

HUMANITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS:  
THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF ECOCRITICISM

Today I want to talk about literary theory as a response to environmental crisis. In doing so I am aware of the fact that climate crisis is a hugely complex problem which seems to be much more scientific, biological and chemical, or political, than cultural, or even literary. The distinction made by John Passmore is very useful in this respect. Passmore distinguishes between problems in ecology and ecological problems (HANDOUT #1). A problem in ecology, he argues, “is a purely scientific problem, arising out of the fact that scientists do not understand some particular ecological phenomenon” (43). An ecological problem, on the other hand, is “a special type of social problem .... It is labelled a problem not because, like a scientific problem, it presents an obstacle to our understanding of the world but rather because – consider alcoholism, crime, deaths on the road – we believe that our society would be better off without it” (ibid). Of course, the current – and future – environmental crisis is a bit more encompassing and urgent than alcoholism. Nonetheless, this crisis is not merely a result of pollution, for instance, but also very much of cultural conceptions about nature and our environment. Literature is one of the areas in which these views of nature are expressed, and which are used to imagine alternatives to or consequences of environmental crisis. Ecocriticism is a fairly new literary theory that studies texts in terms of environmental crisis and human-nature relations. I want to do three things today: firstly provide an introduction to ecocriticism; secondly, outline my own research in which I argue for a broadening of ecocritical practice; and thirdly, briefly discuss Jeanette Winterson’s novel *The Stone Gods* to illustrate my approach.

The most widely used definition of ecocriticism, and its first, is Cheryll Glotfelty’s who defined it as [HANDOUT #2]“the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xvii). She compares it to feminism and Marxism and suggests that “[j]ust as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (ibid.). Ecocriticism aims to foreground nature: instead of interpreting the natural environment as symbolic – as earlier critics have – ecocritics read nature in its own right. They furthermore question how nature is described in a text, the cultural assumptions

that underlie the construction of nature and the historical and environmental reality of a work. Ecocriticism developed out of nature writing, works by authors such as Thoreau, Muir, Aldo Leopold, the British Romantics and Richard Jefferies which are characterized by a celebration of nature, a keen eye for detail and stress on personal experience. Consequently, early ecocritics focused on Anglo-American nature writing, non-fictional works and poetry.

Recently, ecocriticism's focus has broadened (see Armbruster and Wallace on HANDOUT) to include works that are neither non-fiction nor nature writing. At the same time, ecocritics have explored intersections with other literary theories such as postcolonialism. For instance, postcolonial ecocritics such as Graham Huggan point out that colonisation isn't merely a matter of colonizing people, but also colonisation of the environment. Furthermore, whereas early ecocriticism focused very much on the local and tangible, recently critics such as Ursula Heise have argued for more attention to the global, suggesting that only a global perspective can adequately address environmental crisis. [see HANDOUT, also special issue]

Nonetheless, the focus of much ecocriticism remains on a relatively limited selection of works, namely those that are obviously, as Patrick D. Murphy puts it, "nature writing, nature literature ... and environmental literature" (18-9). Most contemporary British fiction, for example, continues to be largely ignored by ecocritics, also because they have traditionally been suspicious of contemporary fiction. My project has three aims: firstly, to contribute to the further development of ecocriticism and broadening of ecocritical practice by proposing different reading strategies; secondly, demonstrate ecocritical approaches to contemporary fiction; propose alternative ways of engaging with three images we use to represent nature: pastoral, place and apocalypse. Today I will only argue for a broadening of ecocritical practice. I will illustrate my argument through a short reading of Jeanette Winterson's 2007 novel *The Stone Gods*.

I want to suggest that there are two main ways of reading a text ecocritically: a primarily environmentalist and a primarily literary way. The first, the environmentalist way, focuses on the message of the novel and evaluates whether it is "environmentalist" enough. Or, as Richard Kerridge puts it, "ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (5) [HANDOUT #3]. The other way of reading texts ecocritically, and what I argue for, is a more literary approach which doesn't only focus on the *content* of a novel, for instance, but on the *form* – literary

strategies, narratological elements – as well. These are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Any literary theory that has an ethical foundation – be it ecocriticism, or feminism, or postcolonialism – needs to have an ethical as well as a literary component in order to be viable and widely applicable. Also, the two approaches have the same aim: both are a form of academic activism in that they want to raise awareness of nature and environmental crisis by foregrounding representations of nature.

I'll use my reading of *The Stone Gods* to argue for a more nuanced, literary ecocritical approach. *The Stone Gods* consists of four parts: the first, "Planet Blue", appears to be set in the near future; the second, "Easter Island" is set in 1774, and the third and fourth parts, "Post-3 War" and "Wreck City" somewhere in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. From an ecocritical perspective the first part of the novel "Planet Blue" is most interesting so I'll focus on that. It describes life on a planet much like earth, Orbus, only a few decades, or perhaps a century, from today. Robots have become part of daily life, as is the highly advanced, evolving *Robo sapiens*. The narrator, Billie, is a young woman with old-fashioned preferences for real animals, real food and farming. She briefly works with the *Robo sapiens* Spike who was on the first mission to a newly discovered planet, Planet Blue. When Billie becomes a risk to the government, she is shipped off, together with Spike, a woman named Pink and a space privateer on a new mission to Planet Blue. Their aim is to divert the trajectory of an asteroid so that it will hit the planet, cause a minor ice age and kill the monsters – dinosaurs – that currently make it inhabitable to humans. Their mission fails, however, when the asteroid's impact is much bigger than they had anticipated. Although it is suggested that Pink and the space cowboy survive, Billie and Spike, after having a brief lesbian-robot-romance, die.

The environmental circumstances on Orbus are eerily similar to issues facing us today. In a discussion with her supervisor, Manfred, Billie is told that Orbus is not dying – as "doomsters and environmentalists" have suggested (7) – but is "evolving in a way that is hostile to human life" (8). Not only is this a clever piece of rhetoric, it also suggests a very cynical view of environmentalism. The destruction of the environment will most likely not kill the planet, but it will make it hostile to human life, as it has been during different periods in the past. Environmentalism, Manfred seems to suggest, isn't so much about saving the planet, but about saving the human species – and therefore a lot more anthropocentric than the average environmentalist might be comfortable to admit.

Furthermore, the steps that have been taken to preserve the environment are much like those proposed by contemporary environmentalists. As Manfred says: [HANDOUT #4] “We have the best weathershield in the world. We have slowed global warming. We have stabilized emissions. We have drained rising sea levels, we have replanted forests, we have synthesized food, ending centuries of harmful farming practices ... we have neutralized acid rain, we have permanent refrigeration around the ice-caps, we no longer use oil, gasoline or petroleum derivatives” (37-8). Clearly, however, these steps were taken when things were already too late, as Spike – designed to make the kind of “planet-sized decisions that human beings are so bad at” (159) – points out: “it’s too late ... Orbus has a projected lifespan of around fifty years” (36; 38). The *Robo sapiens* also suggests that humans will never succeed in living sustainably. In what almost sounds as an apology for the human race, Spike says that [HANDOUT #5] “life never believes that it will end” (108) and, poetically, that “The mind will not believe in death, perhaps because, as far as the mind is concerned, death never happens” (97).

I recently presented a paper on *The Stone Gods* at an ecocriticism conference in the UK, where another woman, Sherry Booth, also presented a paper on the novel. Listening to her paper was interesting to me as her approach is so different from mine, and because her reading is exemplary of very traditional ecocriticism. Booth argued that ecocritics ask of authors what can be done and look for fiction with an agenda which moves readers to hope and action rather than despair. The message that *The Stone Gods* gives, she argued, is that of “hope” and “love”. Such a reading is problematic as it is prescriptive, narrowly environmentalist, naïve and black and white. My reading focuses on literary aspects such as narrative structure and characterization and adds an extra dimension to the explicitly environmentalist readings of Booth, Kerridge, Murphy and others, and makes ecocriticism more viable and applicable. If ecocritics do indeed want take environmental crisis serious, I argue throughout my dissertation, they cannot afford to ignore a large portion of literature – is environmental crisis is as ubiquitous and important as they claim, it needs to be studied in a wide variety of works.

Unfortunately I don’t have a lot of time today to give an in-depth reading, so I will focus on two brief aspects: narrative structure and characterization. Booth suggests that the novel expresses hope. Likewise, the cover of the paperback edition quotes Ali Smith who wrote that the novel “holds loss and hope in the one hand ... but gives the heft to hope every

time". The novel appears to promise hope because it presents a fresh start to the human race time and again. The three narratives in the novel are not distinct, but instead are instead part of a larger narrative which describes repetitive universes. "Planet Blue" is about the discovery of a Blue Planet that will provide the inhabitants of Orbus – the Red Planet – the opportunity for a fresh start. The second narrative, "Easter Island", appears to be set on Planet Blue – Earth – yet the fragments from Captain Cook's diary in "Easter Island" also appear in Planet Blue. The novel therefore suggests a series of repetitive worlds, in which the actions taking place continuously repeat themselves. The repeating universes of the novel, I want to argue, suggests that humankind is incapable of actually changing – and that there is therefore little reason for hope. Or, as one of the characters puts it, "the universe is a memory of our mistakes" (106).

Booth – the only critic I know who has read the *The Stone Gods* ecocritically – pays very little attention in her analysis to the characters, except for the romance between the gay main characters of each narrative who express a message of "love". A more detailed analysis of the characters in the novel shows, however, that the novel is by no means this clear. In fact, in the first part, there are characters such as Manfred and Pink – a cosmetic surgery junkie who finds nature inconvenient and embodies consumerism – who counter Billie's environmentalism. Together, these characters express ambiguous views of nature and environmentalism, in which the moral obligation to take care of the planet earth conflicts with consumer desires and economic concerns.

In short, then, I argue that ecocriticism, in order to truly fulfil its aim of raising awareness of environmental crisis and conceptions of nature, cannot afford to study only a small portion of literature. What is needed, then, is an approach to complement the explicitly environmentalist approach that ecocritics generally take. Such an environmentally-inflected literary approach consequently paints a more nuanced picture of representations of nature in literature, more adequately expresses ambiguous contemporary views of nature and makes ecocriticism more viable and applicable.

