

ECOCRITICISM – INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT

UDC 502.12

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Abstract. *As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, ecocriticism started developing in the 1990s. In the initial phase particularly, it was a meeting place of American critics dealing exclusively with American literature. Being serious proponents of their theory and trying to demonstrate and enable the verification of their results, ecocritics have founded their association ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) and their journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment).*

The word ecocriticism is a semineologism. Eco is short of ecology, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. These are obviously interdisciplinary studies, unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. That unusual (interdisciplinary) combination of the physical and the spiritual can be seen in some of the terms used in ecology and ecocriticism, which both have the same aim: to contribute to the preservation and survival of man.

Key Words: *Ecocriticism, Ecology, Literary Criticism*

As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, ecocriticism started developing in the 1990s. In the initial phase particularly, it was a meeting place of American critics dealing exclusively with American literature. Being serious proponents of their theory and trying to demonstrate and enable the verification of their results, ecocritics have founded their association ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) and their journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment).

Undeniable development and establishing of this kind of criticism can be supported by numerous contributions in some other journals as well as by an attempt at systematizing the published articles and defining an emerging ecocritical canon done in 1996 by Cheryl Glotfelty, editor of *The Ecocritical Reader*. Apart from this, a series of major professional conferences has been held since 1995. Although the first conference was an assem-

bly of American critics only, every next conference was gaining in internationalism. ASLE now numbers about 750 members in different parts of the world. It is also important to note that ecocriticism is the young people commitment which is the fact that stresses the fervor and the potential longevity of this humanistic discipline, still insufficiently founded. Lawrence Buell, one of the most distinguished and persistent ecocritics notes that at the first national meeting in 1995 the median age of participants was well under 35.¹

The word *ecocriticism* is a semineologism.² *Eco* is short of *ecology*, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. These are obviously interdisciplinary studies, unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. The domain of ecocriticism is very broad because it is not limited to any literary genre. The most widely known ecocritics, apart from the afore-mentioned Lawrence Buell and Cheryl Glotfelty, are Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, Suellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love.

It is appropriate here to stress that it was only in the 1990s that ecocriticism emerged as a separate discipline although it is a fact that the relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to literary critics.³ This interest, both at the basic scientific level and in the metaphorical form in literature, can be explained in two ways: 1. man always exists *within* some natural environment or, according to Buell, there cannot be *is* without *where*,⁴ and 2. the last decade of the twentieth century was the time when it became obvious that the greatest problem of the twenty-first century would be the survival of the Earth. The first explanation is concerned with man's essential quest for personal identity or with his need and failure to find his roots. That is the reason why he is a life-long wanderer, on the one hand, and why he is always identified with the familiar physical and cultural environment, on the other.⁵ The latter explanation results from the fact that man feels *vitally* threatened in the ecologically degraded world. Over-exploitation of natural resources and man's disregard of the air, water and soil that sustain him have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet (Earth). The end of the twentieth century showed clearly that *everyone* had to do something to help the Earth survive. Ecocriticism is one of the ways in which humanists fight for the world in which they live. The reflection of that difficult struggle in the area of culture and spirit speaks for the urgency of action or the urgent need to do something in this respect.

¹ Buell, Lawrence: 'Letter' in Forum on Literatures of the Environment, *The Modern Language Association of America*, 1999, p. 1091

² *Ibid.*, p. 1091

³ As early as 1986 L. Buell shrewdly noted in his *New England Literary Culture. From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 292) that there was something that could be called a literary-ecological trait of New England.

⁴ Vukčević, Radojka: Američka književnost na Harvardu. Intervju sa Lorensom Bjuelom, *Zbornik Matice srpske za književnost i jezik*, Knj. LII, Sv. 1/2004, str. 215

⁵ According to L. Buell (*Op. cit.*, p. 300) the cultural landscape that New England regional prose portrays is an *absence*.

This unusual (interdisciplinary) combination of the physical and the spiritual can be seen in some of the terms used in ecology and ecocriticism, which both have the same aim: to preserve the *where* without which there cannot be *is* or the survival of man. Two different and distinct disciplines, ecology and literary criticism, are combined in order to restore the Earth's health, which was lost owing to man's wrongdoing. It should be noted that ecocriticism is still not a unified approach. It is rather an area of diverse and overlapping projects and disciplines. This overlapping can be seen in some of the terms that they use:

Table 1. Ecological Terms as a Source of Ecocriticism and Language Study

Ecology	Ecocriticism and language study
ecology	deep ecology
physical environment	environmental imagination reimagination
biodiversity	global environmental culture environmental unconscious
endangered species	ecocultural habitat
pollution	toxic discourse literary hazards language pollution

Ecology is the science that studies the relationships between living organisms (biotic component) and their physical environment (abiotic component). In other words, ecology is concerned with the living organisms in their natural environment. Although it is not explicitly stated here, ecology is anthropocentric whereas deep ecology originating from the endeavor to promote life as such is biocentric and stresses the fact that man is only one part in a huge and complex life net in nature in which everything has a certain value. That is why man has to realize that he is not allowed and entitled to reduce the richness and variety of the living world except for the satisfaction of his basic needs.

The term *deep ecology* was coined by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, in 1973. *Deep* as an adjective denotes something that is opposite to *shallow*, *obvious* or *superficial*. Naess wanted "to go beyond the factual level of ecology as a science to a deeper level of self-awareness and 'Earth wisdom'" ⁶ It is one's personal development which is stressed here, but, seemingly paradoxically, it involves his concern for both living and non-living world. Thus, man broadens the narrow limits within which he has built the assumptions and values of his culture. Deep ecology emphasizes the role of the individual who is invited to behave as a citizen of the World and Earth and to take responsibility for it. It is important to see that this philosophy involves *all* the aspects of human life and thought. The inspirational quality of such an approach is enormous and the Deep Ecology Movement is gaining in influence year by year, particularly in America. It is holistic and it involves the acknowledged unity of man and all the creatures and the environment around

⁶ Porritt, J. and Winner, D.: *The Coming of the Greens* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988, p. 235)

him. This can be seen in the summary of the Deep Ecology principles formulated by Arne Naess (Norwegian) and George Sessions (American):

1. The well-being and flourishing of non-human life on Earth have value in themselves, independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life-forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy *vital* needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs would be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating *life quality* rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation either directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.⁷

Of these eight statements, statements 6 and 8 are particularly important because they call for action. Everyone has to change their anthropocentric attitudes into biocentric attitudes which are centered around any life on Earth. This change is not easy to carry out. The first step is individual, man should change his own way of life and thinking, but the next step involves going beyond oneself, and not only verbally. Action is necessary. Ecocriticism, a kind of literary criticism, complies with these principles. Lawrence Buell expresses his devotion to the world of nature, to the unification of everything in the world and the practice of promoting man's physical environment – and all that in the field of literature and literary criticism.

The second term mentioned that is important for both ecology and ecocriticism is *physical environment*. Space, or what Buell terms *the where*, is a precondition of any existence. According to the *Collins Dictionary of Environmental Science* it is "the combination of external conditions that influence the life of individual organisms",⁸ or, more specifically, it "comprises the non-living, abiotic components (physical and chemical) and the inter-relationships with other living, biotic components."⁹ Alan Gilpin is even more specific in defining the physical environment as including "the built environment, the natural environment, and all natural resources, including air, land and water."¹⁰ Gilpin also quotes a section of the European Union definition of the environment as "the combi-

⁷ Ibid., p.235

⁸ Jones, G. et al.: *Collins Dictionary of Environmental Science* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990, p. 145)

⁹ Ibid., p. 145

¹⁰ Gilpin, Alan: *Dictionary of Environment and Sustainable Development* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1996, p. 74)

nation of elements whose complex interrelationships make up the settings, the surroundings and the conditions of life of the individual and of society, *as they are or as they are felt*"¹¹ This definition is important because it pinpoints three things. First, it puts an emphasis on inter-relationships, on mutual interdependence of all the elements comprising one human life. Second, it is an invitation to the individual to stop ignoring the things and beings that are not of immediate concern to him because modern times continually deny that misconception. And finally, the third important dimension of this definition is subjectivity in assessing one's environment. Where someone lives is not only an objective fact. How one feels about that environment is an equally important fact. It is undoubtedly dependent upon objective parameters but its intermixing with man's spirituality must be taken into account because the end-product is a new and objective entity. A step further is Lawrence Buell's boldly coined phrase *environmental imagination* referring to how the physical environment shapes imagination. Studying the literary culture of New England in the USA, he noticed that there is something that could be called "the New England landscape and ethos."¹² This definition shows that the physical environment can be combined with an attitude indicating that there is "the cultural geography of a region"¹³ This is the reason why there is the *urban imagination* or *island imagination*. The *where* influences the *is* in the spiritual way.

The third term in the table, *biodiversity*, is closely related to the fourth one, *endangered species*. Biodiversity is the abbreviation of *biological diversity*, or diversity of the species in a habitat. Biodiversity is a matter of fact in nature. Owing to planned or collateral interventions of man, a lot of plant and animal species have been eradicated and an equal number of other species have been added to the list of endangered species. Extinction is a natural process but it is alarmingly accelerated because of man's activities. Man is rarely satisfied with the satisfaction of his vital needs, as advised by the Deep Ecology principles. Immoderate economic schemes and constant economic growth are the reason why man often destroys the world in which he lives. "It has been claimed that of all human extinctions which have occurred since 1600 AD, 75% of the mammal extinctions and 66% of avian extinctions can be directly attributed to human activity."¹⁴ These figures mainly refer to the largest and hence visible plant and animal species. The number of small and totally unknown species, however, have suffered at least as great an extinction rate.

Things have been similar in culture or cultures as well. Namely, the small community cultures get increasingly isolated or even extinct. The world trends of the development and domination of "great" cultures have given rise to the extinction of a lot of "small" cultures so that the cultural diversity reduction occurs. Eco-definitions can apparently be used for culture as well.

Language diversity is also threatened. More than half of the 6, 000 languages existing on Earth are expected to disappear during the century, warns the UNESCO. In 2005,

¹¹ Ibid., p. 74., underlined by J.T.

¹² Buell, Lawrence: *New England Literary Culture. From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 283)

¹³ Ibid., p. 304. This corresponds to the definition of *environmental perception* in *Collins Dictionary of Environmental Science*, p. 149

¹⁴ Jones, G.: Op.cit., p.156

Buell is aware of the English language dominance in the world but he questions Anglo-globalism, the assumption that this monolingual scheme is capable of expressing everything. English has, for understandable political and linguistic reasons, become superior to other languages and this is what Buell calls a *literary hazard*. The word *hazard* is usually associated with environmental protection and not with linguistics or literature. The urgency of the situation, however, has changed even that. Buell states that English is not capable of expressing everything. Other languages can have more possibilities of expression (e.g. English lacks the distinction between the intimate and formal second person singular or kinship distinctions between mother's family and father's family).¹⁵ Therefore, English as the global language destroys the desirable language diversity in the world.

Habitat modification is another important cause of extinction. The changed attitude towards soil involving the greater use of herbicides and pesticides has contributed to the extinction of numerous species or to reduced biodiversity. It is daunting that "for every one species which becomes extinct, approximately 30 other dependent species move into the 'at risk' category."¹⁶ At the biological and ecological level, these facts have led to the attempt at preserving the endangered species and establishing the protected areas. This is, however, not enough. Action must be much broader and the whole society and all the individuals must be changed.

The issue of habitat shows that man is different from other living beings. Plants and animals can directly be endangered by the change of habitat. Humans are much more mobile. Metaphorically, they lack roots; hence their continual quest for something firm and whole. The positive aspect of man's physical mobility, however, is gaining a broader insight into other cultures and people. Boundaries get erased and cultures merge. Man becomes a citizen of the planet or a citizen of the world ecosystem. The world ecosystem is the term that is usually not used although, the boundaries of an ecosystem being arbitrary, it is theoretically possible if all the boundaries are removed. This might be the solution: only by global participation in everything that exists can man prevent his own extinction. The term *global environmental culture* denotes the ultimate broadening of one's insights and it ultimately leads to *environmental unconscious* in which concern for space anywhere in the world becomes crucial. Even literature and literary criticism serve that end. Ecocriticism is therefore part of general globalization in the world. At the level of creation, the creator's consciousness is called for. Out of his *unconscious* he moves towards the conscious effort to create a work of art whose structure will help the formation of the *unconscious* in the recipient or *spatial unconscious* in the case of ecocriticism. As a sort of literary interpretation ecocriticism adds a dimension that the average reader might have missed – that man together with his immediate environment or space is part of the whole human race whose space must be protected and preserved. In other words, at the consciousness-unconsciousness level, it is necessary to question or change one's attitudes to nature and all the other living beings – it is necessary to accept the principles of Deep Ecology and create *reimagination*. By doing this, one comes to a broad term *ecocultural habitat* which is a combination of the physical and social, individual and global.

¹⁵ Buell, L.: *The Future of English Literature Studies in an Age of Globalization*, 2005

¹⁶ Jones, G., Op. cit., p. 156-7

The last of the ecology terms from the table, *pollution* or *polluting*, cannot be avoided in any talk about man's environment today. Hazardous waste and toxic substances discharges give rise to the changes in the biosphere which are "reflected in the impaired performance, reduced growth, lowered reproductive capacity and ultimately the death of individual organisms".¹⁷ Such a result or outcome of overconsumption or exhaustion of natural resources, mentioned in this paper in the discussion about the physical environment, has also given rise to a fierce fight in the areas like literature and linguistics, which have traditionally been regarded as "useless" and unchanging. W.H. Auden's famous line that "poetry makes nothing happen"¹⁸ cannot be true at the time when man and his physical environment are vitally endangered. *Poetry* or literary production in general must become the means "to undo the folded lie/ The romantic lie in the brain/ Of the sensual man-in-the-street/ And the lie of Authority/ Whose buildings grope the sky:/ There is no such thing as the State/ And no one exists alone."¹⁹ Although taken out of a completely different context, these lines can equally be applied to the conservation of the environment in which national and administrative boundaries mean nothing. Pollution crosses the borders without passports. Following the post-structural and interdisciplinary approaches, the new trends in literature, literary criticism and language studies show that one discipline can be used (formerly considered abused) by some other discipline for the realization of its ends. On the one hand, structuralist approaches have already exhausted their possibilities so that they have become too narrow for inventive analysts. On the other hand, man's fear of his own extinction has moved the borders of disinterested academism. The terms reserved previously for environmental protection have thus appeared in unusual combinations: *toxic discourse*, *literary hazards* or *language pollution*. The last two terms refer to language – the first of these has already been explained in connection to biodiversity. As for language pollution, it is defined by Dragan Veselinović as the process of uncritical import of new lexical units or words and new syntagmatic or syntactic structures from other languages, notably English.²⁰ It must be admitted though that this process is twofold: on the one hand, it means enrichment because the new terms follow the appearance of new reality formerly non-existent in that language. In that case it is easier to reach for the foreign words and phonically domesticate them. This same process, however, can be considered pollution when the host language has the equivalents which are pushed aside because of the foreign words.

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¹⁷ Jones, G.: Op. cit., p. 345

¹⁸ Auden, W.H.: In Memory of W.B. Yeats, in Mendelson, Edward: *W.H. Auden. Selected Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, p. 88

¹⁹ Auden, W. H.: September 1, 1939, in Mendelson, E.: Op. cit., p. 82

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EKOKRITIKA – INTERDISCIPLINARNO PROUČAVANJE KNJIŽEVNOSTI I ŽIVOTNE SREDINE

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Kao poseban pokret ili škola književne kritike, ekokritika je počela da se razvija tek devedesetih godina dvadesetog veka. Naročito u početnoj fazi, ona je bila stecište isključivo američkih kritičara i bila je ograničena na bavljenje američkom književnošću. Kao ozbiljni zagovornici svoje teorije, koji pretenduju na prikazivanje i verifikaciju svojih rezultata, ekokritičari su osnovali svoju organizaciju ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment – Društvo za proučavanje književnosti i životne sredine), ali i svoj stručni časopis ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment – Interdisciplinarno proučavanje književnosti i životne sredine).

Sama reč ekokritika predstavlja neku vrstu poluneologizma. Prefiks eko- predstavlja skraćenicu za ekologija, koja za predmet svog interesovanja ima proučavanje međusobnih odnosa svih živih bića u njihovom prirodnom okruženju, kao i njihove odnose i veze sa tim istim okruženjem. Reč je oA proučavanju književnosti i životne sredine tj. ekokritika proučava kako se u književnosti ili književnim delima reflektuju odnosi čoveka i fizičke sredine u kojoj on živi. Reč je, očigledno, o interdisciplinarnom proučavanju, koje predstavlja neuobičajeno kombinovanje jedne prirodne i jedne humanističke discipline. Taj neverovatan spoj (ili interdisciplinarnost) fizičkog i duhovnog može se videti u terminologiji dve nauke, ekologije i ekokritike, koje se udružuju u cilju očuvanja i opstanka čoveka.

Ključne reči: *ekokritika, ekologija, književna kritika*