

What is ecocriticism?

# 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**” (Glotfelty xviii).

# Ecocritics ask questions like:

- “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?” (Glotfelty xviii-xix)

# Place as Category

- “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?” (Glotfelty xix)

# Interconnections

- “Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between **nature and culture**, specifically the cultural artifacts of 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” (Glotfelty xix).

# Ecosystem vs. Ethical System

- “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” (Worster, quoted by Glotfelty xxi).

# Nature as Actor in Drama

- “Worster and other historians are writing environmental histories, studying the **reciprocal relationships** between humans and land, considering nature not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama” (Glotfelty xxi).

# First Stage in Fem/Eco Criticism

- The “images of women” stage, “concerned with **representations**, concentrating on how women are portrayed in canonical literature.”
- “Analogous efforts in ecocriticism study **how nature is represented in literature.** “
- Stereotypes of nature: “Eden, Arcadia, virgin land, miasmal swamp, savage wilderness”
- Absences are important: “where *is* the natural world in this text?” (xxiii)



# Second Stage in Fem/Eco Criticism

- The “women’s literary tradition stage...serves the important function of **consciousness raising** as it rediscovers, reissues, and reconsiders literature by women.”
- Ecocriticism reconsiders “neglected genre of **nature writing.**”
- Ecocritics draw from “existing critical theories—psychoanalytic, new critical, feminist, Bakhtinian, deconstructive...” (xxiii)

# Third Stage in Fem/Eco Criticism

- The “theoretical phase, which is far reaching and complex, drawing on a wide range of theories to raise fundamental questions about the **symbolic construction** of gender and sexuality within literary discourse.”
- “Analogous work in ecocriticism includes examining the **symbolic construction** of species. How has literary discourse defined the human?” (xxiv)

# Anthropocentric v. Biocentric

- “In ecology, man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (Rueckert 113).
- **Anthropocentric:** “assumes the primacy of humans, who either sentimentalize or dominate the environment” (Martin 217-218)
- **Biocentric:** “decenters humanity’s importance... explores the complex interrelationships between the human and the nonhuman...” (Martin 218)

# Three Approaches

- **Domination Model:** “The anthropocentric view...exemplified both by the pastoral and the literature of territorial expansion...humans dominate the environment”
- **Caretaking Model:** “...still anthropocentric, positions humans as caretakers of the earth.”
- **Biocentric Model:** “rejects anthropocentric views... [explores the] connectedness of all living and nonliving things.” (Martin 218)

# Rhizomatic Thinking

- “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance” (Deleuze and Guattari 1609).
- Rhizomatic thought: a rambling nonhierarchical network, without genesis or endpoint; the rhizome is subterranean, interconnected, associative, omnidirectional, always in the process of becoming.
- **The rhizome is a useful ecocritical tool**; it expands theoretical possibilities by dismantling hierarchical thought and proposing a generative, egalitarian model.

# Roots of “ecocritic”

- Interestingly, ecocritic William Howarth draws our attention to the roots of “ecocritic”: “*Eco* and *critic* both derive from Greek, *oikos* and *kritis*, and in tandem they mean ‘**house judge**,’ . . . So the *oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls ‘our widest home,’ and the *kritos* is an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order...” (Howarth 69).

# Works Cited

- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Excerpt from *Introduction: Rhizome*. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001. Print.
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