seventh event” or the inevitability of mass extinction. Invite students to reconcile the tremendous effects of scaling up or down with the negation of the value of an individual human in the grand scheme of the universe. This cosmic magnitude contrasts with the importance of a friendship between two people. Allow students time and space to reflect upon the gravity of climate change, as referenced by Mia.

Use the additional supporting sustainability materials listed below to prompt further class discussions, blogposts, and other activities to engage student learning. Additional types of nature-related writing (mentioned in the discussion section above) may be introduced to expand the conversation.

Students should be assessed on their engagement with the material and level of comprehension through low-stakes short answer writing or drawing assignments. Individual reflections may be checked for required length and coherence, but emphasis should be placed on completion of the assignment and ability to connect students’ own experiences and attitudes to

both the fictional material and the sustainability topics and frameworks. Whenever possible, students should be allowed to follow their own interests and select from a range of options when it comes to supporting materials to research and the format of their final group project.

As educators conclude the module, they will instruct students to craft their own sustainability statements and take a change-agent skills or sustainability knowledge self-test such as the ([Sulitest](#)) to identify their existing capacities as well as areas for improvement.ⁱⁱⁱ

Encourage students to gather and share sustainability-related quotes with their peers. These could be worked into presentations in a variety of media. Examples follow.

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“When we talk about the climate crisis and we don't talk about these communities that are being affected, we create this circle of it becoming a white issue, or an issue that doesn't care about black and brown bodies, and that allows for solutions that don't care about black and brown bodies.”

Isra Hirsi, Co-Founder, U.S. Youth Climate Strike

“To meet the challenges of the climate crisis and preserve all that we hold dear; to retain democracy, social justice, human rights, and other hard-won freedoms in the future, we must part ways with that which threatens to destroy them. Now is the time to make profound shifts in how we live, work, and relate to each other.”

Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac

The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis, Knopf, 2020.

All students will end the module with a written reflection in which they name the aspects of sustainability that remain with them most strongly through memory or their own commitment. In addition, they will comment on the experience of writing a formal essay on the topic of

dilemmas based on their chosen short story. Finally, each student will reflect on their experience of working on a group project including their particular role and delivery, the success of collaboration in the group, barriers encountered along the way, and commentary on the final project.

It is important to grade on levels of reflection and engagement (including peer review/support) not solely on content. Value should be placed on the student's ability to connect with the material on a personal level, to contextualize it within their existing knowledge, and to relate to the content such that they possess it on their own terms, as prescribed by educational philosopher John Dewey, a century ago.^{iv}

More advanced students might investigate Garret Hardin's famous *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968) and ways theorists since then have reworked and refined his theory, including Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom. Or they might delve more deeply into topics of environmental justice or feminist ecological citizenship.

Notes

ⁱ Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 2nd Ed. ASCD, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Ursula K. Heise, 2006. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism." *PMLA* 121(2) (2006): pp. 503 – 16, p. 504.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sulitest, an initiative of the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals partnerships: <https://www.sulitest.org/en/test.html>

^{iv} John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. USA: CreateSpace, 2013.

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<https://www.sulitest.org/en/test.html>

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Bibliography for Further Reading on Eco-criticism and Ecological Citizenship for Instructors

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Organizations that Support Sustainability in Higher Education

- Sustainability Curriculum Consortium www.curriculumforsustainability.org
- Disciplinary Associations Network for Sustainability ([DANS](#)) including [discipline specific resources](#)
- Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) www.aashe.org
- United Nations [Higher Education Sustainability Initiative](#) (HESI)
- College Student Educators International (ACPA) [Sustainability Learning Outcomes](#)
