

LITERARY ECOCRITICISM

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it. *Ecocritica (letteraria)*; Fr. *Écocrétique (littéraire)*; Germ. (*literarische*) *Ökokritik*; Span. *Ecocrítica (literaria)*. A critical practice that investigates representations of non-human entities and their relationships with humans in literature. The term is commonly used without "literary" in all the aforementioned five languages, unless the context requires the field of study to be specified. The prefix "eco" derives from "ecology", understood both as a discipline that studies the interrelationships between living beings and their environment and as a cultural movement that promotes the protection of ecosystems. Ecocriticism therefore has a strong interdisciplinary vocation, combining two broad approaches: historical-philological and ethical-pedagogical (Scaffai, 2017). The former analyses literary representations of non-human beings and environments as symbolic figures, presenting typical characteristics shaped by their socio-cultural and historical context (e.g. 'Arcadia' in the nineteenth century). It ranges from the analysis of singular figures, such as the Moon in Giacomo Leopardi's poetry, to ecological worldviews that emerge from the author's process of worlding, whether as an unconscious restitution of their own interpretation or as a conscious fictional construction. The latter approach focuses on how literary practice is or can be used as a tool to enhance ecological awareness (e.g. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*).

Ecocriticism is generally considered to have emerged as a discipline in the 1980s and 1990s within Anglo-American academia. As a practice, however, it developed simultaneously in various context, so its origin cannot be attributed unambiguously to a single context. Since the 2000s, Ecocriticism has become widespread and it is now a recognized branch of Literary Criticism in many countries worldwide, diversifying its concepts and critical perspectives in relation to different cultures, habitats and worldviews. Ecocriticism constitutes a branch of the broader fields of Ecological and Environmental Aesthetics, focusing on literary forms of Ecological and Environmental Arts, and typically addressing themes such as the environmental crisis and the concept of Anthropocene. Consequently, it may also be understood as a development within Political Aesthetics.

CURRENT DEBATE AND OPEN QUESTIONS

How can literature represent the environmental crisis at planetary scales without erasing local, historical, and cultural differences? Is “the planetary” a necessary framework or an abstraction that risks flattening difference? (Dipesh Chackrabarty; Ursula K. Heise; Timothy Clark; Adeline Johns-Putra; Elizabeth DeLoughrey)

How should Ecocriticism conceptualize agency in a world of human–nonhuman entanglement? How can it decenter the human without dissolving responsibility, ethics, or politics? (Michael Bennett; Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann; Donna Haraway; Bruno Latour; Anat Pick)

In what ways must Ecocriticism confront colonial histories, environmental injustice, and unequal exposure to ecological harm? Is the ecological crisis a shared human condition, or the product of specific histories of extraction, empire and racism? (Rob Nixon; Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin; Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee; Joni Adamson; Kyle Powys Whyte)

What counts as “environment” or “nature” in literary analysis today, after the collapse of the nature/culture divide and the inclusion of urban, toxic, industrial, and embodied environments? (Lawrence Buell; Terry Gifford; Matthew Gandy; Kate Rigby; Stacy Alaimo)

What role should Ecocriticism play in relation to activism, ethics, and environmental futures? Should it advocate, diagnose, unsettle or imagine? Can it do all four without losing critical rigor? (Greta Gaard; Kate Rigby; Timothy Morton)

BEGINNINGS OF THE DISCIPLINE

The term “ecocriticism” first appeared in William Rueckert's essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). During the 1970s, many authors and critics explored the intersections between literature and ecology, alongside the rise of the environmental movement and growing concern about the environmental crisis, however without being aware of each other's work. It was in the 1980s that a scholarly network began to form.

In 1985, Friedrich O. Waage edited the book *Teaching Environmental Literature: Material, Methods, Resources*, a collection of conceptual descriptions and anthologies from nineteen university courses. Starting in 1989, Alicia Nitecki created *The American Nature Writing Newsletter*, issued biannually and disseminating essays, literary texts and course materials. At the 1991 annual conference of the Modern Language Association, Harold Fromm chaired a special session entitled *Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies*. In 1992 – the same year as the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro – the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) was founded, with Scott Slovic as its first president. The following year, the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies on Literature and the Environment* was established. Ecocriticism became a “recognisable critical school” alongside other two main currents of the time: Feminist criticism and Marxist criticism (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, XVIII).

The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, is considered the seminal text of North American Ecocriticism. The approach of these authors is primarily ethical-pedagogical. Conceived as a broad analysis of the literary “negotiations between the human and the non-human”, the editors’ interpretation of Ecocriticism encompassed related terms used at the time, such as literary ecology, ecopoetics, environmental literary criticism and green cultural studies.

The American tradition of Nature Writing, associated with Henry David Thoreau, was characterized by the centrality of the concept of “wilderness”. This concept was criticized early in ecocritical debate, both from a literary perspective (Buell 1995, 2001, 2005) and from an ecofeminist one (Kolodny 1996; Gaard and Murphy 1998). In the first decade of the new millennium, postcolonial studies introduced a strong cultural critique of Western worldviews, including dominant conceptions of the environment and nonhuman entities (O’Brian 2001; DeLoughrey et al. 2005; Huggan and Tiffin 2010; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011). The field was further enriched by Animal Studies (Singer 1975; Adams 1990; Haraway 2008).

Ecocriticism thus acquired new critical lenses, addressing phenomena such as ecological imperialism (Plumwood 2001), biocolonisation (Kimball 1996; Shiva 1997) and environmental racism (Bullard 1993; Curtin 2005; Taylor 2014). The interest in incorporating ecocritical perspective from other cultural contexts into Western academia led to the publications of collective volumes by authors from around the world, such as *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (Slovic, Rangarajan and Sarveswaran 2019). *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), written by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, represents a significant recent development in the American tradition, drawing inspiration by New Materialism (Braidotti 1994; Barad 2007; Haraway 2008; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010).

As far as scientific societies are concerned, the largest society in this context is ASLE, which has expanded into ASLE-UKI (England and Ireland, 1998), ASLE-Japan (1994), ASLE-Korea (2001), ASLEC-ANZ (Australia and New Zealand, 2003), ASLE-India (2005) and ASLE-Taiwan (2010). The European association is called EASLCE: European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and the Environment. The “Ecological Literature” branch of the China Ecological Civilisation Research and Promotion Association (CECRPA), was inaugurated in 2025.

The Lexington Books series *Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, founded in 2015, offers a broad overview of the discipline’s progressive and global developments.

THREE WAVES, OR PALIMPSESTS

Although the multiplicity of practices, themes and timelines of Ecocriticism across different countries suggests irreducible complexity, scholars often refer to a general historical-thematic model: the system of “waves”, initiated by Laurence Buell. However, what the author wrote in 2005 still remains valid today:

"the distinction should not ... be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarrelling with precursors. In this sense, 'palimpsest' would be a better metaphor than 'wave'" (Buell 2005, 17).

According to this model, the first wave (1980-2000) was characterised by an effort to establish a close connection between literary criticism and the environmental sciences. It sought to translate ecological perspectives into literary analysis, drawing on disciplines such as biology, ethology, landscape studies, geology, applied mathematics, risk theory, and artificial intelligence. This is the case, for example, with Joseph Carroll, Glen A. Love, Ursula Heise, William Howarth, and N. Katherine Hayles.

However, this approach has since been criticised for its anthropocentric tendencies, its universalisation of Western models, and its implicit trust in science as a discourse exempt from meta-critical scrutiny. Moreover, the "environment" under consideration was often understood primarily as the "natural environment", sometimes equated – especially in the American context – with wilderness. Representations of the natural world and its relationship with humans tended to be predominantly organicist.

The second wave (2000-2010), as identified by Buell, developed through a critique of the aforementioned assumptions. Ecofeminism was among the first, highlighting the correlation between institutionalised patriarchy and dynamics of separation, domination and exploitation of the non-human, through the symbolic identification of "woman" and "nature". Carolyn Merchant, Carol J. Adams, Vandana Shiva and Donna Haraway played a fundamental role in this process. Postcolonial Studies further exposed colonial and racist dynamics in both material exploitation of people and environments, and cultural imperialism (Chackravorty Spivak 1999; O'Brian 2001; Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Yuki 2013).

Bruno Latour, and later Philippe Descola, challenged the supposed absoluteness of scientific discourse and the Western divide between nature and culture, or nature and society. As this division is destabilised, the distinction between natural and artificial environments also breaks down, foregrounding the entanglement of human and non-human entities, as in the urban landscape. A "social ecocriticism" (Bennett 2001) thus emerged, placing environmental justice at the center of its critical concerns (Coupe 2000; Armbruster and Wallace 2001; Adamson, Evans and Stein 2002; Heise 2008; Nixon 2011).

The third wave (2010-present) operates in a more systemic manner, integrating ecofeminist, postcolonial, decolonial, anti-racist and queer critiques. It addresses themes such as the Anthropocene, climate justice, new materialism, posthumanism, Multispecies Studies and affect theory. Compared with the second wave, it calls for greater philosophical clarity regarding key concepts, while also warning against excessive abstraction and emphasizing the urgency of climate and environmental activism. Responsibility, alongside attention to local perspectives as a corrective to universalizing approaches, has become a central concern.

Italy was among the countries that most rapidly embraced the ecocritical perspective, thanks to a handful of scholars who acted as “cultural translators”, bridging the gap between American theory and Italian literary history. Foremost among them is Serenella Iovino, often cited as the “mother” of Italian Ecocriticism. *Filosofie dell'ambiente. Natura, Etica, Società and Ecologia letteraria: Una strategia di sopravvivenza* were both published in 2006, followed by her work on Material Ecocriticism and then, ten years later, by the anthologies *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance and Liberation* (2016), edited with Oppermann, and *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies* (2018), with Enrico Cesaretti.

On the one hand, Iovino's Ecocriticism opened Italian literary criticism to political ecology, introducing the innovative perspectives of New Materialism and Posthumanism. On the other, it closely linked literary analysis to the socio-cultural context and territory, as well as to local communities' resistance to pollution and overbuilding.

If Iovino introduced the field, Niccolò Scaffai consolidated it. *Letteratura e Ecologia: forme e temi di una relazione narrativa* (2017) traces the history of environmental awareness from Dante to the contemporary “Anthropocene novel”. A focus on place, regional writing and environmental justice has become a defining feature of Italian Ecocriticism. Italian literary studies, traditionally rooted in philology, Marxism, and structuralism, quickly moved beyond first-wave nature writing studies to address topics such as sea ecologies in the Mediterranean, waste and pollution crisis, migration and borders, urban environments, environmental justice and seismic disasters.

Scholars currently working on Ecocriticism in Italy include Serenella Iovino, Damiano Benvegnù, Matteo Gilebbi, Elena Past, Enrico Cesaretti, Marco Armerio, Niccolò Turi, Emiliano Guaraldo Rodriguez, Serena Ferrando, Paolo Saporito, Danila Cannamela, Alberto Baracco, Marco Maggi, Caterina Diotto, Claudia Dellacasa, Silvia Lavanco Livreri, Michele Cometa and Abele Longo.

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