Can the human imagination conceive of the radical consequences of climate change? What will happen to the arts and culture, including literature, if the climate change worsens? Moreover, how can literature help us reorient our relationship to the natural world and envision more sustainable forms of human progress and pleasure? At this moment in history, many literary scholars have turned to ecocriticism as an urgent topic of research. Ecocriticism employs the tools of literature and literary criticism—imagination, creative language, self-reflection, sensorial sensitivity and social criticism—to foster awareness and responsiveness to climate change.

This course will take a pan-historical and cross-cultural perspective, reading literary texts from different periods and different literary traditions. We will also cut across genres, reading religious and mythical texts (The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Book of Genesis), novels (Indra Sinha), climate-oriented science fiction or “cli-fi” (Ursula Le Guin) poetry (American poetry, Yiddish poetry and Hebrew poetry) and essays (Helen Cixous, Robert Hass).

The course will also engage philosophies of nature (Theodore Adorno, Samuel Taylor Coleridge), as well as contemporary political writings on climate change from around the world. The course will feature at least two guest lectures and provide options for students to experiment with their own writing on nature and climate change.