

# Introduction: Special Issue

## Ecocriticism

### Part 1

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Could it be that the most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world? Literary scholarship and literature itself are, on the most fundamental level, associated with human values and attitudes. We should, as critics and teachers of literature, consider how literary expression challenges and directs readers to decide what in the world is important to them. We can't afford to shy away from the issue of values – this is the proper domain of literary studies and it's one reason why the humanities should be a crucial part of university programmes in environmental studies.

(Slovic 1994: <<http://www.asle.umn.edu/>>)

Social commentators are in agreement that the past century has been marked by three important discourses: the civil rights movement, feminism(s) and, more recently, environmental activism. Despite obvious differences, all these movements seem to have a common purpose, namely the ultimate rejection of hierarchical and patriarchal patterns of possession and domination.

The existence of international treaties and much publicised activities by watchdog organisations such as Greenpeace, Earth First! and Earthwatch signal a heightened global awareness of, amongst others, the following environmental issues: the destruction of habitat; loss of species, global warming, ozone depletion, pollution, health crises (HIV/Aids, malaria, tuberculosis and cholera) and natural disasters such as floods, droughts and resultant poverty.

On a local level, the South African Constitution (Act 108/1996) duly protects rights with respect to gender, race and environment and Section 24 of the act specifically aims to protect and promote an ecological culture:

24. Everyone has the right:
  - to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and
  - to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that:
    - (i) prevent pollution and ecological degradation;
    - (ii) promote conservation; and

- (iii) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development.

(Literary) texts mirror social contexts and as the global and local concern for environmental matters has grown over the past three decades, so has the number of texts and research papers highlighting the complex relationship between humans and their physical environment. Parini (1995: 52) aptly refers to this paradigm shift as “the greening of the humanities”.

During 1992, Glotfelty led a coordinated attempt to formalise and institutionalise the field of study and as a result, a professional organisation named The Association for Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) came into being. ASLE (see <<http://www.asle.umn.edu/>>) supports an infrastructure consisting of a journal (*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*), a newsletter entitled *The American Nature Writing Newsletter*, a database and a mailing list.

The mission statement posted on their website reflects the principles underpinning this special issue of *Journal of Literary Studies (JLS)/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap (TLW)*, namely

to promote the exchange of ideas and information about literature and other cultural representations that consider human relationships with the natural world ... to be as inclusive as possible, encompassing any text that illuminates the way humans perceive and interact with the nonhuman environment ... to encourage and seek to facilitate both traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, ecocritical approaches to all cultural representations of nature, and interdisciplinary environmental research.

(<<http://www.asle.umn.edu/>>)

The term ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in an essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (cf. Glotfelty & Fromm 1996). Ever since, terms such as ecopoetics, literary ecology, environmental literary criticism and green cultural studies have all been applied to demarcate the field of study, but Rueckert’s ecocriticism still enjoys widespread acceptance and recognition.

In short, ecocriticism refers to a study of (literary) texts involving the physical environment (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii); criticism informed by ecological sensitivity (Marshall 1994). The definition was broadened by Heise (1999: 1096-1097) to include all genres that actively engage in the environmental discourse. According to Levin (1999: 1097), ecocriticism is marked by a “tremendously ambitious intellectual, ethical, political and even (sometimes) spiritual agenda”. He acknowledges that there is great diversity of opinion in the field, but states that ecocritical dialogue often aims at transforming the human environmental and ecological consciousness by guiding the historically egocentric Western imagination toward a newly emerging ecocentric paradigm.

Ecocriticism is therefore an overarching concept that accommodates a wide range of theoretical approaches and world views. Slovic (1999: 1103) affirms that there is no single, dominant world view guiding ecological practice and Cokinos (1994) concludes that ecocriticism offers no method/praxis for the description of texts, but rather represents “a strategy, an attitude, an angle of vision” that allows for a myriad of literary critical methods; an ethical inquiry into the connections between self, society, environment and text – a classical example of issue replacing theory.

Against this backdrop, scholars were solicited to submit manuscripts for a special issue on ecocriticism. The result is a double volume devoted exclusively to this topic, of which this edition is Part 1. The contributions assembled in the first part pay tribute to Slovic’s belief that ecocriticism is large and contains multitudes; that any conceivable style of scholarship may become a form of ecocriticism. A strong interrelational link, however, is the fact that all the essays (to some extent) grapple with issues of human values and attitudes towards the non-human environment (cf. the introductory epigraph).

Swanepoel, in his milieu-philosophical essay “Engaging with Nature”, ventures into the realm of environmental aesthetics, and critiques existing (Western and non-Western) theoretical models that define human interaction with nature. He explores the multifarious variables that could possibly affect attitudes towards the environment in an attempt to devise a model that stimulates positive behaviour and alters negative attitudes. The strategy of effecting behavioural change by means of a model based on an aesthetic engagement with the environment (a cosmovision) is finally presented as a supplement to the existing legislative measures and penalties that seek to ensure the sustainable development of our natural resources.

In the contribution “//Kabbo’s Challenge: Transculturation and the question of a South African Ecocriticism” Wylie investigates the possibility of recharging and absorbing “other” values, ecological strategies and indigenous knowledge systems from the San/Bushmen (as represented and articulated in texts by Watson, Krog, and James) to provide a local basis for a South African ecocriticism that not merely emulates current Anglo-American models. He reflects on the question of what it may mean to be an ecologically orientated literary critic in South Africa and applies Ortiz’s notion of transculturation in an effort to merge our diverse cultural histories. He concludes that a South African ecocriticism, if it is to be developed despite all the ontological and epistemological obstacles, will resemble “a nest of unique and living snakes (rather than) a crystalline or geodesic structure”.

The trend described by Parini as “the greening of the humanities” signals a definitive shift in values and attitudes towards the environment. In her essay “‘But Where’s the Bloody Horse?’: Textuality and Corporeality in the ‘Animal Turn’”, historian Sandra Swart explores the phenomenon of green

curricula in general and animal studies in particular. She presents the horse as case study to motivate the inclusion of animal-centred research as part of a curriculum in the humanities (as opposed to being the exclusive domain of the natural sciences). The subsequent essays by Woodward and Cloete respectively fall well within the ambit of animal studies as proposed by Swart's essay and confirm the latter's thesis that species (like race, class and gender) should be constructed as a new critical category.

Woodward introduces her topic ("The Killing (Off) of Animals in Some Southern African Fiction, or 'Why Does Every Animal Story Have to be Sad?") by narrating stories relating to the killing of animals. She includes a discussion on the media debate following the ritual slaughtering of a ceremonial bull by Tony Yengeni and claims that these narrated scenarios open up various attitudes to the killing of animals. Ethical issues relating to the deaths of animals in recent Southern African fiction are debated with reference to voices as diverse as Derrida, Nussbaum, Buddhist scholars, utilitarianists and the fictional character Elizabeth Costello.

In "Tigers, Humans and *Animots*" Cloete affirms the idea that a representation of animals can hardly be separated from the cultural and political imaginations of historical periods. She traces the representation of the tiger as cultural symbol back to Anglo-India and like Woodward, she taps into Derridean theory and specifically the notions of "*animot*" and "absolute hospitality" toward animals as the ultimate other to facilitate her description of Pi's relationship with the Bengal tiger, Richard Parker.

By placing readings of diverse texts from different historical periods, cultures, genres and disciplines within an environmental matrix, we hope to challenge and even change dismissive attitudes toward ecocriticism by demonstrating the versatility and viability of the ecocritical approach.

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