

## Questions to Consider When Thinking About Sustainability and the Humanities\*

“Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just 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-centered approach to literary studies.” *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996)

- What is considered nature/natural in the text? What is considered culture/unnatural in the text? Are the lines between nature and culture firm or blurred?
- What role(s) does the setting play in the text? How does setting create the mood? Is nature a reflection of the character’s emotions (pathetic fallacy)?
- How are representations of nature/culture presented?
  - Does the text personify nature, use (extended) metaphor, simile, and/or symbolism? Pathetic fallacy? What kind of language is used? Examine the language choice: what are the word’s denotations and connotations?
  - Does the text represent nature in spiritual or chaotic terms (sublime)?
  - Does the text use characteristics connected with gender (masculine/feminine), class, race, (dis)ability, sexuality to describe nature? Is nature a force to be conquered and controlled? An inscrutable Other?
- What does the text value? Are the text’s values consistent with ecological understanding? How so? Why not?
  - What ideology best describes the text’s values? Consider, for example: radical, conservative, liberal, neoliberal, feminist, (post)colonial, Marxist, etc.
  - Do the representations assume nature has agency?
  - Do the representations assume human control and/or center human activity/agency?
  - Is the representation *anthropocentric* (human centered), *biocentric* (nonhuman species equally valuable to human), or *ecocentric* (nature/nonhuman centered)?
  - What do the representations (metaphor, personification, symbolism, description of setting, etc.) say about the way we or other individuals treat or value nature/the land?
- Do different writers/artists represent nature differently? How so? Why so?
  - How might these differences be influenced by culture/historical context (time period, gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, etc.)? Different ideological foundations?
- What key American myths/symbols related to the American landscape does the text employ? Consider: frontier, virgin/undiscovered land, narrative of discovery, narrative of exceptionalism.
- How does the text encourage or discourage sustainable/environmental practices?
- How does the text reflect contemporary discussions of the environment? How does the text intervene in contemporary discussion of the environment?
- Is the text ecologically accurate? What bearing does the science of ecology have on the text?
- How might science benefit from literary/historical/cultural analysis?

\*Questions adopted from *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, editors.

- **Sit Spot Writing:** students select a location “in nature” they can access regularly. Students determine and explain what constitutes “in nature.”
  - Assign “sit spot” writing. Example: sit in your place for at least 15 minutes every day for two weeks. While you sit, unplug from all media. Use your notebook to record all of your observations about your spot.
  - Assign research related the location: what is the history of this space? What local flora and fauna should be there? What actual flora and fauna are there? Who has historically owned the land?
  - Students create individual, informal journals as well as formal writing based on their sit spot observations and research.
  
- **Service-Learning Project:** students (or instructor) select an ecologically-based service-learning project to encourage civic engagement on environmental issues using humanities skills. Possible projects:
  - Letters to the editor (persuasive writing/research) about a local issue (food security, pesticide use, pipeline proposal, green space, dune/beach replenishment, etc.).
  - Art or media based public service announcement or awareness campaign (e.g. about cafeteria food waste, pollution, etc.).
  - Community partner: work with a community partner with an ecological focus to conduct needed research, create an ad campaign, or assist with some other project.
  
- **Creative Writing Zine:** students write and produce a zine (electronic or print) based on creative writing produced for the class. Select a broad or specific ecological theme.
  
- **Write and/or Perform Ecologically-Theme Play/Dance/Poetry Slam:** work individually or across classes to write and/or produce an ecologically themed event.
  
- **Write Local Ecological History:** research and publish (electronic or print) the ecological history of one of your local communities. Focus on the three pillars of sustainability: culture, economics and the environment.
  
- **Literary/Cultural Analysis:** create or tweak existing reading/writing assignments to incorporate ecological analysis; create or tweak existing assignments to incorporate media (film, blogs, advertising, music/lyrics) and analysis from an ecological perspective.

**Additional Examples/Resources:**

- “Environment and Food” section of the Zinn Education Project’s *Teaching A People’s History*: <https://zinnedproject.org/teaching-materials/?themes=environment-food>
- “Environmental Education Activities and Resources” section of the NEA: <http://www.nea.org/tools/EnvironmentalEducationActivitiesAndResources.html>
- The Walden Woods Project: <https://www.walden.org/Education>
- “No Impact Project” Curriculum: <http://noimpactproject.org/educators-middle-high-school-environment-curriculum-html/>
- Environmental Humanities Resources (Environmental Humanities Center, UC-Santa Barbara): [http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?page\\_id=1617](http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?page_id=1617)
- Tips for Teaching Sustainability: <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/sustainability/>
- ASLE Teaching Resources: <http://www.asle.org/teach/teaching-resources/>
- Wendy Petersen-Boring, and William Forbes, eds. *Teaching Sustainability: Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2014. Print.
- Todd LeVasseur, "Teaching Sustainability via the Environmental Humanities: Studying Water, Studying Ourselves" *Journal of Sustainability Education* 14 December 2014: [http://www.jsedimensions.org/wordpress/content/teaching-sustainability-via-the-environmental-humanities-studying-water-studying-ourselves\\_2014\\_12/](http://www.jsedimensions.org/wordpress/content/teaching-sustainability-via-the-environmental-humanities-studying-water-studying-ourselves_2014_12/)