

Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice

Sixteen Position Papers from the 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting
Salt Lake City, Utah--6 October 1994

Introduction

The word "ecocriticism" traces back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" and apparently lay dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting (in Coeur d'Alene), when Cheryll Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell, now Assistant Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno) not only revived the term but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that heretofore had been known as "the study of nature writing." Cheryll's call for an "ecocriticism" was immediately seconded at that same WLA meeting by Glen Love (Professor of English at the University of Oregon) in his Past President's speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism." Since that meeting in 1989, the term "ecocriticism" has bloomed in usage, so that now one finds it appearing with some frequency in calls for papers, critical articles, and indeed academic job descriptions. Indications are that acceptance of the term is imminent.

But there's a problem, which came to the fore at the 1993 WLA meeting in Wichita. Trouble arose on the last day of the conference, at the end of a session entitled, "Ecocriticism: Reimagining the Way We Write about the West," a session that, unfortunately, was left without time for discussion at the end. As people were gathering up their belongings and streaming toward the doors, an older gentleman, still in his seat, clearly befuddled, tried to raise his voice above the haste: "But what IS ecocriticism?" It seems that few people heard him but those who did recognized a voice crying out in the wilderness. O'Grady and Branch immediately exchanged looks of: "Hey, that fellow deserves an answer--we all do!"

And thus was born the idea for the session at the 1994 WLA meeting in Salt Lake City, "Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice." Gathered here are one-page position papers by sixteen "younger" scholars, all of whom are pondering the question posed by the good man in Wichita: "What is ecocriticism?" Rather than provide the definitive answer, the point of these papers is to foster an awareness of the varied uses (or non-uses!) to which scholars are putting the term. In addition, the writers were asked to consider how our present understanding might lead to future developments, both in scholarship and in pedagogy. Please use this material as a working document, a point of departure from which to ponder your own stance toward "ecocriticism."

Michael P. Branch, Florida International University
Sean O'Grady, Boise State University

Position Papers

What We Talk About When We Talk About Ecocriticism

By Ralph W. Black, New York University

Not long ago I saw *King Lear* again. Olivier's *Lear*. I marveled as usual at *Lear*'s deep rage and deeper sadness, and I cried as usual as he carried Cordelia's body across the stage at the end. But I was struck even more by the beginning: A map of the kingdom is unrolled. It is painted across the tanned hides of a small herd of royal deer. The old Sovereign uses his sword to symbolically divide his domain among his daughters. Even before the daughters have spoken, or refused to speak the trajectory of their love, there is this transgression: the commodified landscape is sliced up and parceled out to the highest rhetorical bidder. For a moment I wonder about my understanding of the tragedy, about what hubristic act instigates *Lear*'s fall, about the significance of the natural world in the play, the moments of clarity that all seem to take place outside--in a storm, on the moors, at the seashore.

William Cronon has recently written about his work as an environmental historian, saying that "human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural." He is speaking of histories of the Great Plains, but we, invested as we are in the natural world and its literary representation, might use it to talk about Colonel Sutpen, Natty Bumppo, or *King Lear*.

Lear is one of the last books I would put on an environmental literature reading list, but surely there is room enough, and reason, for exploring the relationship between the human and natural worlds in the play. And even if I use such an interpretive act only to bolster a reading of, say, *The Tempest*, I hope I am making some headway toward furthering and, some might say, legitimizing the work of ecocriticism.

Saying that, I wonder if I don't mean that we need to test our ecocritical tenets on "real books"--that is to say, books other than those by Abbey or Thoreau or Silko or Cooper, those books, as one of Norman Maclean's more insightful readers famously pointed out, that have trees in them. If ecocriticism's territory is the interplay of the human and the nonhuman in literary texts, there are few wider. Cather's prairie or Van Dyke's desert are as crucial to and as formative of their respective characters as the cityscapes of Don Passos, James, or Baldwin. Ecocriticism gives us a vocabulary to find a common ground among books that might otherwise seem to have very little in common. This is the envelope's edge that I want to push.

I'm speaking here both as a city-dweller and as a teacher of city-dwellers. The "out there" that's out here is, visually and ecologically speaking, a long way from Abbey's slickrock canyons. I'd trade up in a Lower Eastsider's second, and yet the issues of representation in a Baldwin story and the political, social and environmental implications behind that representation could hardly be more vital. The term "endangered species" has been used in recent years to describe young black urban males and two-parent "inner city" families as well as spotted owls and red wolves. The interplay among characters, species, and ecosystems in a literary text often demands an interdisciplinary approach to thoroughly parse. Part of my own agenda as a teacher is to use this interdisciplinarity to interpret not just our relations to a text, but to the physical (if not always "natural") world in which that text (and its reader) exists. This is where it can get political: the ecosystemic relationships within a literary text will often reach out and implicate us in its web. That's what reading does--when we're lucky. Then we, devious organisms that we are, can turn and insinuate that relationship, changed now, more complex, on our

environments. Call it "A reader grows in Brooklyn." Perhaps we all can learn to sing along with Father Hopkins: Let there be left,/ O let there be left, wildness and wet;/ Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

What Is Ecocriticism?

By Christopher Cokinos, Kansas State University

For those already engaged in what necessarily must be a diverse and (yes, I hope) contentious project, a definition seems somewhat beside the point. For others (i.e. the vast majority of the literary profession), perhaps a definition is in order: ecocriticism is the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it. (Such a definition, of course, draws on the work of critics like Glen Love, Cheryll Glotfelty, and others.) Ecocriticism necessarily entails a shift away from approaches that strictly privilege language and the difficulty of referentiality to approaches that re-emphasize the real work of words in a world of consequence, joy, and despair. Like feminism at its best, ecocriticism is fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy, one that investigates and helps make possible the connections among self, society, nature, and text. That said, I neither encourage nor welcome an ecocritical atmosphere that may be developing which is hostile to and ignorant of language-centered literary theory. Also like feminism, we need a diversity of approaches. It is time for ecocritics to try to develop an ecologically oriented poststructuralism (as SueEllen Campbell has suggested). I might call such an approach "compoststructuralism."

Two concerns: 1) that we do not allow ecocriticism to become merely another "ism"-machine for publication and tenure, thus transforming it from crucial professional and social necessity to just another generator in the academic factory; and 2) that we start now to use ecocritical lenses to seriously call into question the various canons we have received as "given" and which continue to be taught as though nonhuman nature and the human place within it didn't matter.

Revising canons has become somewhat of a cliché recently, but this is the work that may have the most immediate and long-lasting effects. I am suggesting here that it's not enough to offer nature writing and nature literature classes alone (though goodness knows we need to) but that the entire range of canons--from children's literature to modern poetry--must be called into question anew. Problematic as this may sound, I think we'll find that ecocritical approaches to canon formation will complement quite intelligently the feminist and multicultural approaches to canons that already have been underway with no little success.

What Is Ecocriticism?

By Nancy Cook, University of Rhode Island

I don't often think of the work I do as ecocriticism, but at some level I suppose it is. I'm interested in place, how we place ourselves in the world and the biological, social, and political ways in which we define where we are. My work of necessity is interdisciplinary, and grows more so with every class I teach. As I prepared this statement I ranged from Mike Kowalewski's literary studies to Donald Worster's history, to Neil Evernden's environmental studies for guidance. Each has been informed by a different matrix of methodologies, different disciplines; all are useful and necessary.

I'm not sure I know what we mean by the term "ecocriticism," but it seems to be a term that is inclusive rather than exclusive. I'm uncomfortable with the term because I think already it comes associated with a particular set of political and social agendas, ones which although I may often share, predispose an audience to make value judgements. Thus, if the term "ecocriticism" assumes what in Montana disparagers call a "granola" mentality, then I hesitate to use the term. In my region it's a crucial task for me to get all of my students to analyze their assumptions about how they place themselves in the world, their assumptions about the word "nature," and their assumptions about environmental advocacies.

The battle lines in Montana have been rigidly drawn, and I hope, by using less familiar rubrics as well as liberal doses of various theoretical methods, I can get my students to come down from the battlements long enough to learn how the battle lines have been constructed. Interdisciplinarity remains crucial to such an enterprise. In order to historicize the term "nature," for example, I need to learn how to draw from biology, environmental history, geography, philosophy, cultural studies and literature, among other disciplines. Before we can successfully argue the merits of the next Wilderness Bill, my students and I need to be able to address such questions as: What is wilderness to us? What do we mean by "nature"? How do we represent where we are? How do we interact with the non-human world? How is that interaction mediated by such factors as historical period, regional location, race, gender, class?

In a sense I practice regional studies. But 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." So in order to understand my region or any region, I need to develop an ecological view. Politics enters my classroom obliquely and again regionally, for I urge my students to take heed of Barry Lopez's warning: "the more superficial a society's knowledge of the real dimensions of the land it occupies, the more vulnerable the land is to exploitation, to manipulation for short-term gain." While we should be skeptical of facile agreement as to what constitutes "exploitation," and "short-term gain," we need the tools to analyze both the land and our relation to it. And theory plays an important role here. How can we begin to examine a term such as "Nature" without some theoretical apparatus?

What Is Ecocriticism?

By Harry Crockett, Loveland, Colorado

Ecocriticism elucidates relationships between human and non-human nature (cf Mike Branch!), privileging literary inscriptions of those relationships for all the usual reasons why we in this profession privilege literature.

Now for qualifications and caveats. This "definition" is partly true but it's too self-promoting and calculated. Smacks too much of upwardly-mobile straining for the rarified. And it doesn't sufficiently account for the personal connection and sense of responsibility that many who do this work feel towards their subject.

Also, of course, it says nothing about how we do our "elucidating." Have we developed a new, distinct set of critical practices? Or are we a special interest group, training familiar critical lenses upon aspects of texts that most other critics ignore? I've intentionally left this method/subject distinction blurred, because that's the way I see it in ecocriticism articles, conference presentations and course outlines. To some extent, we aspire to a method but really have a subject. In other ways, though, we do swim

outside the mainstream (it's fun to feel subversive). Since these differences are also our saving graces, we should cherish and make the most of them:

- 1) We want to have an impact beyond the academy about those matters in the world most dear to us. Ultimately, we will be failures in our own eyes if our labors don't help green our society. Some other critical approaches share such a "bigger world" commitment (feminism); with others it's difficult to see how they could produce positive change (deconstruction? or do you see some promise I don't?). Our time is too precious for the latter.
- 2) We reject the prevailing critical assumption that reality is socially constructed.
- 3) We're informed by "hard" science. For critics of most stripes, the natural sciences are, at best, irrelevant. For us, they're vital. Too bad we can't say (yet) that the reverse is also true.
- 4) The aforementioned personal investment in our subject makes us more willing than critics of other stripes to honor our own experience and reactions. At its worst, this leads to solipsistic, self-indulgent, holier-than-thou posturing. It's not always that way though.

We in the U.S. have reached a recognition that major changes in the way we live are inevitable; we're a long way, though, from figuring out how to make them. Owing to the features I've been talking about pointing out, ecocriticism is unique among lit-crit approaches in its potential to contribute to that conversation. But how will we get those beyond our disciplinary boundaries to listen to us? As one presently employed outside of academics, I think about that essential question all the time. When I come up with some answers I'll let you know.

What Is Eco-Criticism?

By Thomas K. Dean, Cardinal Stritch College

Eco-criticism is a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world. Eco-criticism is also a response to needs, problems, or crises, depending on one's perception of urgency. First, eco-criticism is a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction. In large part, environmental crises are a result of humanity's disconnection from the natural world, brought about not only by increasing technology but also by particularization; that is, a mentality of specialization that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of all things. In terms of the academy, eco-criticism is thus a response to scholarly specialization that has gone out of control; eco-criticism seeks to reattach scholars to each other and scholarship to the real concerns of the world.

Inherently, then, eco-criticism is interdisciplinary. In order to understand the connectedness of all things—including the life of the mind and the life of the earth—one must reconnect the disciplines that have become sundered through over-specialization. Inherent in the idea of interdisciplinarity is the wholistic ideal. Therefore, eco-criticism must remain "a big tent"—comprehensiveness of perspectives must be encouraged and honored. All eco-critical efforts are pieces of a comprehensive continuum. Eco-critical approaches, thus, can be theoretical, historical, pedagogical, analytical, psychological, rhetorical, and on and on, including combinations of the above.

As a response to felt needs and real crises, and as an inherently wholistic practice, eco-criticism also has an inherent ideological if not moral component. A wholistic view of the universe is a value-centered one that honors the interconnectedness of things. As the interconnectedness of things is valued, so too is the integrity of all things, be they creatures of the earth, critical practices, spiritual beliefs, or ethnic backgrounds. For example, as eco-criticism invites all perspectives into its tent in order to understand the human relationship to the universe, the philosophies and understandings of different ethnic groups will be shared by all. Eco-criticism can be, for individuals who choose to make it so, socially activist or even spiritual. While some may criticize eco-criticism for being undisciplined because of such comprehensiveness, it is that very wholistic view that marks it off from the particularized critical approaches of the past that have led to the types of disconnections that eco-criticism seeks to heal.

Although eco-criticism can touch virtually any discipline, when it translates into action, it generally comes back to its home ground--the human relationship with the earth. Eco-criticism, then, can be, but need not be, politically active, as it advocates for an understanding of the world that works to heal the environmental wounds humans have inflicted upon it.

What Is Ecocriticism?

By Cheryl Glotfelty, University of Nevada, Reno

Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and 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 the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. government reports, and what rhetoric enforces this view? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and 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 nonhuman.

Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society--the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the

world" to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, that "Everything is connected to everything else," we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact.

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, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature. Historian Donald Worster argues that humanities scholars have an important role to play:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding. (*The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* [New York: Oxford UP, 1993] 27; my emphasis)

Literary scholars specialize in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language, and it is in these areas that we are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking.

In my view, an ecologically focussed criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is its most important task. Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications.

The Ecocritical Heritage

By Ian Marshall, The Pennsylvania State University, Altoona

Like would-be discoverers of a New World of scholarship, we ecocritics of ASLE feel ourselves embarking on a vast journey. Our mission: to map our territory, lay out its boundaries. We're not quite Adamic, given the privilege of naming, but we at least get to assume the act of defining what it is we do, or think ought to be done. It's exciting to be part of something new, and it's liberating to think that we can make things up as we go along. But let's not forget that even the scholarly world is round. Let's learn from the ethno- and self-centric excesses of past explorers and be aware of those who were here before us. I got my doctorate at a conservative university, where I studied under a conservative, tradition-minded early Americanist, and the word "ecology" never came up in any of my classes--and yet during my studies I read a whole lot of literary criticism about human attitudes toward nature and landscape, criticism by people like Norman Foerster, R.W.B. Lewis, Hans Huth, Henry Nash Smith, Perry Miller, Edwin Fussell, Howard Mumford Jones, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, Leo Marx, and Roderick Nash--to name very few, all writing major works before the 1970s. I suspect that there is an equally rich tradition in environmental studies.

I hope that definitions of ecocriticism can be broad as well as deep. Put as simply and loosely as possible: it's literary criticism informed by ecological awareness. But if ecological awareness means either scientific or spiritual recognition of the interconnections of living things, including humans, with each other and with their environment--then what we're doing really is not entirely new. Just as there is precedent for ecologically sensitive thinking even before there was such a word as ecology (by people like Henry Thoreau, William Bartram, the Cherokee, the Apache, and so on), there is such a thing as an ecocritical heritage. Those critics who have defined, studied, and applied concepts such as "pastoral," "romanticism," "transcendentalism," or "the frontier," or in American literature those critics who have pointed out that in the nineteenth century the land served as a determinant and symbol of the national character--weren't they all exploring the relationship between humanity and the natural world?

I don't mean to suggest that there's nothing new to do. The contemporary ecocritic undoubtedly should take recent scholarship, new ideas, new awarenesses into account. The science of ecology, for instance. Or post-structuralism--as much as it seems to ignore the real world in order to engage in mental and linguistic gymnastics, its emphasis on de-centering is entirely compatible with ecological thought. Or feminism, which has already given rise to the branch of ecocriticism called ecofeminism--a branch that at present is bigger than the rest of the tree.

So what should we do as ecocritics? Among other things, we could reinvigorate traditional studies of such topics as "the frontier" by respectfully reexamining past assumptions based on the new kinds of knowing inherent in ecology. And we might argue our case for the importance of our subject in part by emphasizing the scholarly tradition that we are heir to.

What Is Ecocriticism?

By Kent Ryden, University of Southern Maine

Ecocriticism, and the texts upon which ecocritical scholars focus, provide perhaps the most clear and compelling means we have of literally grounding the study of literature in the vital stuff of life--the earth that surrounds and sustains us. 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 that ground, and on the implications of our behavior toward that ground; it removes literary scholarship from the realm of rarified word games, from the endlessly self-reflecting hall of mirrors that comprises so much of contemporary criticism and makes it matter in human affairs. As Wendell Berry has written, "To assume that the context of literature is 'the literary world' is, I believe, simply wrong. That its real habitat is the household and the community--that it can and does affect, even in practical ways, the life of a place--may not be recognized by most theorists and critics for a while yet. But they will finally come to it, because finally they will have to. And when they do, they will renew the study of literature and restore it to importance." [1]

I began my graduate studies in a conventional English program, but quickly became restless. I was realizing that the way I was studying the texts I preferred to read had little relation to what I was really interested in: the subtle, complex manner in which people connect, individually and communally, to the landscapes and places that surround them every day. I have always been motivated by a naive belief that literature matters insofar as it derives from and reflects on human experience--and, as essayist Rockwell Gray reminds us, "All experience is placed experience"; all human experience, that is, literally

"takes place." [2] To fully understand this aspect of experience--the daily, inevitable, deeply shaping relationship among people, the earth, and the life (broadly conceived) that the earth supports--requires more than the careful reading of words on a page. It demands that we listen to the stories that people tell about the land, that we examine how they shape and have shaped the land, that we get out there and get our hands dirty; it demands that we be folklorists, geographers, historians, landscape readers, students of material culture. In embracing an interdisciplinary approach, the ecocritical scholar recontextualizes literature in the physical, grounded circumstances of life and thought and action, circumstances of the sort that generate literature in the first place: as William Stafford has remarked, "All events and experiences are local, somewhere. And all enhancements of events and experiences--all the arts--are regional in the sense that they derive from immediate relation to felt life." [3] Through examining not only written expression but also human life, thought, and behavior as they relate to the physical and natural world around us with as many scholarly tools as we can bring to bear, we enrich our understanding of the works we study and ground our scholarship more firmly in the exigencies of daily human existence. Without this grounding, any scholarly endeavor, no matter its discipline, seems to me to lose its point.

When I began to realize all this, I jumped ship and swam over to the avowedly interdisciplinary field of American Studies. This is a course that, in some measure, I suggest we all take. 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 and, throughout that exploration, achieve a deeper resonance, raising fundamental ethical questions, demanding that we think carefully about how to live well and wisely. Criticism has no more important work than this.

Notes

[1] Wendell Berry, "Writer and Region," in *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 84.

[2] Rockwell Gray, "Autobiographical Memory and Sense of Place," in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. Alexander Burrym (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 53.

[3] William Stafford, "Having Become a Writer: Some Reflections," *Northwest Review* 13.3 (1973), 92.

What Is Ecocriticism?

By Stephanie Sarver, University of California, Davis

The term "ecocriticism" is vague and perhaps misleading. I admit to using the term to identify a range of approaches to the study of literature that share a common concern with the relationship between humans and the non-human world. Nonetheless, I've wondered how our literary efforts relate to ecology. Generally, literary ecocriticism seems concerned with the ways that the relationship between humans and nature are reflected in literary texts. This concern, however, is better labeled an environmental approach to literature (or simply environmentalism) than ecocriticism. Popular culture often conflates ecology and environmentalism, but within the academy, ecology is a scientific discipline that studies the connections between organisms and their environment. On the other hand,

environmentalism comprises a range of practices that promote the well-being of the earth. As literary scholars, our work may be informed by environmentalist concerns, but we ultimately study texts, not organisms. (I know that some will dispute this.) Although some might argue that our work assumes a quasi-ecological character when it reveals how writers make connections between organisms and environments, this work is better described as a form of environmentalism than the practice of ecology. As a scholar of literature, I am not comfortable co-opting the name of a discipline in attempting to describe broadly my work.

"Ecocriticism" has proven to be more jargon than a descriptive term. It describes neither a philosophy nor an activity; it is meaningful only to the exclusive audience whom I address here. If I utter the word "ecocriticism" to a room full of ecologists, they will wonder to what activity I am alluding. If, however, I call myself an environmentalist who studies literature, both academic and non-academic audiences generally will understand what values inform my work.

"Ecocriticism" is also an unfortunate term because it suggests a new kind of critical theory. The emerging body of work that might be labeled ecocritical is united not by a theory, but by a focus: the environment. This ecocritical work draws on a variety of theories, such as feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and historicist. Using these different theories, the ecocritic considers how nature is reflected and perceived in literary texts. It seems, therefore, that these literary studies reflect not the science of ecology, but a broad-based environmentalist sensibility. Literary scholars who are environmentalists seem not to be creating a new critical theory; rather, they are drawing on existing theories to illuminate our understanding of how human interactions with nature are reflected in literature.

Finally, I am concerned about a move to establish an environmentalist camp among the critical elite of the academic literary community. It seems that some would like to establish ecocriticism as a rival to other critical movements. The rationale, as I understand it, is that if we can create a collective ecocritical presence, then the literary establishment (i.e., the MLA) will take notice. Such a move, while possessing a certain logic, may also backfire. In creating a vague and somewhat misleading name before we have any well-defined theory or methodology, we put the cart before the horse. We also create a handy term with which we can be stereotyped and, possibly, dismissed.

To acquire true influence within the larger literary community, literary environmentalism must reach into the spheres where we are, as yet, unheard. This will occur when, in addition to identifying how wild nature is perceived in literary texts, we introduce environmental matters into more main-stream literary discussions that center on such issues as gender, sexuality, politics, economics, ethnicity, and nationalism. (Some of this is already occurring.) Much progress has been made toward the goal of legitimizing the study of nature writing. We will earn a wider respect when our environmental readings expand to address not just the trees and rivers that inhabit the texts we study, but also the nature inherent in humans and in settings in which humans figure prominently: in our dooryards, cities, and farms. Our credibility and influence as literary environmentalists will not be earned by creating a new buzz-word. We will acquire broader recognition and respect when we can demonstrate that environmental issues are human issues, and that our reverence for nature--both textual and actual--is not, as some of our critics would argue, a convenient excuse to avoid the problems of the human world.

Some Principles of Ecocriticism

Don Scheese, Gustavus Adolphus College

1. The theory and practice of ecocriticism is inherently political. I feel about ecocriticism the way Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader* does about feminism: "At its best, feminism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read." One of the main reasons I teach courses in nature writing and environmental history, and publish on these topics, is to make our students and the general public more sensitive towards and knowledgeable about the places in which they live. I echo Barry Lopez's hope that the practice and study of nature writing may someday "provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought."

2. Ecocriticism can benefit from integration with other literary theories. I don't find it useful to lambaste the MLA for its solipsism, its jargon-laden discourse, and its woeful neglect of the literature of the environment. We ought to engage other literary theories in a dialectic from which a better understanding of nature and nature writing might emerge. For example, I think there is some merit in the post-modernist claim that nature is a social and psychological construct, because all writing is anthropocentric in that it must be filtered through a human consciousness. I have also benefited from the perspectives of the New Historicists and their emphasis on "the textuality of history and the historicity of texts." We need an ecocriticism that is grounded in place, yes; we also need theory that is grounded in history, that historicizes the text--and its criticism. The challenge, as William Rueckert has put it, is this: "How can we resolve the fundamental paradox of this profession and get out of our heads? . . . How can we move from the community of literature to the larger biospheric community which ecology tells us. . . we belong to even as we are destroying it?"

3. Ecocriticism is inherently interdisciplinary. One of the startling discoveries I have made in teaching nature writing over the years is of the broad community of scholars across the disciplines who regularly incorporate the literature of place in their courses. Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place. Landscape by definition includes the non-human elements of place--the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air--as well as human perceptions and modifications. How an author sees and describes these elements relates to geological, botanical, zoological, meteorological, ecological, as well as aesthetic, social, and psychological, considerations. And then there is the historical vantage point. As Thoreau once wrote, there can be no history but natural history--if one believes that by "nature" we mean the human as well as non-human world.

4. Fieldwork on the part of scholars and students can improve the practice of ecocriticism. In teaching and publishing on various works of nature writing, I have benefited from visiting the sand counties of Wisconsin, the Maine woods, Yosemite Valley, Arches National Park--to compare and contrast my impressions with those of the authors, to trace the historical evolution of a place, to get the feel of a particular environment. Like an anthropologist we should engage in fieldwork; our informant is the land itself. Outdoor education goes hand-in-hand with ecocriticism because we and our students need to be reminded regularly that the earth was not made for humans alone. There's no such thing as "bad weather."

5. Ecocriticism must tolerate dissent. We should welcome the opinions of those who argue there is no ecological crisis, who hold that environmentalism has gone too far in its methods and goals, who think

that nature writing smacks of purple prose. Diversity is healthy, both in the ecosystem and in the academic community.

Survival Stories: Toward an Ecology of Literary Criticism

By Mark Schlenz, University of California, Santa Barbara

A few years ago a student said he had enrolled in my particular section of a 20th-century American Literature course because he had heard I was "into" the emerging field of ecocriticism. An environmental studies major taking an English course to fulfill breadth requirements, he explained how he looked forward to integrating personal intellectual interests and political commitments in what would otherwise be for him an "irrelevant course." Literary studies, he went on, were known to be dominated by "politically correct" emphases on issues of race, class, and gender--all hopelessly anthropocentric in his view. The project he proposed involved instead a biocentric application of "the environmental ethic" as an interpretive standard to a reading of Robert Frost's poem "The Woodpile."

Though I encouraged his enthusiasm, I also cautioned him to sharpen his definitions of what he understood the aims and methods of ecologically focused literary study to be: What did he mean by the environmental ethic? How would his interpretive strategy evade excesses he condemned in other critical discourses? How would his analysis aid our productive understanding of interrelations between literary activity and ecological concerns? I further suggested that he reread Aldo Leopold's articulation of the land ethic and also take a look at Raymond Williams' essay, "Ideas of Nature." Despite these and subsequent suggestions, the student's paper chastened my best hopes and confirmed my worst anxieties for the healthy survival of ecocriticism. Because, as the student insisted, the poem's narrator claims to know the inner thoughts of a small bird, Frost is an arrogant humanist. Because he admires the work of a wood-cutter, Frost is a flagrant utilitarian. In short, according to my erstwhile student, Frost's anthropocentric poem, because it violates the integrity of "the environmental ethic," is an offensive text deserving deletion in a biocentrally reformed canon.

Ecocriticism, as this incident illustrated for me, cannot be productively approached as simply another species of criticism competing for survival in the rarified habitat of academe. Rather, ecocritics should seek to transform academe by bringing it back into dynamic interconnection with worlds we all live in--inescapably social and material worlds in which issues of race, class, and gender inevitably intersect in complex and multi-faceted ways with issues of natural resource exploitation and conservation. As the emergence of contemporary ecofeminist and environmental justice movements demonstrate, human and natural resource exploitation are invariably linked through various and competing ideas of nature. In literary studies, the ecocritic's task should involve articulation and critical examination of these linkages as revealed in and by linguistic and textual practices. Joseph Meeker noted in *The Comedy of Survival* that humanity is a uniquely literate species and went on to ask whether--and how--the stories we tell will finally contribute to our survival or extinction. This, I believe, is still the central question ecocriticism must confront. Further, I believe this confrontation draws us into a cooperative rather than a competitive relation with other members of our discourse community as we seek to establish an ecology of literary criticisms that appreciates and integrates insights of various critical perspectives by contributing to each an indefatigable and guiding concern for the fate of our earth.

Ecocriticism: Storytelling, Values, Communication, Contact

By Scott Slovic, Southwest Texas State University

I have just spent eleven months in Japan, serving as a kind of temporary "nature writing guru" among scholars and students who had, a year ago, never heard of "ecocriticism" or "nature writing." Now, after months of travelling and lecturing, after countless introductory spiels on "literature and environment" (my lecturing voice invaded my dreams at night) and the distribution of examples of nature writing in both Japanese and English, there is a budding new movement in this field on those islands of mountains, rice fields, temples, skyscrapers. and haiku. A Japanese branch of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, with about sixty founding members, got started in May. In my introductory talks on nature writing and environmentally conscious literary scholarship, this is what I said about "ecocriticism": "the term means either the study of nature writing by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem (at first glance) oblivious of the nonhuman world. This new enthusiasm for the study of 'literature and environment' in the United States is not only a reaction to the impressive aesthetic achievement of American nature writing, but an indication of contemporary society's growing consciousness of the importance and fragility of the nonhuman world." That's my general description of this field, but there are several other basic ideas/strategies that, I think, are essential for ecocritics to keep in mind, essential to the vitality and meaningfulness of what we're doing. Since I'm in the habit of playing the guru role, let me put these in the form of rules or bits of advice:

1. Storytelling. Ecocritics should tell stories, should use narrative as a constant or intermittent strategy for literary analysis. The purpose is not to compete with the literature itself, but simply to illuminate and appreciate the context of reading--that is, to embrace the literary text as language that somehow contributes to our lives "out in the world." We must not reduce our scholarship to an arid, hyper-intellectual game, devoid of smells and tastes, devoid of actual experience. Encounter the world and literature together, then report about the conjunctions, the intersecting patterns. Analyze and explain literature through storytelling--or tell your own stories and then, subsequently, show how contact with the world shapes your responses to texts. See John Elder's *Imagining the Earth* (1985) and Kent Ryden's *Mapping the Invisible Landscape* (1993) for examples of intermittent "narrative scholarship." I've experimented with it at the end of *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992).

2. Values. For several years I've pondered a bold claim that Glen Love made in "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism" (*WAL*, Nov. 1990). I often begin my courses with this thought, transforming Love's assertion into a question: could it be that "the most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world"? This seems to throw "scholarly poise and neutrality" out the window. But it occurs to me more and more these days that literature is, indeed, much more than an intellectual toy, created for the pleasure of clever, but "irresponsible," critics who resist taking stances on what's happening in the world. Literary scholarship and literature itself are, on the most fundamental level, associated with human values and attitudes. We should, as critics and teachers of literature, consider how literary expression challenges and directs readers to decide what in the world is meaningful/important to them. We can't afford to shy away from the issue of values--this is the proper domain of literary studies (and such fields as philosophy and religious studies), and it's one reason why the humanities should be a crucial part of university programs in environmental studies.

3. Communication. Try not to waste words and paper. If you have something to say, say it clearly and directly--communicate. So much literary scholarship is unreadable garbage, apparently not intended for a real audience. I think ecocritics, of all people, ought to challenge themselves to use language with clarity and elegance. Those of us who study nature writing have some of the world's best models (writing that communicates) in front of us day after day.

4. Contact. This past summer, two Japanese nature writing scholars arranged for me to visit eighty-four-year-old farmer/philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka, the author of *The One-Straw Revolution*, in the mountains outside of Matsuyama on the southern island of Shikoku. After spending a few hours walking around Fukuoka-san's jungle-like orchards, we went to have tea in a primitive hut. While drinking tea, we listened to Fukuoka-san talk about farming and nature. Then I asked him something I had been wondering during our entire visit. Did he think it might be possible for the university to contribute anything to our understanding of nature? (What did he think about these three literature professors who had come to visit him?) Fukuoka-san seemed to look right past me, and then he said (in Japanese), "Listen to the bird sing." I thought he simply hadn't heard my question or that he found it unimportant. But everyone stopped talking and, sure enough, there was a nightingale ("uguisu" in Japanese) calling outside the hut. Then Fukuoka-san's assistant leaned over to me and whispered, "He means, it is possible if you have a simple mind." In other words, those of us who work at universities might be able to contribute to society's understanding of nature if we remember to pay attention to nature itself, if we don't lose ourselves in lectures, theories, texts, laboratories. A powerful admonition: ecocritics need contact not just with literature and not just with each other, but with the physical world.

Four Ways of Looking at Ecocriticism

By Stan Tag, The College of Idaho

1. It wrestles with, embraces, and seeks to understand Walt Whitman's declaration in "A Song of the Rolling Earth":

There can be no theory of any account unless it corroborate the theory of the earth,
No politics, song, religion, behavior, or what not, is of account, unless it compare with the amplitude of
the earth,
Unless it face the exactness, vitality, impartiality, rectitude of the earth.

2. As pedagogical practice, it means encouraging and enabling students to explore the natural world firsthand. To read the earth--carefully, closely, and often; to pay attention to its rhythms, patterns, intricacy. Students need to get to know the earth, not just discuss it. Such outdoor experiences will enliven their reading of books, and even sharpen their thinking and writing. It means creating assignments that get students out of the classroom, or that challenge students to study any given subject within the larger contexts of their campus environments, their towns, watersheds, continents, planet. We must give students time and space to experience the natural world. One student who spent much of her semester writing project watching a hillside change from winter to spring wrote: "I can't believe how wrong I've been about this bush so many times. At first, I thought it was dead--and it grew buds. Then I watched it grow and the buds mature, thinking it was a young tree or some plant I'd never seen before--and it has turned into a lilac bush. My town's backyards sport quite a few lilacs; my own is no exception. My brother and friends and I used to chase the dog through them, and each other. How could I have not recognized this bush? Maybe it's because I watched it so closely. I studied it carefully,

not knowing what it was, with no preconceptions of how it should look or any idea of what it was. Before, I knew the flower of the lilac bush, and I knew the leaf, but I didn't really know the plant. I didn't see how it grew from a clump of kinked, dead-looking sticks into a full bouquet of wiry branches weighted with mini-pineapples. Now I know the plant better, the whole bush instead of just the flower or the leaf. This hillside is like that bush now. I know the whole place better, having watched it take on new life with no preconceived ideas, no expectations. If I brought someone down here now they would see the flower and the leaf. I see the whole bush."

3. As scholarly and pedagogical practice, it means exploring (reading, discussing, writing about) language as an on-going product of evolution. Language is not inherently separate from the natural world, as some theories may suggest, but is evolving out of the same evolutionary processes as the earth itself. Arguments about whether language represents the world, or whether it distances us from the world, sidetrack us from the more important things we have to learn about how language already functions within our experiences of the world. When we study the relationships between language and landscape, text and terrain, or words and woods, we are not studying two separate things (as if we lived in some dualistic universe), but interdependencies, particular manifestations (even processes) of the thing we call life, each interconnected to the other, and both wholly dependent upon such basic natural elements for their survival as sunlight, water, and air. No literary theory would be worth a whit if the sun burnt out tomorrow. (Some aren't anyway.) Ecocritical scholarship also needs to be interdisciplinary. Just as a healthy ecosystem depends upon a diversity of plant and animal life, healthy ecocriticism depends upon a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives. A fully ecological analysis of any text can only happen within a community of readings. Such an approach to studying literature, according to Don Elgin (*The Comedy of the Fantastic*, 1985), "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. It means trying to see the whole, and the whole is so enormous and complex that the temptation is to retreat to the comfort of specialized knowledge, information that is reassuring precisely because it has simplified the world to the point at which it can be understood" (15).

4. It means always keeping in mind that--as Thoreau recognized--"The universe is larger than our views of it."

What Is Ecocriticism?

By David Taylor, Converse College

What is ecocriticism? Ecocriticism is certainly a broad, gangly term that groups very disparate types of criticism: some overtly polemic, others seemingly disinterested in cultural critique. To my mind, ecocriticism is an inherently polemic form of scholarship (most often ecological) because in examining cultural constructions of environment ecocriticism suggests a reevaluation of the readers' own cultural constructions of environment.

Only recently (20-30 years) has literary criticism begun to examine its usefulness and purpose in a broader notion of society. Previously, literary criticism has discussed notions of the pastoral, romantic wilderness, literary naturalism, and such, but such criticism has focused more on the literary style of the text in order to place it into a canonical framework (an aesthetic consideration only) than on the human descriptions of an actual landscape. This change in values (as I see it, ecocriticism) parallels that of

literary criticism's movement away from New Criticism (perhaps is an intellectual byproduct). Terry Eagleton says of New Criticism's view of interpretation:

Meaning was public and objective, inscribed in the very language of the literary text, not a question of some putative ghostly impulse in a long-dead author's head, or the arbitrary private significances a reader might attach to his words. (*48 Literary Theory: An Introduction*)

Deconstructionist critics have pointed out that such a hermeneutics ignores the milieu in which the text is read, the historical concerns of and influences on the author, and, of course, the cultural background of the reader. Ecocriticism also reflects similar values by stressing the importance of the cultural constructions of environment in the text (and by the reader) instead of focusing on the text's similarities with accepted genres and literary movements.

Alexander Wilson claims "the culture of nature--the ways we think, teach, talk about, and construct the natural world--is as important a terrain as the land itself." The effect that ecocriticism will have is the change that takes place as a result of the tenuous connection that exists between action and the criticism of ideology (a very tenuous connection). I'm not suggesting that we coerce our students to march in picket lines or spike trees; those are also cultural constructions of environment (to which we may or may not be sympathetic). Rather I'm suggesting that we be open about the polemics of ecocriticism with our students and readers. The choice of action or non-action is theirs.

What Is Ecocriticism?

By David W. Teague, University of Delaware

Ecocriticism seems to have arrived at one of its early major crises. As the title of this panel implies, there are some pressing issues arising in the intersection of the theory and practice of ecocriticism. One of these issues, as far as I can tell, is that the theory and the practice of ecocriticism in fact exist apart from one another more often than they should. This separation occurs along very specific lines, and, as many of us are finding in our classrooms, one of those lines seems to run between the front row of chairs and the lectern. Whether for generational, cultural, ethical, or moral reasons, or, quite likely, some combination of the above, it is difficult consistently to maintain the interest of one's undergraduate students in the literature of nature.

The most common response to this problem is to blame one's students. At least that's my most common response. "What's missing in them?" we ask, "Why can't these kids see the value of Thoreau's experiment in Walden Woods?" But nothing is wrong with our students. Generally, they want to learn things they can use, and without a fairly sophisticated critical perspective, much nature writing is alien to the experiences of contemporary college students. The field guide, the ramble, the backcountry journal, the travel narrative are all, from a generic perspective, very interesting to a certain demographic group, namely the educated middle class from which many college professors come. Also interesting to us are deep ecology and the convergence between ecocriticism and postmodernism, but we ought to realize that the love of ecological writing is not a universal good, that it is defined culturally, among other things, and that our students often have a different culture from us. Not only do they have a different culture from us, they are also justified in having a different culture from us.

But still, it's true that our students do live in the world, and that they ought to know how to read what people say about it. In order to help them learn, I think we'd do well to impart to ecocriticism some of the energy and sophistication that other critical movements--Marxism, feminism, the civil rights movement--have in the past few decades brought to bear on literature. As well as exposing students to the "deep" ecologies of Muir, Burroughs, Thoreau, Austin--three men and one woman in nature--we might also do well to expose them to more pressing concerns such as the contemporary environmental justice debate, which is reflected in much of the literature we teach. We need a pedagogy of ecofeminism--actually, we need several of them. We need to start thinking about environmental literature and race. Consider, for instance, the racial composition of this panel.

I submit for consideration the March 1994 volume of *American Quarterly*. It is devoted to the discussion of American suburbs. Relying primarily on sociological methodology, it simultaneously addresses questions of land-use, gender, race, class, and, significantly, reading. Can we apply similar paradigms in our endeavor to make the study of literature and environment more relevant to our students' experiences?

What Is Ecocriticism?

By Allison B. Wallace, Unity College of Maine

Wendell Berry has called the latter twentieth-century ecological crisis an inevitable result of several other crises, those of American character, agriculture, and culture. Underlying them all may be a much larger, more deeply rooted crisis of imagination. At their best, both ecoliterature and ecocriticism address and redress this general American failure to participate as fully--that is, as imaginatively--as possible in all the nonhuman, Other life going on around, within, and in spite of us.

When I talk about ecoliterature, I'm talking about any writing that focuses on place, on the thousands of local landscapes that make up not scenery through car windows, not Sierra Club calendars nor slick ads for hiking gear, but rather our daily contexts, what David Quammen calls our "matri[ces] for destiny." Writing that examines and invites intimate human experience of place's myriad ingredients: weather, climate, flora, fauna, soil, air, water, rocks, minerals, fire and ice, as well as all the marks there of human history. Writing that sifts carefully among old metaphors regarding natural phenomena (again, including humans) and casts about for new ones, conscious that metaphors serve not only as our links to these things but also as our provisional truths about them.

When I talk about ecocriticism, I stick (for now) to a basic and rather old-fashioned charge: ecocriticism must work to make American writing about place more prominent in academic journals and undergraduate classrooms, whether the discipline is English, history, American studies, philosophy, economics, geography, ecology, geology, biology, whatever. These fields concentrate on human life on the one hand or nonhuman life on the other--rarely do they make any significant marriage between the two their aim. Ecocriticism stands poised to integrate the field that does--ecoliterature--into virtually all the standard disciplines. Why should this matter? Because this kind of reading points to human participation in nature that enriches and enlarges the mind and spirit; because our best hope for our imperiled places lies in this imaginative involvement, as readers and as agents of change, insofar as it fosters in us a sense of sympathy and belonging. That accomplished, then a multi-layered, rewarding sense of place-as-home can begin to supplant any amorphous notion of "the environment"--surely a concept evolved by large numbers of homeless (albeit affluently housed) people.

But to return to ecocriticism per se: I envision this to include writing that continues to bring--as it already has to an extent--nonfiction texts regarding place into the literary canon(s); focuses on the ecological (again, eco = place) concerns within and ramifications of all literary texts, no matter the genre; reaches out to an interdisciplinary audience in an effort to get ecoliterature into classrooms typically unconcerned with literary texts; offers an ongoing cultural critique of American relationships to places and their countless components.

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