Ecological Criticism

Aliases

Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach known by a number of other designations, including:

- green (cultural) studies
- literary ecology
- ecopoetics
- environmental literary theory/criticism
- nature writing

Definitions

Buell: “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.”

Estok: “ecocriticism has distinguished itself . . . firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections.”

Estok: more than “simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—
thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds.”

Gomides: “The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations.”

**Major Tenets**

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. Science and art come together to analyze the environment and generate possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation.

There are examples in literature, explicit and implicit, that man has abused his environment. Although man is accountable to preserve the environment for future generations, he continues to plunder the earth for gain.
Man’s prime directive—to replenish, subdue and have dominion over the earth—has given Christian cultures justification to legitimize their oppression over less powerful groups and exploit their natural resources, while preserving Western economic domination.

Genesis 1:28—And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

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<th>The “civilized” were those from:</th>
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<td>• industrialized nations</td>
<td>• agrarian or hunter-gatherer tribes</td>
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<td>• cash-based economies</td>
<td>• barter-based economies</td>
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<td>• Protestant Christian traditions</td>
<td>• “pagan” traditions</td>
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<td>• patriarchal societies</td>
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Art and literature are important in revealing human beings unto themselves. Literature is intended to act as a catalyst for real social change, in a cooperative effort to meet the demands of a world perceived to be on a destructive course.

Ecocritics advocate/argue whether the examination of “place” should be a distinctive category, much like class, gender, or race.

Ecocritics examine human perception of wilderness and how it has changed throughout history and whether or not current environmental issues are accurately represented or even mentioned in popular culture and modern literature.

Other disciplines, such as history, philosophy, ethics, and psychology, are also considered by ecocritics to be possible contributors to ecocriticism. At the same time, ecocriticism has borrowed methodologies and theoretically informed approaches liberally from other fields of literary, social and scientific study.

Deep ecology: A movement that takes a spiritual approach to nature. All organisms have equal intrinsic worth. The diversity of life forms and cultures contributes to the richness of wisdom through the ages. A search to get in touch with one’s roots in a barren secular age.

Summary of “deep ecology” principles formulated by Naess and Sessions:

1. The well-being and flourishing of non-human life on Earth have value in themselves, independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.

2. Richness and diversity of life-forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.

5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.

6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs would be deeply different from the present.

7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living.

8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation either directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.
Origins

At the turn of the 19th century, nature poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasized its wonder and beauty. Essayist Henry David Thoreau wrote to increase man’s naturalistic awareness. They were influenced by British Romanticists (Wordsworth and Coleridge especially), and hoped to influence the western mindset concerning the quality of life. If man would connect with nature, by living in harmony with it, his life would be more fulfilled. However, it wasn’t until the 1960s that eco-criticism developed a large following.
Ecologically-minded individuals and scholars began publishing progressive works of ecotheory and criticism during the explosion of environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. However, because there was no organized movement to study the ecological/environmental side of literature, these important works were scattered and categorized under a litany of different subject headings: pastoralism, human ecology, romanticism, nature writing, etc.

Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works both published in the mid-1990s: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell.

**Terms**

**Eco-consciousness:** A growing awareness of the effects of plants and animals on each other and the environment, and how man’s interaction changes his biological surroundings.
Pastoralism: The sentiment or spirit of rural life. Out of her abundance, Mother Earth sustains life. She teaches man about his relationship to deity through her patterns and cycles. Reverence and respect for the earth are cultivated through rituals from less materialistic peoples.

Anthropocentric: Man’s obsession and compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit nature. His ego-centric lifestyle creates a barrier for him to coexist and cooperate in a complex relationship with nature.

Biocentric: All living organisms have the right to live, blossom and reach their own unfolding self-realization.
**Strengths**

- Chronicles the damage done to the environment by mankind
- Challenges the belief that wilderness is waste
- Inspires hope that everyone can rectify the situation
- Advocates the rights of plants and animals
- Promotes awareness, sensitivity, and change
- Connects with scientific communities, women

**Weaknesses**

- It is still a new theory, still crystalizing
- Perceived as more of an issue than a criticism
- Many still believe that the earth was made for man's use only
- Undermined by its parallelism to feminism. The basic claim is that women and nature have both been controlled and abused by white, male dominating classes. Therefore, it has fallen out of favor by its would-be-supporters.