
Ecocriticism: Concepts and Implications

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Abstract

Emerging in the 1980's on the shoulders of the environmental movement begun in the 1960's with the publication of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring", ecocriticism has been and continues to be an "earth centered" approach; the complex intersections between environment and culture believing that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and being affected by it" Ecocriticism asks us to examine ourselves and the world around us critiquing the way that we represent, interact with and construct the environment, both "natural" and "manmade", The challenge for ecocritics is "Keeping one eye on the ways in which "nature" is always culturally constructed and the other on the fact that nature really exists". Similar to critical traditions examining gender and race, ecocriticism deals not only with the socially- constructed, often dichotomous categories we create for reality, but with reality itself.

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The word "Ecocriticism" traces back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: "An Experiment in Ecocriticism" which apparently lay dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting when Cheryll Glotfelty revived the term but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field which has been known as "the study of nature writing". Cheryll's call for an "ecocriticism" was immediately seconded by Glen Love in her Past President's speech entitled "Revaluing Nature: Towards an Ecological Literary Criticism". Since that meeting in 1989 the term "ecocriticism" has bloomed and prospered.

Ecocriticism is the youngest of the revisionist movements that have swept the

humanities in the past decades, first in the U.S. and then in the U.K. It initially focused on the reappraisal of Romanticism. It has since broadened to address the question how cultures construct and are in turn constructed by the non-human world. Ecocriticism is the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the non human world and our relationship to it.

Ecocriticism entails a shift away from the approaches that strictly privilege language and the difficulty of preferentiality to approaches that re-emphasize the real work of words in a world of consequence of joy and despair. Like feminism, ecocriticism is fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy, one that investigates and helps make possible the connections among self, society, nature and text. The entire range of canons-from children's literature to modern poetry-must be called into question anew, by ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary and draws on biology, environmental history, geography, philosophy, cultural studies and literature among other disciplines. It also includes regional studies as Donald Worster has pointed out, "region derives its identity primarily from its ecologically adapted modes of production – or more simply from its ecological modes".

Ecocriticism elucidates relationships between human and non-human nature, privileging literary inscriptions. It is a study of culture and cultural products that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world. Ecocriticism is also a response to needs, problems or crises, depending on one's

perception of urgency. Ecocriticism is a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction. In a large part, environmental crises are a result of humanity's disconnection from the natural world, brought about not only by technology but also by particularization – a failure to recognize the interconnectedness of all things – including the life of the mind and the life of the earth Ecocriticism must remain a big tent – with many approaches-theoretical, historical, pedagogical, analytical, psychological, rhetorical & others included under it.

Ecocriticism also has an inherent ideological, if not moral component. A holistic view of the universe is a value-centered one that honors the interconnectedness of things. As interconnectedness is valued so too is the integrity of all things – be they creatures of the earth, critical practices, spiritual beliefs, or ethnic backgrounds. Ecocriticism can be socially activist or even spiritual. It seeks to heal all types of disconnections. Ecocriticism can also be politically active, as it advocates for an understanding of the world that works to heal the environmental wounds humans have inflicted on it.

Just as feminist criticism examines language & literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like:

1. How is nature represented in this sonnet?
2. What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel?
3. Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom?
4. How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?
5. How can we characterize nature writing as a genre?
6. In addition to race, class and gender, should place become a new critical category?
7. Do men write differently about nature than women?
8. How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?
9. In what ways is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?
10. What bearing does the science of ecology have on literary studies?
11. How is science itself open to literary analysis?

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, especially the cultural artefacts – language & literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere. Literature plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter and ideas interact. Glen Love, in her “Revaluing Nature toward an Ecological Criticism” (Nov 1990) suggests– “the most important function of literature today is to redirect human

consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world.”

Walt Whitman declared in “A Song of the Rolling Earth”:-

“There can be no theory of any account unless it corroborates the theory of the earth. No politics, song, religion, behavior or what not, is of account, unless It compares with the amplitude of the earth, unless it face the exactness, vitality, impartiality, rectitude of the earth.”

Most ecocritical work shares a common motivation-the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems. This awareness sparks a sincere desire to contribute to environmental restoration. The scholars of humanities have an important role to play here. Literary scholars specialize in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, languages, a substantial contribution to environmental thinking. Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis.

Literary criticism informed by ecological awareness had earlier been undertaken by concepts like “pastoral” “romanticism” “transcendentalism” or “the frontier.” In the 19th C the land served as a determinant and symbol of the national character in American Literature. The ecocritical stance reconnects literary study to both the processes and the problems inherent in living on this heavily burdened planet, focusing our attention anew on the ground

beneath our feet, on our complex relationship to the ground and the implications of our behavior towards the ground. Literary scholarship is removed from the realm of rarified word games, from the self reflecting hall of mirrors. Ecocritics need to be folklorists, geographers, historians, landscape readers, students of material culture. They need to get their hands dirty, in the exigencies of daily human existence.

Writings about nature and the landscape, and the interdisciplinary study of those writings explore in its most basic form the intersection of art with the rhythms and textures of life on earth, achieving a deeper response, raising fundamental questions, to provoke us to think about how well and wisely we live. Language is not inherently separate from the natural world; it is evolving out of the same evolutionary processes. When we study the relationships between language and landscape, text and terrain, or words and woods, we do not study two separate things but interdependencies.

A fully ecological analysis of any text can only happen within a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives. A fully ecological analysis of any text can only happen within a community of readings. According to Don Elgin (The Comedy of the Fantastic, 1985)

“Such an approach to studying literature is a frightening one, for it means dealing with infinitely more complex systems than simply philosophies and / or theories of art and literature.

It means investigating the manner in which politics, economics, science, religion,

language, medicine and countless other matters go into the making of a piece of literature”.

According to David Taylor, “ecocriticism is a polemic form of scholarship because in examining cultural constructions of environment, ecocriticism suggests a reevaluation of the readers’ own cultural constructions of environment”.

Ecocriticism has been divided into two waves- The first wave is characterized by its emphasis on nature writing as an object of study and as a meaningful practice. Central to this wave is the environmental crisis of our age- a problem that is both cultural and physical. A primary concern in first wave ecocriticism was to “speak for nature.” Thus ecocriticism gained its reputation as an “avowedly political mode of analysis” This wave kept the cultural distinction between human and nature, promoting the value of nature.

The second wave is modern in its breaking down of some of the longstanding distinctions between the human and the non – human, questioning the very concepts. The boundaries between the human and the non-human are discussed in constructions. Ecocritics challenge these constructions, asking how they frame the environmental crisis and its solution. This wave brought with it a redefinition of the term “environment” expanding its meaning to include both “nature” and the “urban”. Out of this expansion has grown the Ecojustice Movement one of the more political of ecocriticism branches that is “raising an awareness of class, race and gender through ecocritical reading of texts”. The plights of

the poorest of the population, who are victims of pollution, are studied.

Ecocriticism continues to evolve and has undergone several shifts in attitude and direction since its inception. Some ecocritics claim that activism has been a defining feature of ecocriticism from the beginning, while others see activism as a defining feature of the first wave.

Tropes & Approaches:

Pastoral:

This trope, found in much British and American literature, focuses on the dichotomy between rural and urban life, as “deeply entrenched in western culture” (Garrard 33.) There is a general idealization of nature and the rural and the demonization of the urban. Such works show a “retreat” from city life to the country, while romanticizing rural life. It depicts an idealized human existence that obscures the reality of the hard work which living in these areas entails.

Greg Garrard identifies three branches of the pastoral:

- 1) Classic Pastoral, characterized by nostalgia and an appreciation of nature as a place for human relation and reflection.
- 2) Romantic Pastoral, a period after the Industrial Revolution that saw rural independence as desirable against the expansion of the urban.
- 3) American Pastoralism: which emphasizes agrarianism and represents land as a resource to be cultivated, with farmland often creating a

boundary between the urban and the wilderness.

Wilderness:

This approach examines the ways in which wilderness is constructed, valued and engaged as well as represented in literature and popular culture. Representation of wilderness in British and American culture can be separated into a few main tropes. First, old world wilderness displays wilderness as a place beyond the boundaries of civilization, wherein wilderness is treated as a “threat” a place of “exile”.

This trope is seen in Biblical tales of creation and early British culture. Old world wilderness is often conflated with demonic practices in early American literature.

New world wilderness, seen in portrayals of wilderness in later American literature applies the pastoral trope of the “retreat” itself, seeing wilderness not as a place to fear, but as a place to find sanctuary. The New world wilderness trope has informed much of the American and Canadian identity and often constructs encounters with the wilderness that lead to a more “authentic existence”.

Ecofeminism:

As a branch of ecocriticism, ecofeminism primarily “analyzes the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature” (Bressler 236.) Drawing parallels between the domination of land and the domination of men over women, ecofeminists examine these hierarchical gendered relationships, in which the land is often equated with the feminine, seen as a fertile resource, and a property of man.

Ecofeminist approach can be divided into two camps. The first, referred to as Radical ecofeminism, reverses the patriarchal domination of man over woman and nature, “exalting nature”, the “non human” and the emotional. This approach embraces the idea that women are inherently closer to nature, biologically, spiritually and emotionally.

The second camp, which followed the first historically, maintains that there is no such thing as a “feminine essence” that would make women more likely to connect with nature.

Ecofeminism is a highly diverse and complex branch. Many writers have undertaken the job of examining the hierarchical relationships structured in our cultural representation of nature and of women and other oppressed groups. Some groups like the Native Americans have been historically seen as closer to nature portrayed as dwelling in harmony with nature.

The second wave feminist engagement with technology has been characterised by the ecofeminist use of the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother, which shows the deep alliance between the feminist and the ecological. Ecofeminists argue that “uncontrolled growth associated with capitalism, technology and progress has sanctioned the domination of both “nature” and “women”. Ecofeminists assert the political importance of reclaiming both the natural and the female/ maternal from the grips of an exploitative scientific patriarchy.

According to Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, women have a deep and particular

understanding of the connection between patriarchal and ecological violence “through our natures and experiences as women.”

The ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women’s history and the history of the environment and ecological change. Both the women’s movement and the ecology movement are sharply critical of the costs of competition, aggression and domination arising from the market economy’s modus operandi in nature and society. The vision of the ecology movement has been to restore the balance of nature disrupted by industrialization and overpopulation. It has emphasized the need to live within the cycles of nature, as opposed to the exploitative, linear mentality of forward progress. It focuses on the costs of progress, the limits of growth, the deficiencies of technological decision making and the urgency of the conservation and recycling of natural resources. In the same way the women’s movement has exposed the costs for all human beings of competition in the marketplace and the view of both women and nature as psychological and recreational resources for the male.

Ecofeminism grew out of various social movements- the feminist, peace and ecology movements- in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. The term was first used by Francoise D’Eaubonne and became popular in the context of numerous protests against environmental destruction and ecological disasters.

Ynestra King has said:

“Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and

integrity of every living thing. -----
we are a woman identified
movement ----- we see the
devastation of the earth and her beings
by the corporate warriors and the
threat of nuclear
annihilation by the military warriors,
as feminist concerns.”

Through ecofeminism women also
discovered the spiritual dimension of life the
realization of this interconnectedness is
itself spirituality.

**A few proponents of ecocriticism are
quoted here:** Joseph Meeker in his seminal
book “The Comedy of Survival: Studies in
Literary Ecology” published in 1974 writes:

“Human beings are the earth’s only
literary creatures -----If
the creation of literature is an
important characteristic of the human
species, it should be examined
carefully and honestly to discover its
influence upon human behavior and
the natural environment to determine
what role if any it plays in the
welfare and survival of mankind and
what Insight it offers
into human relationship With
other species and the world around
us”. (pg 3-4)

Dave Foreman in his “Confessions of an
Eco-warrior” writes:

“We donot engage in radical action
because we are
primarily motivated by opposition
to authority, because we are
antinomians, but
because we are for something – the
beauty, wisdom and abundance of the

living planet.” The term “deep
ecology” was introduced by Arne
Naess, Norwegian Professor of
Philosophy. Naess said that we must
widen our circle of identification. We
identify not merely with our family,
our community, our culture, but also
with our immediate environment.
Naess envisages self-realization as the
transition not only from ego to social
self, but from social self to ecological
self. When we identify ourselves with
nature, our innate self – love expands
in proportion to our new sense of self.
Defence of nature becomes a matter of
self-defence. Naess pointed out that
the process of self-realisation has
affinities with Gandhi’s notion of
enlightenment.

Joseph Carroll reiterates, “The felt quality of
experience within a natural world is one of
those fundamental conditions of experience.
It should also be one of the fundamental
categories of literary analysis (302)
(Evolution and the literary Theory, 1995)

Harold Fromm the coeditor of “The
Ecocriticism Reader” explains the effects of
the environment on body and consciousness
in “My Life as a Robot”. Toxic substances,
pollution, the quality of soil in which food is
grown, living near highways, chlordane,
PCB’S, DDT, global warming, lead in paint
and dishes are related to one’s physical and
mental condition. Myriad elements of the
environment are woven into the physical
being of every person.

Lawrence Buell is one of the pioneers of
ecocriticism. He provides a profound
rethinking of our literary and cultural

reflections on nature. Environmental crisis brings a crisis of imagination. Writers can help to ameliorate the crisis through their writings through a rescue operation by reanimating and redirecting the reader's transaction with nature. Environmental literacy can be propagated through literature through the writings of Thoreau and Emerson. He believed strongly that pastoral ideology is central to American cultural self understanding. Embeddedness in spacio – physical context is constitutive of personal and social identity.

In conclusion, I quote Jonathan Bate who tells eloquently about the role of literature in the establishment of close kinship between nature and human life:

“We cannot do without thought experiments and language experiments which imagine a return to nature, a reintegration of the human and the

other. The dream of deep ecology will never be realized upon the earth, but our survival as a species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the work of our imagination.”

(Jonathan Bate. “The Song of the Earth. 2000)

Ecocriticism's greatest challenge in the first part of the 21st C is to address the question of environmental concerns in nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness narratives. Ecocriticism's agenda is concerned with issues of social justice and equity. It explores the importance of vision and imagination in changing minds, lives, policies as well as creativity. Ecocriticism has reformist and transformationist aspirations.

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