

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is simply the study of literature and the environment. Literary criticisms develop as groups examine literature through their ever-changing perspectives. For example, psychoanalytic criticism evolved as more people began to appreciate the works of Freud and Jung, Marxist criticism as communism expanded through much of the world for much of the 20th century, feminist criticism became more prominent through the Women's Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and multicultural criticism became more acceptable as world boundaries and cultures began to shrink and integrate into a global community. The same evolution has happened with ecocriticism. Although literary critics have long addressed issues of setting within their studies, since the 1980s, a stronger focus has taken place on the roles the environment has had on texts, characters, authors, and readers.

Generally, people are becoming more sensitive to environmental concerns than ever before. We see that with the proliferation of *eco-* terminology. Nearly every profession somehow seems to try a connection to the environment—that's not bad, just an observation. Just think of how many careers now begin with the preface *eco-*: eco-medicine, eco-commerce, eco-technology, eco-fashion, eco-design, eco-architecture, eco-construction, eco-behavior, eco-education, eco-energy, eco-recreation, eco-composition, and the list goes on and on.

Although this focus on the environment seems recent, many individuals throughout the centuries have been sensitive to the connections between people and the environment. From an LDS perspective, we recognize a strong relationship between the natural world and our divine stewardship within a God-created world. From the very first verses and pages of Genesis, we receive a divine record of the creation of this world patterned after countless other worlds. We get a description of the formation the earth and the sky; of night and day; of water and land; of grass, herb, and trees; of sun, stars, and moon; of fowl, fishes, and beasts; and ultimately of man and woman. And God created a Garden for that man and that woman. God also made it possible for our First Parents to choose to enter a mortal world, and God saw “that it was good.” Throughout the scriptures we see people influencing and being influenced by their environment—think of the children of Israel wandering through the wilderness for forty years, the children of Lehi making their way through the wilderness, and the early latter-day Saints fleeing from Nauvoo to the desert wilderness. Think of Moses sending plagues upon Egypt, getting water from a rock, and parting the Red Sea. Think of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish. Think of Noah gathering animals two by two and the great deluge. Think of the Nephites and the devastating destruction of earthquakes, and fires, and storms at the time of the Savior's death. Think of Daniel being with the lions. Think of great famines that bring the sons of Jacob to Egypt, the prophet Elijah to a widow, and the repentance of a people under Nephi, the son of Helaman. Think of the Jaredites and the Nephites crossing the great sea. Think of Christ and Peter walking on water. Think of seagulls eating crickets in the Salt Lake Valley. Think of a Mount Sinai, a Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of Olives, and a Garden Tomb. Think of Christ's teachings of a mustard seed, of sparrows, of lilies, and of wheat and tares. Think of Christ as the True Vine. Think of symbolic trees: Adam and Eve's the Tree of Knowledge of

Good and Evil, Lehi's the Tree of Life, and Zeno's allegory of the Olive Tree. And we're all waiting for the earth to "be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory." We accept and appreciate the tight integration of this planet and our lives.

In terms of eco-literary criticism, William Rueckert was perhaps the first individual to coin the term *ecocriticism* in his now landmark 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in which he defines *ecocriticism* as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." In terms of a sub-discipline of literary criticism, ecocriticism is still considered new; in fact, of all the leading college textbooks on literary theory, nearly all neglect to even mention this new approach.

Without a doubt, the most quoted definition of *ecocriticism* come from Cheryll Glotfley in the introduction to her and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). Glotfley explains:

What then *is* ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examine 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, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? 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? (xix)

And Camilo Gomides also adds her definition of *ecocriticism*: "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."

There are four different ways of looking at ecocriticism according to Stan Tag:

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, son, 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.
3. As scholarly and pedagogical practice, it means exploring (reading, discussion, writing about) language as an on-going product of evolution
4. It means always keeping in mind that—as Thoreau recognized—"The universe is larger than our view of it."

So why should we seriously consider ecocriticism as a viable literary critical approach? Again Glotfley provides an answer: "In my view, an ecologically focused 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, and about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications."

We, then, are a part of this world, and it makes sense that one of our views of literature can also be through the lens of that physical world.