



## Ecology in Relation to Ecocriticism – A Theoretical Approach

### KEYWORDS

Ecosystem, ecological concern, ecocriticism, theoretical analysis.

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### ABSTRACT

*One has to learn from nature, failing, he had not lived at all is the opinion of Henry David Thoreau. Whatever human beings do to the ecosystem have the reflections back. If man does not harm nature, the nature keeps him safe. Ecological concerns have become the centre of today's discussion. Literature has been responding to the world with its various changes throughout ages. Literary writers have made enormous contributions in representing the world, analyzing its various changes and projecting perspectives in various forms in order to entertain and enlighten the global masses. Though common population was aware of the hazards in the ecosystem to some extent, the literary writers spurred them through their works. The literary writers started relating the environment with humans and named the study "Ecocriticism". A theoretical analysis of ecocriticism is being dealt in this article.*

"We abuse the land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we begin to use it with love and respect."

- Aldo Leopold

Now-a-days, almost all people have turned their attention towards the planet of life, the earth. The ecosystem which accommodates human beings acts reflexively. Whatever humans do to the Mother Earth, have the deeds reflected on them. A sudden attraction towards the ecosystem came about when scientists found a hole in the ozone layer. Then the people began probing the planet more and more. They became more conscious of the environment in which they live. The word "ecoconscious" was coined in 1988. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "eco-consciousness" as marked by or showing concern for the environment.

When people slowly started understanding what is happening to the ecosystem where they live, they started relating the ecological study – which considered the ecological problems like pollution, global warming, etc. – to literature. There emerged a new field of study over the last three decades. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that the study of literature and the environment was recognized as a subject to rise. The literary people named it "Ecocriticism" or "Environmental Literary Criticism". This study addresses how humans relate to the nonhuman nature. A theoretical approach states that ecocriticism grows out of the traditional approach to literature.

Though "Ecocriticism" became a subject heading in the Library of Congress list of "Authorities" in 2002, it is not yet listed in the Oxford English Dictionary. However many words prefixed "eco" are listed among them like "ecofeminism" "economics", etc. The prefix "eco" has its root in the Greek word "oikos" which meant "house". The Oxford English Dictionary cites the German "oecologie" as the first appearance of "ecology" in 1876, which meant "the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Ecocriticism was defined as the conflation of ecology and criticism.

Ecocriticism is the criticism of the "house", the environment as represented in literature. It has burgeoned since 1990. Peter Barry added a chapter titled "Ecocriticism" to the second edition of his Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory (1995). Some ecocritics date the birth of the word "ecocriticism" to William Rueckert, who in a 1978 essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in "Ecocriticism" wrote that ecocriticism entailed "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert 1978 p. 107).

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm rightly included Rueckert's essay in their edited volume The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996), which, more than fifteen years after its publication remains a benchmark text in the field, because of the passion of its contributors, its scholarly breadth and depth, and the diversity of its essays. Glotfelty had urged literary critics in a 1989 Western Literature Association meeting to develop an ecological approach to literature, which would focus on the cultural dimension of humans' relationship to the environment. At the same meeting, Glen Love delivered a speech titled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism", and Glotfelty and Fromm included that text in their volume.

Cheryll Glotfelty, the Sanford distinguished Professor of the Humanities for 2000-2002, revived it as 'the study of nature writing'. The call for "ecocriticism" was seconded at Western Literature Association by Glen Love, Professor of English at the University of Oregon. Glen Love seconded it in his President's speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism". Since 1987, the term "ecocriticism" bloomed into usage.

Thomas K. Dean considers Eco-criticism "a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.)...in some way is connected with the human relationship to the natural world". He extends his explanation of ecocriticism "a response to needs, problems, or crises, depending on one's perception of urgency" (Dean 1994 p. 1). Ecocriticism is a field that bridges the gap between literature and science.

Ecocriticism has experienced a remarkable ascent over the last twenty five years or so. In The Comedy of Survival Studies in Literary Ecology (1974), Joseph Meeker summons "for a careful examination of literature's role in determining the relationship between nature and humans" (Schubnell 2001 Nr.9). ASLE's Graduate Handbook states "examining literature through an 'ecocritical lens'" is an apt way of defining ecocriticism. This statement is found in the essay "Blues in The Green: Ecocriticism under Critique" by Michael P. Cohen. One can refer also to this study as "nature writing" or "environmental literature" or "green reading". The book New Literary History (1999) puts forth that ecocriticism challenges "interpretation to own grounding in the bedrock of natural fact; in the biospheric and indeed planetary conditions without which human life, much less human letters, could not exist". Ecocriticism, being a literary movement, "claims as its hermeneutic environment nothing short of the literal horizon itself, the finite environment that a reader or writer occupies thanks not just culturally coded determinants

but also to natural determinants that antedate these and will outlast them" (Buell 1999 p. 505).

In the Modern Language Association's "Forum on Literatures of the Environment", Lawrence Buell, chair of the English Department at Harvard writes literature to be in relation to physical environment. This dates back to the 1990s. Buell states his observation in 'The Ecocritical Insurgency', *New Literary History* as "the study of literature in relation to environment ...to assume the look of a major critical insurgency" (p. 699). Cheryll Glotfelty in the critical essay "A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism, with Excursions to Cather land" suggests that Elaine Showalter's model of three developmental stages of feminist criticism might provide a useful scheme for cataloguing three analogous efforts in ecocriticism.

Another basic resource that reveals the diversity of ecocritical approaches is *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (2003), edited by Michael Branch and Scott Slovic. Its nineteen essays cover broad landscapes and are written by top ecocritics in the field. The British counterpart to *The ISLE Reader Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* is *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000) edited by Laurence Coupe, which challenges the notion that nonhuman nature is subordinate to human nature, a belief that is rapidly becoming outdated. Another excellent compilation is *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment* (1998) edited by Michael Branch et al., comprise essays that take diverse approaches.

Buell went on to write *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) concerning about the environmental crisis. Here he revokes the dualism between nature and humans and approaches both built and unbuilt nature. He also reaches beyond the American nature writers to diverse and global texts. Another book of Buell *The Future of Environmental Criticism: environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005), emphasizes a shift in ecocriticism to study built as well as natural environments. Buell identifies the environmental movements' forays into English departments as the first wave of ecocriticism, a wave that focused on nature writing, ecocentric texts, and natural history.

Some political praxis is still associated with ecocriticism. In *Ecocriticism* (2004), Greg Garrard measures this by the extent to which one uses, saves, or ignores the environment. This book is useful in its coining categories of how one positions oneself toward the environment. Most ecocritics in Garrard's scheme would probably identify themselves as "environmentalists" or "deep ecologists". Garrard also categorizes the literary loci of the environment: Pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals and the earth. This book serves as an introductory text book in the field.

Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007) complements Buell's work by pursuing the nature of nature in ecocriticism. Morton documents the changing definition of the word "nature" and suggests that nature can be anything. Ecocriticism remains a vibrant and relevant approach to literature. *New Literary History* an online journal devoted its summer 1999 issue to ecocriticism providing the whereabouts of the field of ecocriticism. Glen Love's *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (2003) outlines that the communication between the natural sciences and the humanities are brought closer together. Another essential text promoting interdisciplinary study is *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (2007), edited by Annie Merrill Ingram et al.

When one group of people are involved in creating public awareness towards the ecosystem through their literary works, there are some other people who conducted annual conferences to enhance both scholarly discussion and consciousness in the society. They, through their presentations on eco-literature, try to draw the attention of the people towards the biosphere. The forum OSLE and ASLE are involved in such an activity. Organization for Studies in Literature and Environment is called OSLE and Association for the Study of Literature and Environment is called ASLE. These two forums are involved in conducting annual conferences and presentations. They are entrusted with popularizing ecocriticism all over the world. ASLE was founded in 1992 and has conducted many seminars and conferences to promote ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is branching out into multifaceted approach in Western countries.

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