

Lecture 1: Intro to the Environmental Humanities Ecocriticism, 1. *Why approach environmental issues from a literary perspective?* 2. *Why do we read and study literature at all?*

What is Environmental Criticism?

Environmental criticism is methodologically similar to other forms of cultural criticism, such as Marxist, postcolonial, queer, and feminist criticism.

For example, feminist critics are interested in literary representations of gender and women as they change over time.

Environmental critics are similarly interested in representations of nature and the natural world as they change over time.

As with changing perceptions of gender, literary representations are not only generated by particular cultures, they play a major role in generating those very cultures.

This “feedback loop” is an important phenomenon.

Thus, if we wish to understand contemporary America’s attitude toward the environment, its literary history, which is in some sense over five thousand years old, is an excellent place to start.

What Do Environmental Critics Explore?

Environmental critics explore a range of literary periods, as literary responses to environmental concerns are as old as the issues themselves.

Deforestation, air pollution, endangered species, wetland loss, animal rights, rampant consumerism, and similar issues have all been appearing as controversial issues in Western literature for hundreds—and in some cases thousands—of years.

Environmental critics explore a range of genres of literature, as any genre can be environmentally significant. This includes poems, novels, plays, and so forth, and even works that seemingly have little environmental import, works that are clearly by no stretch of the imagination “nature writing,” like some song lyrics...

Rockstar

”I’m through with standin’ in line

To clubs I’ll never get in

It’s like the bottom of the ninth

And I'm never gonna win
This life hasn't turned out
Quite the way I want it to be
(Tell me what you want)
I want a brand new house
On an episode of Cribs
And a bathroom I can play baseball in
And a king size tub big enough
For ten plus me
(Yeah, so what you need)

"This life hasn't turned out / Quite the way I want it to be / (Tell me what you want) / I want..."

For thousands of years philosophers and poets have been speculating on what we should all want, what constitutes the "good life," be it love, honor, truth, beauty, equality, and so forth.

"I want a brand new house / On an episode of Cribs / And a bathroom I can play baseball in..."

Another version of the "good life" is success at obtaining and making a show of excessive wealth, which is achieved at the cost of exploiting other human beings and the planet.

"I want a brand new house... And a king size tub big enough / For ten plus me..."

Read in this sense, this song contains a very clear ideology, one with profound environmental import, as this version of the "good life" requires that we over exploit the planet's resources.

"On an episode of Cribs..."

Consumption of the earth's resources is a cornerstone of the U.S. economy and is widely promoted in our popular culture, which we are now exporting to the world.

"I want a brand new house / On an episode of Cribs / And a bathroom I can play baseball in / And a king size tub big enough / For ten plus me..."

As we shall see, for over two thousand years writers such as Horace, Ben Jonson, and Henry David Thoreau have been enormously critical of the building of large "trophy" houses.

The average American consumes 18 times more of the earth's resources than individuals in certain developing countries. Some Americans consume well over 100 times more.

Expressed another way, 100 average Americans consume more natural resources than entire towns and large villages do in the developing world.

Our attitudes toward the environment (and most things) are not innate, but rather are constructed, in part from the cultural artifacts (such as this song) that we have inherited and produce.

Another way of looking at this is to ask a basic question: How do we know what we know? Do we not in large part know what we know by way of the culture into which we are born?

Not only can we analyze song lyrics and literary texts for their environmental significance, this same approach can also be used with a variety of cultural artifacts, such as artworks...

"Niagara" Gustave Dorè, 1860

This etching was one of many works throughout the nineteenth century that celebrated and promoted the sublime beauty of America's wilderness areas, in this case Niagara Falls, New York.

Note that the tiny human figures in the scene seem insignificant compared to the enormity of the environment, which is depicted, following the Romantic poets of the 19th century, as sublime, as at once beautiful, awe-inspiring, and frightening. This environment is not innately sublime; rather, it is very carefully constructed as such in this etching.

Dorè uses a variety of clever visual devices to portray the environment as sublime. For example, the human beings in this scene are depicted as much smaller (due to the use of perspective) and less significant than even birds.

Also, the human beings are depicted as kneeling or bowing, having an almost religious reverence for the waterfall. This is exactly how Dorè would depict religious pilgrims in other works (upper left).

As Dorè's etching of the waterfalls reveals, in the nineteenth century the environment increasingly was being seen as akin to a temple, as almost holy, by individuals such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir.

Dorè lived at a time when the environment was romanticized and viewed with almost religious awe.

Two or three centuries before, the view of the environment was quite the opposite. For example, John Evelyn recounted in his seventeenth-century journal a trip

through the Alps with horror and disgust, as a barren place that few would ever want to visit.

If we study them carefully, it becomes clear that artworks, like song lyrics and literary texts, can reveal much about how a culture understands its relation to the environment.

The goal of this course is both to understand better how the perspective of the environment that we have inherited (such as seeing it as sublime) was constructed, as well as what this means for us today.

Some Useful Ideas

Environmental criticism is also known as “green” criticism, or more often “ecocriticism” (a contraction for “ecological literary criticism”).

By “environment” we mean any sort of environment: wilderness or built (farm, suburb, city, etc).

Because ecocritics are interested in a variety of environments, they direct themselves to all sorts of literature, not just so-called “nature writing.”

The word “ecology” was coined in 1866 (just after Charles Darwin introduced his theory of evolution) by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel. “Ecology” suggests that all of the life on earth is connected.

“Ecology” etymologically derives from two Greek words: oikos (“household”) and logos (“study”).

Why approach environmental issues from a literary perspective?

Why not, for example, approach these issues from other perspectives, such as eco-philosophy, eco-psychology, eco-theology, or the hard sciences?

Each of these approaches is not only valid and useful, but crucial and important for finding our way in our current environmental crisis.

Consequently, in this course we will be employing eco-philosophy, eco-psychology, eco-theology, and a range of other approaches.

However, a literary approach taking the form of a cultural, historical analysis (which is what we will be doing this term) is uniquely useful.

To understand what is unique about literary studies, we need to ask an even more basic question, at which we have already been hinted...

Why do we read and study literature at all?

1. Diversion (which is often also why we watch television and films).
 2. Pleasure (vicarious pleasure, hence novels often have a romantic element).
 3. Education / Edification (hopefully we learn something when we read).
 4. To understand human nature (in so far as human nature--and what we value, such as beauty--does not change over time. This is New Criticism):
This critical approach was once an enormously influential; widely used by critics up until approx 1970. (Hence it is no longer "New")
The most conspicuous feature of New Criticism is that history is largely irrelevant, as enduring ideas (i.e. Platonic Ideas) like beauty, which presumably do not change over time, are often of most interest.
Surprisingly, New Criticism is still alive in a certain sense today, as this is a very easy and effective way of teaching literature, because it views literature in isolation, requiring no historical contextualization.
 5. To understand history (to learn about past cultures from their literature: This is, more or less, the approach of traditional historicism). This critical approach existed concurrently with New Criticism, but was never as popular for a variety of reasons:
 - a. It was very time consuming, requiring a great deal of research.
 - b. It was very difficult to teach texts using this approach.
 - c. It lacked any sort of contemporary payout for us today.
- All of the above reasons for reading are valid, but perhaps not as important as the following:
6. To understand our culture (in the sense that we learn about our own culture from its past. This is the approach of New Historicism).
 7. To understand ourselves (as our-Selves are culturally, historically constructed. This is also a form of New Historicism)

New Historicism

This critical approach came on the scene around 1980 and still remains extraordinarily influential and important today. (Nonetheless, like New Criticism, it is now hardly “New.”)

Like traditional historicism, it requires a great deal of research and is not easily imported into the classroom for this reason, but it has certain advantages:

1. It uses history (in the form of texts from past cultures) to interpret the present. Hence, it promises to make past, ancient, literature relevant today. (Which is why we are reading old rather than modern texts.)
2. Not only does New Historicism allow us to interpret our modern culture, but also our-Selves as we come into being in an historical context, which was the insight of twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger, who argued that at birth we are all randomly “thrown” into a culture.

Traditional Historicism...

uses old texts (example: Hesiod) → to interpret (a.k.a. hermeneutics) → historical cultures (Greek culture)

Traditional literary historicism thus promises to provide considerable insight into past cultures that is not found in archeology or physical anthropology; however, as it is entirely directed to the past (as the direction of the above arrows reveals) it tells us very little about our present culture and ourselves.

New Historicism...

Hermeneutic Circle

uses old texts (example: Hesiod) → to interpret → historical cultures (Greek culture, its belief in a Golden Age, which was like Eden, when all the earth was a perfect locus amoenus) → which allows us → to interpret → our present-day culture, ideas, selves (and, in this case, our belief that human beings once had a perfect relationship with the earth, which is by no means innate, but is rather a culturally constructed idea that we in part inherited from the ancient Greeks by way of their literature and art) → *goes back to the beginning*

New Historicism

In some sense the above approach to hermeneutics has been developing for the past 500 years in the thinking of Martin Luther, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt (who coined the phrase “New Historicism”), and many, many others. The above understanding makes clear that a cultural analysis, by way of an historical interpretation of literature, brings something unique to the table, altogether unlike anything from the hard sciences, or any field of inquiry, allowing us to interpret our culture, our ideas, and our selves, more fully.

In short, this approach offers a compelling answer to both of our questions:

1. Why do we read and study literature at all?

Perhaps most importantly, we read and study literature in order to better understand our modern culture and our-selves. This is not dusty old history, but a relevant inquiry today, one that can be very personal. It underscores, or at least should underscore, the value of literature.

2. Why approach environmental issues from a literary perspective?

For our particular (ecocritical) purposes, the above approach allows us to better understand how the relationship that we have with the environment historically emerged, as well as more fully understand our own feelings, both as individuals and as a culture, toward the environment.

An example would be our (inherited) belief in a Golden Age, a time when human beings once had a perfect relationship to the environment.

It is arguably the case that no other discipline or field of study can offer this sort of relevant and important cultural payout.