

Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
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Lecture – 23

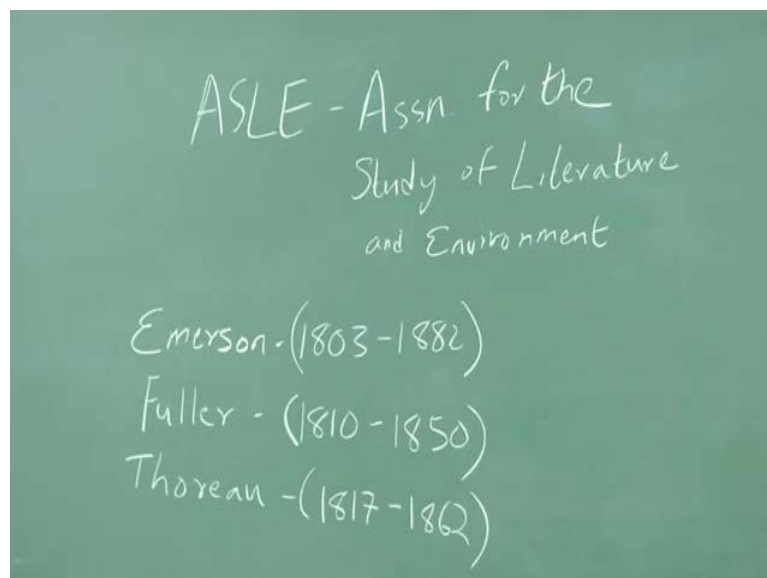
Part A

Eco criticism

Hello and welcome to today's module on Literary Theory and Literary Criticism. In today's lecture, we will be looking at something known as Eco Criticism and as always will be covering this lecture in two modules. Eco criticism is something is a term that seems to have gained currency in lot of currency in recent times, but what in fact is or what do you understand by eco criticism. Simply defined, eco criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, and this definition comes to us from a person known as Cheryll Glotfelty.

Now, both the terms eco criticism and green studies are used to denote this kind of a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980's and in the UK in the 1990's. In the USA, the acknowledged founder of the moment, of the school is the person that we just got the quote from Cheryll Glotfelty, who along with the person known as Harold from co edited the eco criticism reader, landmarks in literary ecology.

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In 1992, she also co-founded what we know as ASLE. ASLE is basically the association for the Study of Literature and Environment and ASLE publishes its in-house journal called *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, which started publishing in 1993. So, it can be imagined that more or less where the roots of the movement come from the 80's onwards or early 90's.

Therefore, due to such early influences, American eco criticism was already burgeoning as an academic discipline by the early 1990's and was developing its professional infrastructure of designated journals and literature. Now, as a concept though eco criticism first arose in the late 1970's at the meetings of the WLA. The WLA is the Western Literature Association, a body whose primary field of interest is the literature of the American west.

Now, in his introduction to a series of brief papers all titled *What is Eco Criticism*, Michael P. Branch traces the world of eco criticism back to William Lucas's 1978 essay, *Literature and Ecology, Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco Criticism*. So, that is where we get the original term from. Now, according to Branch both the terms *ecological* and *eco criticism*, late dormant in the critical vocabulary, were revived at the 1989 WLA conference which was chaired by Cheryll Glotfelty. Glotfelty reviewed the term, revived the use of the term.

Glotfelty also urged its adoption to refer to a blanket critical USA, taking it as literary criticism of three major 19th century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force and the wilderness as manifested in America. Now, these three very important and famous writers are Ralph Waldo Emerson, who lived between 1803 and 1882, Margaret Fuller who lived between 1810 and 1850 and David Henry Thoreau, who lived between 1817 and 1862.

As you can see, they were contemporaries; they lived in almost the same time frame and they wrote in similar ways with similar concerns. Now, as you can probably imagine, they were all American and they were all members of a group of New England writers, essayists and philosophers, who are now collectively known as the transcendentalists. Transcendentalism was the first major literary movement; it is also, it is a side note.

Transcendentalism was the first major literary movement to achieve a sort of cultural independence from the brake system European models. Now, Emerson's on first book, first short book was called *Nature* and it was first published anonymously in 1836 and is we can be seen as a reflective essay on the impact that the natural world had on him. It is voice rather powerfully and romantically and as we can see from some of these lines and these lines are taken from chapter 1 of *Nature*.

This is the quote, Crossing a bare common in snow paddles at twilight under a clouded sky without having in my thoughts, any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear on quote. As you can imagine, this is a quote from *Nature* and you can see how passionately, eloquently and romantically he sites nature's influence on him. Similarly, Margaret Fuller's first book was *Summer on the Lake*, which is also an equally powerfully written journal of her encounter with the American at her education as the first woman student at Harvard.

Now, Thoreau's on important work let we know today is a *Walden* and is account of his two years stay from 1845 onwards in a hut that he had built on the shores of a pond called Walden pond. Now, this was a couple of miles away from concurred, his hometown of concurred in Massachusetts and it is perhaps, the ultimate and classic account of dropping out of modern life and seeking out to renew itself by a sort of return to nature.

The film *Into the Wild* that some of you might be familiar with his also have inspired by *Walden's*, I mean Thoreau's stay at Walden. Together these three books can be seen as the foundational works of the American eco centered writing. Now, by contrast the British version, the UK version of eco criticism or green studies as they call it, takes it is bearings from the British romanticism of the 1790's days rather than the American transcendentalism of the 1840's.

Now, you might be familiar with the Romantic Movement, we have critics and poets like William Wordsworth and Coleridge. They existence of these two distinct national variance of the ecological approach is similar to the situation of British cultural materialism and American new historicism respectively. So, this is basically more or less two aspects of the same phenomenon, two models of the same cultural phenomenon.

In other words, the preferred American term is eco criticism, whereas a green study is frequently used when referring to this in the UK. Also, another key difference between the two approaches is that the American version of the moment is rather celebratory in term and this is something that, you know more hostile critics, more hostile harder left leaning critics dismissively called the phenomenon of tree hugging.

So, the American version is rather celebratory, while the British version is more concerned which is more occupied with environmental degradation and the analysis of governmental commercial and even, new colonial interventions. For instance, we have Jonathan Bate's who published *The Song of The Earth* in 2000 and in the work, Bate argues that colonialism and deforestation have frequently gone together and they have gone hand in hand often times.

Now, some common principles of this phenomenon on eco criticism irrespective of national variance are as follows. The most fundamental point perhaps is the eco critic's rejection of the notion that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. So, nature is something that really access that really is a physical entity for the eco critic and it is present in entity, which effects us and which we can affect in turn, even fatally. You know, if you are not carefully if we go on the mystery thing or natural and landmark resources.

They may tend that nature is not reducible to an abstract concept and which, we can conceive as a part of our cultural practice, they reject that kind of understanding of nature and at this point, you might recall how in theory. In general, we will be tend to see our external world has something that is socially or culturally or perhaps even linguistically constructed. It is something that is already texturelized into discourse.

However, eco criticism called this kind of understanding into question. Now, a good example for the kind of resistance that the eco critics offer such an understanding, would be can be found in a Kate Soper frequently coated remark and this is taken from her seminal book *What is nature*. In the book, she very emphatically points out that it is in language that has a hole in the ozone layer and that is precisely the kind of attitude understands that most eco critics adopt.

Eco criticism thus repudiates the fundamental belief in the contractedness, which is a significant aspect of contemporary and modern literary theory. The essence of eco

criticism intervention in theory has been to challenge this very notion. However, this should not be taken as an implication that the eco critics hold a very naive or a very pre-theoretical approach to a notion of nature. Because, in the case of eco criticism some of the most heated exchanges have been between the American Wordsworth critics Allen Lu and the various eco critics, including Jonathan Bate who we just mentioned.

Jonathan Bate is also an author of the similar work called as a Romantic Ecology. Now, the key argument on this debate from loose position is than by calling something natural and seeing it as something very simply given is usually a way of avoiding the politics, which has you know clearly transformed or made it that way. For example, let us look at this 19th century Children's hymn by C F Alexander, which has these lines.

Quote, The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, he made them both high and lowly and ordered their state. He of course, he implies God. Now, this is taken from C F Alexander's, Children's hymn that originally came out in the 19th century. Now, the problem with the poem as you can, as you have probably guessed is that, it is obvious from the example given here in the poem, that social inequality is being naturalized here.

We have these lines that, you know the rich man is in castle and the poor man is at his gate and that is because God made it that way. So, what we have here is that, a clear case of social inequality is being naturalized as something that is God given. And thus, this situation becomes you know, something that is in his capable from. Then, actually it is we know today as something that is a product of a very specific set of politics at work.

It is a result of, you know political systems and power structures that have actually, in fact put the rich man in the castle and the poor man at his gate. Now, this is also perhaps symptomatic of the Marxian dictum, that religion is the opium of the people. Thus according to Lu, there is no nature in other words, nature is nothing more than a mere anthropomorphic construct and it is created by Wordsworth and the rest for their own convenient proposes.

Now, this is a remark that is often a frequent target in eco critical writing and has been a kind of paradoxically too, a valuable stimulus into the definition and crystallization of the very prepositions that eco criticism adopts today. For example, we have Terry Gifford's response to the statement that, whereas Lu is right to identify nature as

mediation, he is wrong to deny the general physical presence that is that accesses on one side of that mediation.

And therefore, the nature versus culture dichotomy or the nature versus culture distinction is problematized by acknowledging that such distinctions are not always absolute and clear cut. The existence of such distinctions is not under mind by the existence of intermediate takes. To give you an analogy, the existence of the color grey does not quite destabilized the existence of the color black or white and this is precisely this kind of logic at this argument adopts.

Thus in the context of eco criticism, we have nature and culture that are both part taking in around where both are equally valid. Now, this would be to assume a sort of a continuum or spectrum of sorts. You know, a series of adjoining and overlapping areas which gradually move from nature on the one end to culture on the other end that is from pure wilderness on the one hand comprising of perhaps inaccessible deserts and wide open oceans, which almost signify a zero level of human interaction.

On to from then on to spectrum that includes heels and feels and then perhaps something that includes community parks and public gardens and then on to completely artificial landscape, comprising of perhaps the New York City Skyline. All kinds of writing including nature writing can be placed on this spectrum or somewhere, depending upon their degree of engagement with physical nature and you know, the alternating cultural forces.

Thus, British romantic writing and American transcendental writing which shows are predominant interest in mountains and fairies and waterfalls and grasslands. So, all those kinds of writing would be segregated to one end of the spectrum, while other works such as those represented by novels like Huckleberry Finn or Moby Dick, would follow suit and occupy certain other spaces within this very spectrum. Literary spaces often perform an anthropocentric function, which is to say in a human centered approach, natural objects are often seen as existing for the sake of human benefit.

Now, this is a point that deep ecology strongly resist and opposes and this is where, Bate's makes distinction between light greens, his idea of light greens and dark greens and this distinction is given to us by Bate's in *The Song of The Earth*. Now, the light greens are environmentalist, who value nature, because it is natural humanity and

contributes to all well being. They advocate responsible forms of production and consumption and engaging with nature.

The dark greens on the other hand or the deep ecologies, who take more radical stand and are people who maintains that technology is the problem and can never be a part of the solution. They recommend by going back to nature and prefer the term nature over the more anthropocentric term environment, they hate using the term environment, because it implies something that is anthropocentric. The point that is repeatedly made by eco critics is that, for the first time in human history we have nothing known as Through Wilderness.

Through Wilderness does not exist anywhere on this planet anymore and that is because, every region on the planet is affected by some sort of human activity including that of Global Warming and other such anthropocentric problems such as toxic waste or nuclear fallout. So, even if you take the remotest part of Alaska, you know you might be familiar with the picture of a Polar Bear trying to I mean floating away on a piece of ice.

So, regardless of wherever you, whichever landscape you approach, it has been irreparably and consistently in damaged by human activity. Now, they also maintain that issues of gender race and class cannot any longer exhaust. The range of concerns that literature and criticism are to have, that is how we normally see theory engaging with, we have concerned with question of power of gender and race and class, etcetera.

And in another words, eco critics while seeking to contribute to rectify injustices in the area of gender, race and class, they maintain that this is indeed a very not worthy, you know space worthy aim. For critics and theories to have, to identify injustices in the area of gender, race and class etcetera. However, it does not really help us to ignore the fact, that there would not be a place to live for us to live, if we cannot reverse or avoid the inevitable doom, you know the innovative environmental catastrophe that we are heading towards.

So, to put it in another way, it would be like trying to improve the working conditions on the ship Titanic, while the ship was going full speed on it is way to hit an iceberg. So, if that is some more important concern for us, we should be taking care of that first, instead of perhaps trying to improve the working conditions. So, while this is a indeed a very parse worthy aim to have, an eco critical concern it is infinitely more relevant to Archos.

An eco critical reading of a literary text incorporates a consideration and engagement with the kind of issues, we just mentioned. Sometimes, it is just a matter of approaching a very perhaps, a very familiar text with new alertness to the dimensions or to be issues that the text represent. A dimensions which was perhaps not received, the kind of environmentally conscious and sensitive reading, which was always there in the text and with that we will stop this module and when we come back for the next module, we will analyze this case with a short piece of text.

Thank you very much, see you in the next module.