Group 4:  
Ecocriticism (1960-Present)

Ecocriticism is an umbrella term under which a variety of approaches fall; this can make it a difficult term to define. As ecocritic Lawrence Buell says, ecocriticism is an “increasingly heterogeneous movement” (1). But, “simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). Emerging in the 1980s on the shoulders of the environmental movement begun in the 1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, ecocriticism has been and continues to be an “earth-centered approach” (Glotfelty xviii) the complex intersections between environment and culture, believing that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix). Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, calling for collaboration between natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists, historians, and more. 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. At the heart of ecocriticism, many maintain, is “a commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point” (Buell 11). The “challenge” for ecocritics is “keep[ing] one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always […] culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists” (Gerrard 10). 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.

First and Second Waves

Several scholars have divided Ecocriticism into two waves (Buell)(Glotfelty), recognizing the first as taking place throughout the eighties and nineties. The first wave is characterized by its emphasis on nature writing as an object of study and as a meaningful practice (Buell). Central to this wave and to the majority of ecocritics still today is the environmental crisis of our age, seeing it as the duty of both the humanities and the natural sciences to raise awareness and invent solutions for a problem that is both cultural and physical. As such, a primary concern in first-wave ecocriticism was to “speak for” nature (Buell 11). This is, perhaps, where ecocriticism gained its reputation as an “avowedly political mode of analysis” (Gerrard 3). This wave, unlike its successor, kept the cultural distinction between human and nature, promoting the value of nature.

The second wave is particularly modern in its breaking down of some of the long-standing distinctions between the human and the non-human, questioning these very concepts (Gerrard 5). The boundaries between the human and the non-human, nature and non-nature are discussed as constructions, and ecocritics challenge these constructions, asking (among other things) 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 (Buell 11). 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 text” (Bressler 236), often examining the plight of the poorest of a population who are victims of pollution are seen as having less access to “nature” in the traditional sense.

These waves are not exactly distinct, and there is debate over what exactly constitutes the two. For instance, some ecocritics will claim activism has been a defining feature of ecocriticism from the beginning, while others see activism as a defining feature of primarily the first wave. While the exact features attributed to each wave may be disputed, it is clear that Ecocriticism continues to evolve and has undergone several shifts in attitude and direction since its conception.

Tropes and Approaches

Pastoral

This trope, found in much British and American literature, focuses on the dichotomy between urban and rural life, is “deeply entrenched in Western culture”(Gerrard 33). At the forefront of works which display pastoralism is a general idealization of the nature and the rural and the demonization of the urban. Often, such works show a “retreat” from city life to the country while romanticizing rural life, depicting an idealized rural existence that “obscures” the reality of the hard work living in such areas requires (Gerrard 33). Greg Gerrard identifies three branches of the pastoral: Classic Pastoral, “characterized by nostalgia” (37) and an appreciation of nature as a place for human relaxation and reflection; Romantic Pastoral, a period after the Industrial Revolution that saw “rural independence” as desirable against the expansion of the urban; and American Pastoralism, which “emphasize[d] agrarianism” (49) and represents land as a resource to be cultivated, with farmland often creating a boundary between the urban and the wilderness.

**Wilderness**

An interesting focus for many ecocritics is the way that wilderness is represented in literature and popular culture. This approach examines the ways in which wilderness is constructed, valued, and engaged. Representations 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 borders of civilization, wherein wilderness is treated as a "threat," a place of "exile" (Gerrard 62). This trope can be seen in Biblical tales of creation and early British culture. Old World wilderness is often conflated with demonic practices in early American literature (Gerrard 62). New World wilderness, seen in portrayals of wilderness in later American literature, applies the pastoral trope of the "retreat" to wilderness 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 identity," and often constructs encounters with the wilderness that lead to a more "authentic existence" (Gerrard 71).

**Ecofeminism**

As a branch of ecocriticism, ecofeminism primarily "analyzes the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature" (Bressler 236). Drawing parallels between 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 the property of man. The ecofeminism approach can be divided into two camps. The first, sometimes referred to as radical ecofeminism, reverses the patriarchal domination of man over woman and nature, "exalting nature," the non-human, and the emotional" (Gerrard 24). 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 (Gerrard 25). Of course, ecofeminism is a highly diverse and complex branch, and many writers have undertaken the job of examining the hierarchical relationships structured in our cultural representations of nature and of women and other oppressed groups. In particular, studies regarding race have followed in this trend, identifying groups that have been historically seen as somehow closer to nature. The way Native Americans, for instance, have been described as "primitive" and portrayed as "dwelling in harmony with nature," despite facts to the contrary. Gerrard offers an examination of this trope, calling it the Ecological Indian (Gerrard 120). Similar studies regarding representations and oppression of aboriginals have surfaced, highlighting the misconceptions of these peoples as somehow "behind" Europeans, needing to progress from "a natural to a civilized state" (Gerrard 125).

**Typical Questions**

Taking an ecocritical approach to a topic means asking questions not only of a primary source such as literature, but asking larger questions about cultural attitudes towards and definitions of nature. Generally, ecocriticism can be applied to a primary source by either interpreting a text through an ecocritical lens, with an eye towards nature, or examining an ecocritical trope within the text. The questions below are examples of questions you might ask both when working with a primary source and when developing a research question that might have a broader perspective.

- How is nature represented in this text?
- How has the concept of nature changed over time?
- How is the setting of the play/film/text related to the environment?
- What is the influence on metaphors and representations of the land and the environment on how we treat it?
- How do we see issues of environmental disaster and crises reflected in popular culture and literary works?
- How are animals represented in this text and what is their relationship to humans?
- How do the roles or representations of men and women towards the environment differ in this play/film/text/etc.
- Where is the environment placed in the power hierarchy?
- How is nature empowered or oppressed in this work?
- What parallels can be drawn between the sufferings and oppression of groups of people (women, minorities, immigrants, etc.) and treatment of the land?
- What rhetorical moves are used by environmentalists, and what can we learn from them about our cultural attitudes towards nature?

There are many more questions than these to be asked, and a large variety of approaches already exist that are asking different questions. Do some research to check on the state of ecocritical discussion in your own area of interest.

Further Resources

There are many more approaches to analyzing interactions between culture and nature, many of which are interdisciplinary. The following texts are recommended to help you start exploring other avenues of Ecocriticism.

Theory and Criticism

- Charles Bressler - Literary criticism: an introduction to theory and practice, 1999
- Greg Garrard – Ecocriticism, 2004
- ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (Journal)
- Joseph Makus - The Comedy of Survival: literary ecology and a play ethic, (1972)
- Leo Marx – The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America, (1964)
- Raymond Williams - The Country and The City, (1975)

Literature & Literary Figures

Edward Abbey

- Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness (1968)
- Appalachian Wilderness (1970)
- The Monkey Wrench Gang (1975)

Mary Hunter Austin

- The Land of Little Rain (1903)

Rachel Carson

- Silent Spring (1962)

Aldo Leopold

- A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There (1949)

John Muir

- A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf (1916)
- Studies in the Sierra (1950)

Henry David Thoreau

- Walden; or, Life in the Woods (1854)

William Wordsworth

- Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems (1798)
- Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems (1800)