

## Task for *Faith Singer*

### Notes on Ecocriticism (or Environmental Criticism)

Ecocriticism investigates relationships between literature and the physical environment – it provides an ‘earth-centred’ approach to literary studies. It draws attention to the human and non-human world, particularly to connections between self, society, nature and texts. It investigates the ways in which writers represent different environments in literature and how this influences real world attitudes to place.

The principles of ecocriticism are drawn from:

#### *Ecology and Ethics*

What are the relations between language and culture? How do organisms create and sustain complex social alliances? What complex interrelated networks are apparent in texts? How might we recognise the nonlinear and discontinuous order of things? How are social (and environmental) conflicts mediated? How might discourses of science and literature talk to each other in texts?

#### *Language and Criticism*

How do words represent human and nonhuman life? What is the quality and integrity of the work?

Instead of looking for language ‘to represent’ (*mimesis*), ecocriticism examines the ability of language ‘to point’ (*deixis*). In grammatical terms, ‘space deixis’ is concerned with the spatial locations relevant to an utterance where places and things are identified by their distance from the speaker – for example the adverbs ‘here’ and ‘there’, the demonstratives ‘this’ and ‘that’, and the adverbial phrases ‘across the street’ or ‘around the corner’. In broader literary terms, we can ask how does the text point to or draw attention to place? In particular how does it draw attention to aspects of place that might otherwise be overlooked or unseen?

Ecocriticism is concerned with locating entities in space, time and social context relative to physical space. From an ecocritical perspective, learning and writing landscape becomes a way of mapping cultural terrain. Ecocriticism explores how metaphors of nature are used and abused across a range of literary and non-literary texts. Its strongest advocates have been feminist and gender critics who focus on the idea of place as shaping social status and life possibilities.

Ecocritics work within the broad concepts of Landscape, Place, Region, Urban, Rural, Nature and Environment. They might ask:

- How is nature represented (or pointed to) within the text?
- What role does the physical setting play in the text?
- Are the values consistent with ecological wisdom?

- How do the metaphors of the land/ place influence the way we treat it?

Ecocritics argue that in most literary theory, relations between writers, texts and the world are examined, though the 'world' is synonymous with the social sphere of the human. Ecocriticism expands the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere. It proceeds on the assumption that everything is connected to everything else.

The development of ecocriticism has entailed three stages:

1. Firstly, investigating how nature is represented in texts, and exploring the stereotypes and absences in texts.
2. Secondly, recouping nature writing and recognising the environmental conditions that may have shaped an author's life.
3. Thirdly, developing theoretical approaches for ecocriticism by looking at the symbolic construction of species; how binaries of human and other are constructed in texts; how we might understand the hybrid spaces and cosmopolitan ironies of most lives; and the development of an ecological poetics that is attuned to interconnections, energy and flow;

Ecocriticism works against the alienation of humans from nature. Ecocritics argue that there is no such thing as an individual, only an individual in context; no self, only a self in place. They ask: What has counted as the environment, and what may count? Who marks off the conceptual boundaries and under what authority and for what reasons?

In contrast to literature that has celebrated human progress, some ecocritical perspectives attend to the damages that culture has brought about (e.g. waste, pollution, apocalypse) and others focus on wilderness, animals, and earth.

Ecocritics encourage us to focus on place and dwelling, inviting us to 'hunker down' in our own locale and pay close attention as we read and write place.

### References

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