



LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT STUDIES: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

Literature and environment studies— commonly called “eco-criticism” or “environmental criticism” in analogy to the more general term literary criticism—comprise an eclectic, pluriform, and cross-disciplinary initiative that aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment. Eco-criticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and

the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern—can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco-degradation that afflict planet Earth today. The aim of this paper is to highlight the development of eco-criticism. The study is based on secondary sources.

Keywords: Literature, environment Eco-criticism, cross-disciplinary, eco-degradation, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Literature and environment studies— commonly called “eco-criticism” or “environmental criticism” in analogy to the more general term literary criticism—comprise an eclectic, pluriform, and cross-disciplinary initiative that aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment. Eco-criticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and

the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern—can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco-degradation that afflict planet Earth today. In this, eco-criticism concurs with other branches of the environmental humanities—ethics, history, religious studies, anthropology, humanistic geography—in holding that environmental phenomena must be comprehended, and that today’s burgeoning array of environmental concerns must be addressed qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

At least as fundamental to their remediation as scientific breakthroughs and strengthened regimes of policy implementation is the impetus of creative imagination, vision, will, and belief. Even though, as the poet W.H. Auden famously wrote, “poetry makes nothing happen” in and of itself, the outside-the-box thought experiments of literature and other media can offer unique resources for activating concern and creative thinking about the planet’s environmental future. By themselves, creative depictions of environmental harm are unlikely to free societies from lifestyles that depend on radically transforming ecosystems. But reflecting on works of imagination may prompt intensified concern about the consequences of such choices and possible alternatives to them.

II. OBJECTIVES:

The objective of the study is to highlight the relation between literature and environment and its development.

III. METHODOLOGY:

The study is based on secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers, e-books, e-journals, e-sources etc.

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF ECOCRITICISM

Eco-criticism has grown exponentially from its inception in the early 1990s as an organized initiative. The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE, established in 1992) (<http://www.asle.org>) has become a worldwide movement with chapters throughout Europe, East and South Asia, and Australia-New Zealand, though scholars from the Anglophone world, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, still predominate. Since Aristotle, literary criticism had taken a certain interest in “setting,” but not until the late twentieth century did it seriously engage environmental history and the environmental and social sciences. The first significant eco-critical study, Joseph Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival*, and the term eco-criticism date from the 1970s. Meeker’s diagnosis of archetypal comic plots as reflecting strategies of adaptation in the interest of survival anticipates later interest in the pertinence of scientific models for environmental-literary inquiry. Influential studies by Leo Marx and Raymond Williams of pastoral traditions in American and British literatures in their eco-historical contexts spotlighted literature as crucial to understanding the environmental transformations of urbanization and techno-modernity, influencing later work on environmental philosophy and politics of genre, place, region, and nation. This partly explains eco-criticism’s early concentration on the pastoral imagination, on Anglo-American Romanticism (ca. 1780–1860) (by no coincidence also the start of the Industrial Revolution), on lyric poetry in the tradition of William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and his Anglo-American successors, and on literary nature writing from Thoreau to the present.

Literature and environment studies have evolved significantly over time, as the most cited eco-critical collections show. First-wave scholarship of the 1990s tended to equate environment with nature; to focus on literary renditions of the natural world in poetry,

fiction, and nonfiction as means of evoking and promoting contact with it; to value nature preservation and human attachment to place at a local-communitarian or bioregional level; and to affirm an eco-centric or bio-centric ethics, often intensified by some conception of an innate bond—whether biological, psychological, or spiritual—conjoining the individual human being and the natural world. The phenomenological philosophy of Naess (inventor of “deep ecology”) Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, and (at first especially) Heidegger influenced some of the strongest eco-critical work in this area. By contrast, second-wave scholarship of the past decade has shown greater interest in literatures pertaining to the metropolis and industrialization; has tended to reject the validity of the nature/culture distinction, sometimes to the point of following Bruno Latour’s stigmatization of nature as hopelessly vague and antiquated; and has favored a socio-centric rather than bio-centric and/or individual-experience-oriented ethics and aesthetics, placing particular emphasis on environmental justice concerns.

Related developments include the re-conception of place-attachment from local-focused to transnational and/or global and the cross-pollination of literature-environment studies both with postcolonial literary studies and with studies of ethnic minority literatures in addition to Native American, which has been of strong interest from the start. These later developments are by no means the only initiatives that have taken literature environment studies far beyond its original base in modern Anglophone writing. Today’s literature-environment scholarship considers all eras of Western history and is increasingly influenced by criticism on and/or from the non-Anglophone world, particularly Hispanic, German, Chinese, and Japanese.

Literature-environment studies obviously have no monopoly on place theory, an interest shared across the humanities as well as social and applied sciences. Eco-critical thinking broadly accords with humanistic geographers who conceive place-sense as a fusion of personal allegiance, social construction, and physiographic matrix, while often differing in practice as to the relative emphasis on place attachment at the level of imagined individual experience versus at the level of the social collective. Eco-critical partiality for “narrative scholarship” is partly explicable as a way of striking a balance between these two claims.

V. Conclusion:

Eco-criticism started as an organized movement within literature studies in the early 1990s, a scholarly generation later than the first such movements within the environmental humanities (in history, ethics, and theology). Eco-criticism as a Library of Congress subject heading dates from 2002. Its progress has been rapid, such that within two decades it is well on the way to extending itself worldwide from its original Anglo-American base and now boasts half-dozen scholarly journals in Europe, North America, and Asia in addition to ASLE’s flagship journal, *ISLE*. Yet eco-criticism remains more in a state of unfolding than of consolidation. Issues of methodology and proper future course remain matters of debate, as confirmed, for example, by the ongoing dispute as to the proper relation between scientific and

aesthetic methods of inquiry and the comparative recency of attention being accorded to non-Western literatures.

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