

Ecocriticism & Environmental Education

What is Ecocriticism?

At its core ecocriticism can be defined as the study between literature and the physical environment. More specifically, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies - ecocriticism is looking at the literature in our lives through 'nature-coloured' glasses. Educators can use the lens of ecocriticism to inform their EE teaching practice, including what books they use in their classrooms.

Ecoliterary Texts

Ecoliterary texts are texts that foster a love for the environment. They are characterized by scientific validity and credibility, as well as an ability to educate readers in a way that establishes and promotes an ecological affinity for other species, the landscape, and the environment as a whole.

Ecoliterary texts have four defining characteristics:

1. The nonhuman world is present in the book, and is not used simply as a backdrop.
2. The human interest is not the only legitimate interest in the text.
3. Human accountability toward the environment is evident in the book.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant is implicit in the text.

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Ecocritical Teachers

Ecocritical teachers use ecocriticism in their teaching practice to inform:

1. What resources they use, &
2. How those resources are used

They ask questions like...

- How is nature represented in this poem? (hostile, home, or commodity, for example)
- What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? (our environment influences our culture, human built systems, and our day to day lives, is this present in the book?)
- How do our metaphors of the land in this text influence the way we treat it? (Is nature presented as a commodity and thus something to be used for human benefit, or is it presented as something to be protected and cared for? Calling someone a dog as an insult implies that dogs are lesser than humans and thus we do not have to treat them with the same respect).
- How is nature represented in this book?
- How has the concept of nature changed over time and how has this change influenced the representation of nature in children's literature? (Nature has been presented in many ways throughout history, including as a hostile entity, a resource to be exploited/conquered, our home which needs to be protected, etc).
- How is the setting of the play/film/text related to the environment?
- How do we see issues of environmental disaster and crises reflected in popular culture and literary works? (Are they the result of human exploitation and climate change, or acts of god?)
- How are animals represented in this text and what is their relationship to humans? (Are they domesticated, wild, commodified, etc).

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They ask questions like...

- How do the roles or representations of men and women towards the environment differ in this play/film/text/etc? (Women are often portrayed as caregivers while men are portrayed as conquerors. This can lead to different understandings of how nature should be treated between the genders).
- Where is the environment placed in the power hierarchy? (Is the environment portrayed as below, equal to, or above humankind? Does nature have value, does nature have agency?).
- How is nature empowered or oppressed in this work? (Are animals in zoos and on farms portrayed as content, or unhappy? Do they have a voice that reflects their truth?)
- What parallels can be drawn between the sufferings and oppression of groups of people (women, minorities, immigrants, etc.) and treatment of the land?
- What political/economic systems, views, and values regarding the environment are present in the text? (Do the morals in the book fit within current capitalist systems and promote consumerism, or break free of them?)
- Are humans held accountable for their behaviors towards the environment? (Is the relationship between resource extraction, environmental degradation, and human consumerism shown?)
- How are nature or animals portrayed? (Do they have a voice? Do they have agency?)
- What language is used in the text to describe animals and the environment? (Chick vs. Poultry, Cattle vs. Cows).
- What discussions about the environment can I have with students about this book?