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From Nature to Sustainability: Integrating an Ecocritical
Narrative Approach in English Literature and
Heightening Critical Thinking Levels among ESL Learners

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Abstract: Ecocriticism made its global presence into scholarly literary readings by addressing how humans relate to its environment, and the complicated issues relating to sustainability of our limited natural resources. This ongoing scholarly transformation of linking literary criticism and theory to our pressing issues relating to global warming and climate change has brought heightened discussion levels among today's literary academicians. As environmental problems are compounded through our constant use of limited natural resources, along with the unpredictable occurrences of natural disasters, there has been a conscious response among educators to include reading material for students with stories that relate to nature. As a component of this inquiry, this type of literary scholarship provides a neutral backdrop for class discussion on social issues relating to economics, politics, religion, and culture. In this process of integrating literature relating to ecocriticism as part of content-based English courses, the social values relating to the preservation and appreciation of nature are more likened to mobilizing a nature-conscious global understanding that defies cross-cultural barriers. The recent dialogue among motivated educators suggests that ecocriticism is a field of study that helps to elevate critical thinking levels among students to be more informed about current issues on sustainability.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Sustainability, Integrated Language Learning, Societal Values, Positive Synergy

As a Literary Viewfinder, Ecocriticism is a Link to our Natural World

One of NASA's best is Captain James Lowell. He was selected to be on space missions such as Gemini 7 and Apollo 13. Lowell once said, "When you see Earth from the moon, you realize how fragile it is and just how limited the resources are. We're all astronauts on this spaceship Earth—about six or seven billion of us—and we have to work and live together." (December, 1968).

Looking back at what Captain Lowell said before may resonate with each of us at this time, especially since we are becoming more aware of the necessities in evaluating our relationships with our physical environment around us. This heightened level of awareness has become evident due to the ongoing effects of global warming today. People all over the world have been responsive to the aftermath of multiple globally linked natural disasters in recent years from volunteer work at disaster relief centers to coordinating more resilient means to prepare for emergencies in the near future. The message that has been trumpeted out to our attention rings out the word, "survival" in its most dire sense. In other words, there is sense of urgency about our future. Many do believe that the current stakes are up in order to ensure that our future civilizations will be able to continue to thrive on our only home we all know as "mother earth." (Gasper, J. & Reeves, A., 2011).

In the last three decades in response to our pressing ecological needs, the story ideas presented in ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study. Specifically, ecocriticism addresses how humans relate to the environment in literature. According to Loretta Johnson's article entitled, "Greening the library: the Fundamentals and the Future of Ecocriticism" (December, 2009), she indicates that

the literary lines drawn between humans and nature are fast becoming blurred. Instead, Johnson believes that "all literary works have taken on a more inclusive and richer meaningful context due to our more interactive exchange with the words and phrases that described a given place and setting in a human interest story."

To illustrate Johnson's viewpoint, the saga of a young heroine is not simply, the solo struggles of a woman in society from a gender-related perspective, but there is a fundamental factor that involves the connections made in the story about her physical surroundings and her family's well being. Questions that relate to a story may center on the crop failing due to drought in a rural village and move forward to address the fear a mother has that her children may go hungry. Another point that could be raised in a modern fictional literary work may relate to issues surrounding a broken marriage, but the positive aspect of this type of discussion is that these thoughts can be openly discussed under feel-safe conditions within a classroom environment without judgment or reprisal.

To bring this all home to us at the most basic level, the notion of hunger, for example, is a very meaningful concept for all us to grasp at an instance. There is no need to explain any further for we all know what it feels like to be hungry at one time or another. Even if there is no threat of starvation at the time of reading such a story, our minds can certainly imagine these situations because they represent what is "real" and universal in most cultures around the world.

These stories invite us to address a certain consciousness about what people say or do in a given situation or circumstance. According to Johnson's ecocritical stories, these types of inquiries bring us closer to what is meaningful for all us, in that, we begin to develop a critical sense of how we should view life as imagined from a character's point of view. This brings us closer to becoming more aware of life beyond our own comfort zone, and makes us stretch our minds to include other possibilities and potentials that may not be

evident upon first scrutiny. The next layer of building a better consciousness stems from interactive discussions and in sharing our opinions in a guided learning scenario, thus formulating and narrowing a better sense of that particular grain of truth that is portrayed in that story.

Defining Ecocriticism

The academic question relies on the given definition of ecocriticism, and what it may offer to classroom usage for ESL students. The "best" working definition comes from the *Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty. For Glotfelty, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment."

In the late 1990's, Glotfelty who was working on her dissertation on American women authors realized that her interest in American literature swayed over to literature written about nature and the environment. Her general intrigue by authors from Henry David Thoreau to Edward Abbey. They wrote avidly about nature making her realize that critical analysis of their work were not compiled at all. Even if there were other authors who wrote about the same topic on the environment, they did not know of each other. This was the beginning for Glotfelty to set up a bibliography of nature writers and scholars that later prompted meeting and discussions relating to topics on nature. Thus, the concept of ecocriticism was initiated by Glotfelty in this way (Winkler, 1996).

Camilo Gomides offers a more operational definition that is more discriminating as well as encompassing. She states that ecocriticism is "the field of inquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raises moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audience to live within a limit that will be binding over generations." Gomides tests this definition by filming about Amazonian deforestation and the results of such destruction to

biodiversity.

Given the scope of these definitions, the essence of ecocriticism does focus on one's sense of morals and how it can be tested in a given time about our environment. The general academic inquiry can be evaluated on human interactions that may produce a series of changes leading to a not so favorable possibility in creating permanent damage to our natural habitats, thus affecting all humankind. On some level, there is a call for environmental justice, and that we must weigh the pros and cons and offer a critique on the ways cultural norms may contribute to environmental degradation (Phillips, 2003).

More importantly, an instructor's focus should ascertain and communicate an understanding of what sustainability may mean to students on a general level. Even if we can assume that there may be a general consensus among students that all humans would want to live and endure during difficult and trying times for the sake of survival, we must take this a step further. As instructors, we may need to consider how to parcel out this information in a way that elicits a motivated student that is responsive to the environment instead of a student that is passively receiving information and not acting in accordance to his or her sense of consciousness. The ultimate goal for instructors is to have students connect with his or her environment from a personal point of view, thus creating a sense of ownership to this newfound critical knowledge (Glotfelty, 1996).

Connecting Literary Theory with Ecocriticism

Generally speaking, literary theory examines the relations between the writers, texts, and the world as the social sphere; and in comparison, ecocriticism expands this idea of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. Despite the broad inquiry and disparate levels of sophisticated and scholarly discussions in this new field of inquiry, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human

culture is connected to the physical world. We are, indeed, affected by our physical world around us, and our conscious and/or unconscious actions do affect our world around us in a global manner without question (Phillips, 2003).

Succinctly, the ideals of ecocriticism takes in all realms of interconnections between nature and culture, specifically, the cultural artifacts of languages and literature (Rueckert, 1996). If one can metaphorically reduce ecocriticism in a critical stance, it is basically one foot in the world of literature, and the other on earth-centered studies on sustainability. From a theoretical point of view, scholars agree that ecocriticism negotiates between what is human and non-human (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996).

Wangari Maathai. 2004 Nobel Prize Winner and African Ecocritism

One of the greatest boost to ecocritism in the study of continent literature is largely due to dynamic efforts of Professor Wangari Maathai. She has been dedicated in her efforts in preventing deforestation by planting hundreds of trees in her beloved country of Kenya.

Although, Professor Maathai who is not known for her literary works, except for several "green" poems, has been the tour de force on savings trees for over three decades through her concerted political activism. Her strong voice on advocating the rights of forests, and the role of women in Africa is phenomenal according to Evan Mawangi in *The Nation of Nairobi*, (October 24, 2004).

Beyond human love found in romance novels and poetry of the English Renaissance literature, the African literary works center on the environment as a politically charged message for peace and harmony between humans and the environment. If the forests were to be greening sanctuaries for freedom fighters and ecological minded advocates, then nature itself seemed to presage and support these

armed and spiritual struggles to save the last vestiges of the family social values that typify an African village. Perhaps, these writings display the richness of a forest and its natural wildness to avoid the heat of a scorching African sun. This may have inspired other African writers and poets in the advent of ecocriticism according to Mawangi (2004).

Kristina Rungano's Contribution to Ecocriticism

Another example is the Zimbabwean poet Kristina Rungano. She invokes the environment in the form of grass, tress, butterflies, and the weather to comment on the political and social issues facing the nation. She deftly underlines the possibilities of the ending of the prevailing confusion of our natural world. Rungano infuses her work with words that hide the fact that forests are something that can be destroyed for the sake of the advancement of civilization. In her poetry entitled, "A Storm is Brewing," Rungano deploys images of turmoil succeeded by serenity from nature to underscore the fact that the African government wouldn't harm us, despite the enigma it generates to counter preservation efforts for economic gains.

Even if African literature and poetry blindly celebrate the forests, there is a stronger element in these writings among ecocritics that such forests are most certainly the life-giving natural forms on earth. In fact, the forests can sustain human development as a whole, and its liberation from self-destruction. Ecocritics agree at a general level that a forest, for example, is not merely a place for hiding, but a real and safe place of refuge for humans and all other creatures in this African environment of great biodiversity. At this level of understanding, the discussion surrounding ecocriticism is becoming more apparent to recent scholars in this field of interest. (Mawangi, 2004).

Ecocriticism Reaches Back into Historical Writings

Expanding the definition of ecocritical studies would include English renaissance literature offered by the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). The Association states that, "ecocriticism is the relationship between literary, cultural artifacts and the natural environment. Such works in "nature" refer primarily to human behavior or specifically to the question of ontological origins for mankind, a more philosophical reference to unanswerable questions of human existence itself.

After two decades in the nineteenth and twentieth century critical studies, ecocritical treatment of texts from earlier periods are beginning to accumulate, thus generating a new and provocative direction for early modern studies in this field of inquiry. Accordingly to Karen Raber, in her ecocritical scholarly essay, she has maintained that there was always a rich array of English Renaissance material that illustrates the human connection with nature. She asserts that in the last two decades of ecostudies, a more careful evaluation of historical nuances have prompted the theorizing of environmentalism in this literary context and form. Such prominent literary works by Shakespeare, Marvell, and Traherne, and even citing the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings celebrate nature, pastoral nostalgia, and the search for wilderness, and the sensitivity to non-human life in the late Renaissance period.

There are many publications that rein in the notion of ecocriticism in old English material. For one, Gabriel Egan's *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (2006), analyzes Shakespeare's plays alongside patterns of recent ecological crisis, advances in genetics, geology, and nuclear fission. She further considers the context of Shakespeare's own world understanding in contrast to current times, and evaluates his humor, dietary regime, and even his interest in astrology.

Another notable example is Linda Woodbridge's writings in

“Green Shakespeare” taken from her book, *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking* (1994). Woodbridge strongly presents her views that the consequence of references to the notion of “state” in Shakespeare’s plays are a profound responsive to organic nature, and a resistance to deforestation, urbanization, enclosure, and other threats to the natural world.

Robert N. Watson’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s *As you like it* is clearly representative of his desire for simple unification with nature. Watson’s interpretation states that “it is the underlying tone of the language used by Shakespeare.” In the section, “As you liken it: Simile in the Wilderness,” *ShakeS 56* (2003), 79-82, as incorporated into his *Back to Nature I*, Watson proposes that Shakespeare’s intent was his cultural quest for the truth as found hidden in the language of his plays.

There are many more authorships in this vein of inquiry for Shakespeare’s works as well as contributions made in such writings found in E. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1608-1674) to F. Andrew Marvell poetry (1621-1678). Understandably, this new field of ecocriticism did turn to familiar literary figures like Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and Marvell, and the potential to explore the meanings within their works are remarkable and ongoing by scholars in this field. There is still so much to explore, and such promise in critically challenging work may stem from efforts evaluating historical records for land use, farming, husbandry practices, and rural past times. In fact, there are multiple treatises, farming manuals, surveys, and other cultural productions that can form the basis for a new perspective on how early modern civilization from all classes and regions engaged with the diversity in the landscape of our physical environments (Raber, 2009).

The Backbone of Ecocriticism is the Narrative

"We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative," (Hardy, 1968, p. 5). Fundamentally, narratives are the central means in which people give meaning to their lives across time. This leads us to the supposition that narratives have gained increasing stature outside the field of literature, and provide a rich source of data in several areas of linguistics, particularly with L1 acquisition, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and language education (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Chafe, 1980; Johnstone, 1996; Tannen, 1980, 1982, 1993)

To illustrate how ecocriticism may be evaluated through the interdisciplinary narrative study, we must consider the focus on the untold stories people tell about their own lives (Bruner, 1990, Linde, 1993, Ochs, 1997; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, Sarbin, 1986). The significance of narratives in human culture can be seen from the fact that written culture seeks their origins in myths that are recorded for posterity. Historians then begin to inscribe the achievements of their forefathers and the progress of their nation as shown to those in the present so that these cultural memories are preserved as historical stories in novel or short story forms.

In short, the narratives are largely based on cause-and-effect relationships that are generally applied to sequences of chronological events. To illustrate this with a biological metaphor, a nation can be talked about in an explanatory manner as a birth, maturity and demise of a nation in history. This example can be utilized to show that these series of contingencies have resulted in a particulate state of being (Ochs, 1997).

Narrative theory or Naratology is a study of narratives as a genre, and it is in fact, a subset of study in literature. As a study, the narrative forms are bound by the patterns of speech acts (Fludernik, 2009). Thus, it is the narrator who defines everything from the point

of view to the characterization of people in a given sequence of events. This creates a form where the telling of a story for an audience is commonly referred to as a narrative. There is a binary effect of the speech patterns found in the narrative, and the product of the narrative itself, but the importance of a given narrative is the components of the story itself.

Ecocriticism is More Accepted since 1990

In the rapidly changing theoretical approach of literary study ecocriticism grows out of this same tradition of literature, and this is the point where writers explore the local or global, the material or physical, or the historical or natural history in the context of a work of art. Interdisciplinary studies such as the natural sciences, cultural and even social studies invoke and revolve around environmental studies. Although, the word, "ecocriticism" is a subject heading in the Library of Congress under the list of "Authorities" in 2002, it has not yet appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (Johnson, 2009).

Since 1990, the keyword search for "ecocriticism" in the MLA Bibliography online produces 442 hits, three-quarters started since 2001. Nowadays, ecocriticism has entered academic course lists worldwide, along with the creation of interdisciplinary academic faculty positions to teach them. (Johnson, 2009) Thus, the evidence of new practices in this field of study have produced some viable leads in bringing important works on the relationship between culture and nature, and there are benefits in presenting these literary works for second language learners.

Using Literary Texts and Visual Media to Integrate Language Skills for ESL Learners

Using literature as content provides an ideal way to integrate the development of the four basic skills. Students in this kind of learning environment are greatly encouraged to carefully examine the literary

text through guided interpretations by the instructor.

In teaching the concept of ecocriticism, the challenge for the students is to identify the meaning that draws upon any and all references to nature. In this way, the students must focus in developing their reading skills to assess the characters in a given story by the relationship each of them hold with nature or his/her environment. In bringing this to the foreground of teaching points, the student is allowed to enhance their interpretative skills by negotiating the meaning behind the words in a given text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

In a given story, the dialogue or the narrative provides the point of view from the interaction each character has with each other, and how they address their physical environment in either a positive or negative manner. Identifying the elements or decisions that people make could potentially cause the destruction of an ecological habitat due to pressing economic needs for urbanization. In these stories, there are "hot button" issues that boil down to the social values that surface when confronted with what is right for everyone. In a sense, there is a tug-of-war between ecological views and how certain decisions only benefit a few from a financial standpoint.

True Life Experiences Translated into Film

The 1996 drama and comedic film, *Fly Away Home* is an example of an ecocritical story loosely based on the real-life experiences of Bill Lishman, a Canadian inventor, artist, and ultralight aircraft hobbyist. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Lishman openly wondered whether geese and similar birds could be taught new migration patterns by following an ultralight aircraft onto which they have imprinted. After several attempts, logical and bureaucratic setbacks, Lishman was successful in leading a flock of Canadian Geese on a winter migration from Ontario, Canada to Northern Virginia in the United States.

In the film version, the story was re-worked to star a young teenage girl who lost her mother in car accident in New Zealand. Although she survives this terrible accident, the young girl is reluctantly reunited with her father whom her mother divorced years ago in Canada. Overcoming the grief she felt for her mother, and in trying to fit into her father's lifestyle in Canada, the beginning of the story provides a chance for viewers to identify with a real life crisis.

After a construction crew destroys part of a nearby forest close to the girl's new home, she unwittingly discovered some un-hatched eggs. She then brings them home in a mission to save these eggs, and for incubation under an illuminating bulb in a barnyard. Soon thereafter, the hatching of these young geese caused them to imprint on her. This young teenage girl suddenly finds herself being in the position to nurture the geese as their substitute mother, but she doesn't mind this at all for it gives her a purpose in life.

While the story reveals the sensitive and estranged feelings for this teenager's inventor-artist father, his relatives and close friends, there is the vital element ecocritics can readily identify with in this story. This is the saving of the young geese from the destruction of its natural habitat and the young girl's connection to nature.

The father being concerned about reuniting with his daughter somehow resolves these personal issues by trying to help his daughter deal with the imprinting of these geese on her. He then focuses on designing a homemade ultra aircraft in which he teaches his daughter to fly. After re-negotiating their father-daughter relationship, the girl and her father both plan a trip to fly the geese in areas where they would most likely go for the winter, and connect with their natural habitats.

The most endearing part of this story was to show the extent human beings would create an opportunity to ensure the survival of wild animals. In this way, there is a celebration or a kind of victory over developers and urbanization toward the ending of the film. It is

these struggles that the characters were able to overcome that uplift us on a spiritual level. Thus, bringing us closer to realizing how much we cherish our natural habitat and the animals that live among us. This is the "blurring" mentioned by Johnson who suggested the natural links between man and nature in her ecocritical analysis for the future. Whether these ecocritical stories are based on true life experiences or not, most students can walk away with a heightened level of critical thinking based on ordinary circumstances that propels someone to make the extraordinary happen just for the sake of preserving nature at all costs.

Conclusion

Literary theory in a strict sense is the systematic study of what literature is all about, and this includes the methods for analyzing literature in its purest form. Contemporary theorists and literary scholars may differ in their opinions. Most turn to the reference that "literature is any use of language," but the most pressing question is how they define a "literary text." Other agree with the basic interpretation of literary theory is based on "interpretation" of the text whether it be historical documents to popular fiction as a range of choices for evaluation and study.

Currently, the modern sense of "literary theory" has grown to differing branches of study from aestheticism, American pragmatism, reader-response criticism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, comparative literature, gender, structuralism to name a few. While the emergence of these theories date back from the early 1950's, the current development of ecocritical theory is entering into varying influential ways of critical thinking. This may well be inclusive of content-based subjects such as history, culture, sociology, psychology, science and technology, politics, economics, religion, anthropology as well as television, radio and forms of media-related broadcasts.

The fundamental human to environment exchanges within the global realm of literature has a call to duty in recent years. This is what brings ecocriticism to the forefront of current discussions within literary circles. More specifically, the defining stance for educators is to take a more cooperative outlook with the environment in terms of renewal resources.

One can say that it is a new attitude that revolves around the concept of sustainability that merges into this new literature, but the direction that contemporary writers are taking directs the community to be more regenerative. Mostly, it is to focus on our own human existence in harmony with nature so that there is chance to continue beyond the next century. In this regard, ecocriticism is the stem of a larger branch of literary works that employs students and educators alike to consider not just the cultural meanings embedded into the works, but to understand the essential physical connections with our real world and our relationship with nature. In this way, the power and strength of the written word continues to inspire us to an even greater awareness with a critical eye in connection with our natural world.

Since we cannot blindsides ourselves into thinking that our world will always be there for us, we should continue to take steps to make a more positive synergistic changes in our daily lives. The richness of literary works based on ecocriticism brings us to the heart of matter for evaluation of literature today. Through these writings by authors focused on sustainability issues, the language that these words and phrases espoused can help us ignite our passion for living a life that is not only measured by progress and technology, but our undying love of our world and nature itself.

More information: Journals and Websites

The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) is an invaluable source for learners of ecocriticism since 1992.

On its website, ASLE “seeks to facilitate interdisciplinary and innovative approaches to the study of nature and culture through forms such as “nature writing, art, ecocritical scholarship, pedagogy, science writing, poetry, music, creative writing, and film, among other forms.”

Since its development as a field of study, ASLE’s first print bibliography, *Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment: ISLE Bibliography, 1990-1993*, ed. By Zita Ingham and Ron Steffens, includes 120 pages of works pertaining to ecocriticism. Other resources available are the ecocritical library that provides links to articles and online texts; announcements about professional events and conferences. There is also *Handbook on Graduate Study in Literature and the Environment* that is essentially a directory of colleges and universities in the United States with graduate programs and degrees in environmental sciences, environmental literature, and human ecology.

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