

Approaching Environmental Literary Education in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. The most relevant ideas of this theory were stated in Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) in which that environmental crisis is designed to build knowledge, behaviors and values that help people fight the effects of anthropocentrism in the tragic conception of the hero in a close vital relationship with the change of the climate.

Keywords: Literary Criticism, Ecocriticism, Environmental Literature, Literary Education.

1. Introduction

Climate change, like many other of the problems that surround our societies (poverty and economic imbalance, mass migration, violence, health crisis, even the impact of natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods), has a global nature; in a double sense which affects not only the entire globe but also the understanding of its nature and its effects. It is necessary to act effectively on it and to integrate knowledge and actions from many different areas and disciplines. Literature and Literary Criticism are not really far from sharing and discussing this relevant issue.

This contribution will reflect on the different possible strategies to adopt a horizontal approach in environmental criticism, specifically through the ideas stated in Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) in which that environmental crisis is at a certain point designed to build knowledge, behaviors and values that help people fight, or at least reduce, the effects of anthropocentrism in the tragic conception of the hero in a close vital relationship with the change of the climate.

2. Environmental Literary Education

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works, both published in the mid-1990s: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell.

In the United States, Ecocriticism is often associated with the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which hosts biennial meetings for scholars who deal with environmental matters in literature. ASLE has an official journal—*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*—in which much of the most current American scholarship in the rapidly evolving field of Ecocriticism can be found.

Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach that is known by a number of other designations, including “green (cultural) studies”, “ecopoetics”, and “environmental literary criticism”.

References to environmental literacy in the environmental education literature tend not to pay specific attention to fundamental debates about literacy, for example concerning the limits of textuality. If it can be argued that we “read” the environment, then the scope of environmental literacy is even larger than that of environmental education.

However, it is hard to justify the relevance of “literacy” in a narrower sense than this as any more than marginal in environmental education. It is difficult to define a weak conception as one which is inconsistent or unclear in these respects in the field of environmental education; a strong conception takes a broad view of literacy and acknowledges its full ramifications with respect to environmental education.

3. Evolution of Ecocriticism in Literary Studies

Recognized as a distinct subdiscipline of literary studies for about ten years now, Ecocriticism (also referred to as *studies in literature and the environment*) is one of the newer theoretical-critical schools, although it originates in sixties environmental activism and texts such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) that catalyzed that movement. Ecocriticism is frequently seen as a logical development out of the field of ecology. But if the term *Ecocriticism* connotes attention to the relationship between written works and the nonhuman environment, the subdiscipline has now expanded well beyond this initial focus, which may explain the adoption of the more expansive subdisciplinary label *studies in literature and the environment*.

As the shift in terminology indicates, the identity of Ecocriticism is still in a formative phase, and though indeed a rigid definition is to be avoided, some clearheaded attention to its conflicting characteristics would improve the area’s methods and promote its aims. While Ecocriticism presently enjoys an expanding range of critical projects, it continues to exhibit a general animus toward theory and a consequent unwillingness to theorize epistemological and literary critical aims.

Initially motivated by environmental concerns, Ecocriticism might logically pursue an alliance with biology, but many ecocritics retain a postmodernist suspicion of hard science. Therefore, many of the field’s assumptions about the relationship between cultural artifacts and the nonhuman environment have not been considered with much thoroughness, resulting in a habitual collapse of the aesthetic onto the ethical and a celebration of potential incoherence in the guise of diversity and pluralism.

Ecocritics investigate such things as the underlying ecological values, what, precisely, is meant by the word nature, and whether the examination of “place” should be a distinctive category, much like class, gender or race. Ecocritics examine human perception of wilderness, and how it has changed throughout history and whether or not current environmental issues are accurately represented or even mentioned in popular culture and modern literature. Other disciplines, such as history, philosophy, ethics, and psychology, are also considered by ecocritics to be possible contributors to Ecocriticism.

William Rueckert may have been the first person to use the term Ecocriticism (Barry 240). In 1978, Rueckert published an essay titled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. His intent was to focus on “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.”

Ecologically minded individuals and scholars have been publishing progressive works of ecotheory and criticism since the explosion of environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. However, because there was no organized movement to study the ecological/environmental side of literature, these important works were scattered and categorized under a litany of different subject headings: pastoralism, human ecology, regionalism, American Studies, etc.

British Marxist critic Raymond Williams, for example, wrote a seminal critique of pastoral literature in 1973, *The Country and the City*, which spawned two decades of leftist suspicion of the ideological evasions of the genre and its habit of making the work of rural labor disappear even though Williams himself observed that the losses lamented in pastoral might be genuine ones, and went on to profess a decidedly green socialism.

Another early ecocritical text, Joseph Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival* (1974), proposed a version of an argument that was later to dominate Ecocriticism and environmental philosophy; that environmental crisis is caused primarily by a cultural tradition in the West of separation of culture from nature and elevation of the former to moral

predominance. Such ‘anthropocentrism’ is identified in the tragic conception of a hero whose moral struggles are more important than mere biological survival, whereas the science of animal ethology, Meeker asserts, shows that a “comic mode” of muddling through and “making love not war” has superior ecological value.

4. The Comedy of Survival

Since publication of the first edition more than twenty years ago, *The Comedy of Survival* has been credited as the founding work in the field of literary ecology, the study of relationships between the literary arts and scientific ecology. Here, Joseph Meeker expands upon his consideration of comedy and tragedy, not as dramatic motifs for humor and sadness but rather as forms of adaptive behavior in the natural world that either promotes our survival (comedy) or estranges us from other life forms (tragedy). We will just review the key ideas of the comic mode and afterwards comment on chapter 4, ‘Hamlet and the Animals’.

Joseph Meeker is a biologist who turned his talents to the study of literature. His contributions have an ecological and evolutionary flavor and can be classified as eco-criticism. His best known work is a study of comedy and tragedy from the mid 1970s which are restated in this volume.

Tragedy, Meeker says, is characterized by a struggle between the heroes and forces greater than themselves. These forces may be Nature, the gods, fate, passionate love, hatred, morality, injustice and so on. The hero invariably dies in their attempts to overcome them and receives a heavenly and/or the earthly reward of remembrance for their sacrifice. The prerequisite for tragedy, according to Meeker, is that the universe cares about the sufferings of these extraordinary tragic heroes.

Meeker also argues that this tragic way or mode of behavior is a cultural artifact and somewhat ‘unnatural’. People are not born with a predisposition to die for causes they are taught this, or they imitate examples of so-called heroes found in Classic and Renaissance literature.

Comedy on the other hand is found wherever humans are. He suggests that it is universal, genetically based and therefore natural. Comedy is about avoiding conflict and always seeking a compromise such that would ensure your survival. Under the comic mode of behavior there is nothing worth dying for. These ideas resonate and have a certain appeal. His work on Hamlet on the other hand is spurious and we think he is mistaken.

In the essay ‘Hamlet and the Animals’ contained in this volume, Meeker asserts that Hamlet tries throughout the play to avoid violence by converting “...actions into words, violence into argument, murder into a game. He thus reverses the usual processes of tragic action, which usually move from word to deed, argument to battle, and threats to murder.”

Meeker cannot credibly claim that Hamlet does this, when what he does is convert his violent thoughts, or intent, into violent words. But even this is only partially true. Apart from the unintentional slayings of Polonius and Laertes, Hamlet has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed, and by his own hand kills his uncle/step-father Claudius.

Meeker also claims that Hamlet might demonstrate redirected aggression. Animals that have the ability to kill an opponent of the same species do not. Instead, they turn away when they sense their adversary is defeated, and attack some defenseless object. This is no doubt true, but it does not transfer to Hamlet’s situation either physically or verbally.

Meeker cites the example of Hamlet’s verbal attack on Polonius and Guildenstern after the fracas of *The Mousetrap*. He purports that these characters are innocent even though they are allied to the king.

The three message-bearers are all allied to the king and so represent the enemy, but all are personally harmless to Hamlet. There is no direct threat in their manner or intentions regarding him... Hamlet attacks them with the weapons

he controls best: metaphor, wit, and imagination.’

It is really difficult to accept Meeker’s argument. For Hamlet they are disingenuous spies and constitute a threat albeit an indirect one. They are certainly not innocent. This is at its best a very tenuous example of redirected aggression, at its worst it is none at all.

We think that Hamlet’s motives for not acting and taking violent revenge are not expressions of redirected aggression. They are not, simply because his behavior does not fit the definition. Instead, Hamlet’s inaction is due to his uncertainty which can be interpreted as cowardice.

Nevertheless, Hamlet does not fear dying or killing. What he fears is the possible threat of divine punishment for committing suicide or murder; “Conscience doth make cowards of us all.”

Meeker has built his essay on a very weak and erroneous foundation of so-called redirected aggression. Once this concept is dismissed then the house of cards collapses.

The tragedy in Meeker’s essay is that he is convinced of its veracity to the exclusion of all others possible points of view:

“So obvious and simple an explanation would surely have occurred to someone long ago and the problem of interpreting Hamlet need not have filled so many dreary books.” p.42.

This essay is a warning to us about how easy it is to take a good idea too far, and to see what we want to see in a text.

5. Conclusion

In the later, ‘second wave’ Ecocriticism, Meeker’s adoption of an ecophilosophical position with apparent scientific sanction as a measure of literary value tended to prevail over William’s ideological and historical critique of the shifts in a literary genre’s representation of nature.

As Glotfelty noted in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, “One indication of the disunity of the early efforts is that these critics rarely cited one another’s work; they didn’t know that it existed...Each was a single voice howling in the wilderness.” Nevertheless, Ecocriticism—unlike feminist and Marxist criticisms—failed to crystallize into a coherent movement in the late 1970s, and indeed only did so in the United States in the 1990s.

In the mid 1980s, scholars began to work collectively to establish Ecocriticism as a genre, primarily through the work of the Western Literature Association in which the reevaluation of nature writing as a non-fictional literary genre could function.

In 1990, at the University of Nevada in Reno, Glotfelty became the first person to hold an academic position as a professor of Literature and the Environment, and UNR has retained the position it established at that time as the intellectual home of Ecocriticism even as ASLE has burgeoned into an organization with thousands of members in the US alone.

From the late 1990s, new branches of ASLE and affiliated organizations were started in the UK, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India, Taiwan, Canada and Europe.

Buell’s latest contribution to the field *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005) more commonly known as Ecocriticism signals both his own and the discipline’s shift away from the narrower focus on the natural environment suggested by the prefix ‘eco’, and towards a broader, more hybrid conception of environment that includes the urban, the interweave of built and natural dimensions, and the interpenetration of global and local pressures.

The Future of Environmental Criticism functions as an excellent critical introduction to the field of environmental criticism and posits, through a timely reminder that environmental crisis is a broadly cultural issue, the importance of the field for twenty-first-century humanities.

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