

## The Pioneer Ecocritics' Critique of the English Profession in the Emergence of Ecocriticism

Sezgin TOSKA (\*)

**Abstract:** Ecocriticism is one of the most recent trends in literary criticism. Ecocriticism is critical of the ignorance and absence of nature, environment, and the environmental crisis in literary studies. The pioneer ecocritics argue that this indifference of the literary studies is mainly due to the dominant anthropocentric worldview in literary studies.

**Key Words:** Ecocriticism, anthropocentric, nature, environment, environmental crisis, literature.

## Ekoeleştirmenin Ortaya Çıkışında Öncü Ekoeleştirmenlerin Edebiyat Eleştirisi

**Özet:** Edebiyat alanındaki yeni eğilimlerden biri de ekoeleştirmedir. Ekoeleştiri edebiyat alanındaki doğa, çevre ve çevre krizlerine olan ilgisizlikten yakınır. Bu alandaki öncü ekoeleştirmenler de, edebiyat alanındaki bu ilgisizliğin alanda egemen olan insanmerkezli görüş yüzünden kaynaklandığını ileri sürerler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ekoeleştiri, insanmerkezli, doğa, çevre, çevresel felaketler, edebiyat.

---

\*) Arş. Gör., Atatürk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, İngiliz Dili Edebiyatı Bölümü.  
(e-posta: toska@atauni.edu.tr)

As ecocriticism is one of the most recent trends in literary criticism, its aims and its emergence are not known well in the academic field and other fields except ecocritics whose critique of the English profession (literature and literary studies) mainly consists of ignorance and absence of nature, the environment, and the environmental crisis in English profession. The pioneer ecocritics' major concern, in the critique of the English profession, is the indifference of the English profession to the environment and the environmental crisis mainly due to their dominant anthropocentric worldview in the English profession.

Cheryll Glotfelty, who is one of the pioneer ecocritics in the English profession and one of the founders of ecocriticism, makes one of the most valuable definitions of ecocriticism in her introduction to the co-edited work *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. She notes that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996: xviii). Thus, she tries to link literature and the physical world, or, in other words, she tries to improve the relationship between literature and nature. She argues that people do not have to treat literature and nature as independent with no effect on each other. On the contrary, literature and nature affect each other. The acceptance of this mutual influence of literature and nature is one of the basic and exclusive features of ecocriticism. Glotfelty suggests that:

*If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, 'Everything is connected to everything else,' we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact (xix).*

Thus, in ecocriticism the world is not understood as the society or social sphere but it refers to the whole cosmos, and, in this ecocritical reading of the world everything is in interaction with everything else.

According to ecocritics, although the relationship between literature and the physical world is clear and significant, they argue that they have not been satisfied with seeing this clear and significant relationship in literary studies in which nature as well as human beings has active roles in the English profession. In his essay "Speaking a Word for Nature" Scoot Russell Sanders points out that "what is missing from much recent fiction, I feel, is any sense of nature, any acknowledgment of a nonhuman context" (Sanders, 1996: 183). According to Sanders much recent fiction ignores nature, the physical world and the nonhuman context. It is rare to find something related to the physical world which affects literature and is affected by literature in the English profession.

Furthermore, ecocriticism suggests that "the absence of any sign of an environmental perspective in contemporary literary studies would seem to suggest that despite its 'revisionist energies' scholarship remains academic in the sense of 'scholarly to the point of being unaware of the outside world' " (Glotfelty, 1996: xv). This indifference to the

outside world is one of the basic problems which ecocriticism tries to overcome. In this outside world, it is clear that human beings have been faced with a dangerous environmental crisis in their recent history. In daily life any person who reads newspapers and magazines and watches T.V channels is aware of the nuclear accidents and threats, global warming, dangerous storms, aridity, diminishing green areas, and the great abnormal changes in natural life, etc. In other words, she is aware of the endangered planet. On the contrary, a person can hardly find any awareness of these environmental crises and the active role of nature in literature. Glotfelty argues that:

*If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all (xvi).*

It is interesting to observe and argue that literature depicts a kind of world that seems to be independent from nature as if literature belonged to a different world. In this world there is little room for nature, the environment, and the environmental crisis which affect human beings and which are affected by human beings.

On the contrary, it is clear that the people who produce and consume literature live in the endangered world. Thus, ecocritics realize that the environmental crisis would bring the end of the world. And according to them, it is nonsense and useless to keep the same strategy, methods and anything else that are indifferent to nature, the environment and the environmental crisis. In the wake of this self-criticism, ecocritics argue that “[o]ur temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature departments, but, as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we’re not part of the solution, we’re part of the problem” (xx-xxi). But the question is what makes the English profession indifferent to the outside world? This question and its answer are very significant in order to understand the strategy of ecocritics and their argument’s root cause.

One of the answers that ecocritics give is the dominant anthropocentric worldview in the English profession. According to ecocritics the dominant anthropocentric worldview limits the study area of the English profession mainly to human beings and their social and cultural relations. Thus, it does not let the scholars be interested in nature and the physical environment, where the dangers and crises are rising, as this seems to be taking place at the outside of the cultural and social spheres. In his essay “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” ecocritic Glen A. Love claims that “[b]esides our tendency to postpone or relegate to lesser priority ecological considerations, we must also recognize, in our failure to consider the iceberg, our discipline’s limited humanistic vision, our narrowly anthropocentric view of what is consequential in life” (Love, 1996: 229). An

anthropocentric worldview puts humans into the center of the universe. Everything is for humans and everything must serve them according to the purposes of human beings. This idea dominates literature as well. People in the English profession mainly focus on what is beneficial for man. If man is okay, the rest can be ignored, destroyed, and exploited for the ends of the human being.

To give some information on the background of the anthropocentric worldview, especially its relation with nature, would make the understanding of ecocritics' critique of the anthropocentric worldview clear. Joseph W. Meeker asserts that:

*Civilization, at least in the West, has developed as a tragedy does, through the actions of pioneering leaders who break new ground and surmount huge obstacles. Religion and philosophy have usually affirmed the pioneer's faith that only his own kind really counts, and that he has a right-perhaps even an obligation- to destroy or subjugate whatever seems to obstruct his hopes of conquest (Meeker, 1996: 162-163).*

Religion, philosophy and the industrial revolution (technology) are the significant elements that form the anthropocentric worldview and they make the anthropocentric worldview stronger in order to abuse and destroy nature.

Ecocritics claim that religion or the reading of religion gave birth to the anthropocentric worldview and gave the human being immense authority on the earth. It can be easily inferred from their point of view that in religion man is the centre of the universe and he is the king of the earth. All other creatures are subject to him. Everything in the world has been created for him:

*By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image (White, 1996: 9).*

This quote mainly refers to the story of Genesis in the Bible and it speculates that this anthropocentric reading of the story forces people to regard themselves as the kings of the world. This reading gives them the opportunity to do what they want by ignoring any other creatures on the earth.

On the other hand, the story can also be read in terms of an ecocritical worldview. In this kind of reading people should take care of other creatures in the name of God as all

the creatures are also the creations of God. There are, of course, many other fields that examine religion and nature and the positive or negative effects of religion on nature and the debate still goes on. Therefore, I use religion in terms of its contribution to the formation of anthropocentric worldview because it cannot be denied that some ecocritics charge religion with its contribution to the natural destruction. Lynn White advocates that:

*Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the second century both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends (9-10).*

Under the light of this argument it can be inferred that religion is one of the root causes of the anthropocentric worldview that is destroying nature.

Philosophy, from which especially the fundamental principles of Western civilization come, derives its main insights from the Renaissance. The motto that a human can do whatever he imagines is one of great results of the period. Education, the scientific revolution, and the faith in humanity resulted in the belief that man with reason is unique in the universe:

*As Kate Soper and Carolyn Merchant point out, medieval and Renaissance thought was dominated by the concept of the Great Chain of Being, which placed humans midway between nature and divine in a hierarchical order. While this concept did position humans as part of a greater whole that included the natural world, its hierarchical nature often justified and encouraged human domination of nature (Wallace and Armbruster, 2001: 9).*

The emerging self-reliance and the science exerted negative as well as positive influence on the world and human beings. Human beings began to put nature, themselves, and the world into a kind of destructive process by relying on and keeping Renaissance insights and values. Ecocritics assert that:

*For many philosophical and literary chroniclers of Western attitudes toward nature, though, the shift in thinking most destructive toward nature began in the Renaissance and then flowered during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the periods associated with the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the rise of money-based*

*economic system. The rationalism of René Descartes and the empiricism of Francis Bacon are most often singled out as representing this shift; by denying mind or spirit to any beings other than humans, Descartes gave philosophical support to Bacon's project of gaining mastery over nature through scientific experimentation (9).*

Thus, besides religion, philosophy strengthened the anthropocentric worldview by overtly encouraging human beings to gain control and dominion over nature, which has eventually led the universe to the current environmental crisis and the potential destruction of the world. At the same time, this situation also means the destruction of the human being though he has had technological power since at least the industrial revolution; but this does not help to change the destruction due to his anthropocentrically working mind.

The Industrial Revolution is another factor that supports and strengthens the anthropocentric worldview. Harold Fromm asserts that "the Industrial Revolution affected humanity's conception of its relationship to nature, warning that technology has created the false illusion that we control nature, allowing us to forget that our 'unconquerable minds' are vitally dependent upon natural support systems" (Glotfelty, 1996: xxvii). As a human being believes that he has the capacity to produce technology for the benefit of human beings, he also believes that he can overcome every problem, which disturbs him, by creating solutions out of his mind. He can ignore anything unless he is disturbed. Thus, the destruction of nature, animals, plants and other things is out of his concern unless he is comfortable and there is no immediate negative effect for him that comes from this destruction.

On the other hand, according to ecocritics time is running out and the anthropocentric mind cannot see this as man thinks that he is not in immediate threat of destruction. Ecocritics also strongly warn human beings to be more cautious and concerned about the understanding of the use of technology. Glen A. Love depicts the human being's immediate mental direction to save the world in his essay "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism." He asserts that "we become increasingly aware, as our technological world begins to crack beneath our feet, that our task is not to remake nature so that it is fit for humankind, but as Thoreau says, to make humankind right for nature" (Love, 1996: 234). A human being cares for nothing but himself. This anthropocentric worldview prevents him from to espy that "... surely no creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order" (White, 1996:4). Human beings are not even aware of this fact as they have been taught that everything in the universe is to be in the service of humans. He gives the meaning to the entire universe. "Man, if we look to final causes, may be regarded as the centre of the world; inasmuch that if man were taken away from the world, the rest would seem to be all astray, without aim or purpose..." (Manes, 1996: 21). It can be argued that this anthropocentric worldview is the basic problem that ecocriticism tries to overcome.

Thus, ecocriticism tries to alter the dominant man-centered approach in literary studies at least in order to understand the roots of the ecological crisis. Ecocritics try to get rid of the anthropocentric worldview that promotes the indifference of the English profession to environmental crises. Thus, "...ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty, 1996: xviii). One of the goals of ecocriticism is to replace the dominant anthropocentric worldview with an earth-centered approach. Man should not be the centre of the universe by dominating and controlling other creatures for his proper ends but he should understand that he is part of nature. Every creature should have a voice and right to live peacefully in order to prevent the coming global catastrophe.

To eliminate the possibility of this kind of catastrophe and a man-made apocalypse is what triggered ecocritics. They mostly share and argue that:

*the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse (xx).*

According to ecocritics the end of the world is close if human being insists on his old way. Thus, ecocritics could not stand to follow this way that takes human beings, all the other creatures and the world to extinction. They try to find solutions for this aim; they advocate the active participation to change the anthropocentric minds of people to distinguish this fact and to move them to active participation.

Ecocritics do not want only to participate in these kinds of activities to alter people's minds and make them realize the inescapable end of this mind's consequence in their free time. They speculate what they can do in the English profession itself to realize this goal in their professional lives apart from their free time. They strive to put an end to the indifference of the English profession to nature, the environment, and the environmental crisis. They would like to use their capacity as professors, writers, critics, readers, teachers of literature in order to make contributions to the environmental cause for the sake of the planet.

To achieve their ecocritical goals, ecocritics need to use and benefit from the anthropocentric productions, such as literature, but they become conscious enough to use literature, which is one of the unique products of the human being, in the service of eco-consciousness that, according to them, will prevent the destruction of the world and save it. It is not just for the sake of non-humans but it is also for the sake of human beings. Thus, literature must be in the service of ecocriticism. Love expresses:

*Human beings are the earth's only literary creature. ... If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction? (Love, 1996: 228).*

This is not the paradox in ecocriticism. Ecocriticism tries to depict the possible roles of literature and figures out the production and the critique of literature to have functions in the process of saving the world from the man-made environmental crisis.

One of the functions of literature, according to ecocriticism, is to engage the attention of people who are interested in the environmental issues in literature. “[R]evaluating nature-oriented literature can help redirect us from ego-consciousness to ‘eco-consciousness’” (Glotfelty, 1996: xxx). In order to solve the problem, one must understand the problem and its reasons. In other words, one needs to contemplate the issue. Thus, “an ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is the most important task. For how can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them?” (xxiv). Thus, old conceptions and conventions which are under the influence of the anthropocentric worldview need to be changed in order to force the readers to see the environmental crisis and its reasons in terms of human and non-human relations. The readers must become aware of the physical world and the relationship between the physical world and mankind. The reader must grasp that interaction between human and non-human is significant effective. Human beings affect the non-human and they are affected by it.

To change the reader's attitudes toward nature, the environment, and the environmental crisis, the people in the English profession should revise their behaviors when they are producing and criticizing literature. Love claims:

*Just as we now deal with issues of racism or sexism in our pedagogy and our theory, in the books which we canonize, so must it happen that our critical and aesthetic faculties will come to reassess those texts—literary and critical—which ignore any values save for an earth-denying and ultimately destructive anthropocentrism. And it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the potential significance of such awareness for the reinterpretation and reformation of the literary canon could be far greater than any critical movement which we have seen thus far (Love, 1996: 235-236).*



As a new form of literary criticism ecocriticism is very challenging. It does not only claim that new literature and new criticism should be nature-oriented but also argues that old literature can be reevaluated in the limits and context of new criticism in order to save the world.

Ecocritics mainly are not satisfied with the English profession which is dominated by an anthropocentric worldview as this worldview creates and supports the indifference of the English profession to nature, the environment, and the environmental crisis. They have an argument that religion or some uses of religion, philosophy and the Industrial Revolution erect and support the idea that man is at the centre of the universe and he is the king of the universe. As a consequence, man ignores and even destroys everything for his welfare and he does not realize that it also means his own destruction. Besides, this alienation from nature has brought about the environmental crisis which is very vital for the future of the human being. In order to understand these problems and raise consciousness by using the elements of the English profession for the sake of the world, ecocritics have formed a new kind of literary criticism which is called ecocriticism. It tries to alter the anthropocentric worldview to the new ecocentric worldview and to develop the relationship between literature and the physical world, in other words, between human and non-human. These are the basic elements and ideas which lie at the foundations of ecocriticism and define its possible goals.

## References

Cheryll Glotfelty (1996). "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Scot Russell Sanders (1996). "Speaking a Word for Nature," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Glen A. Love (1996) "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Joseph W. Meeker (1996). "The Comic Mode," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Lynn White, JR (1996). "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster (2001). "Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and Where To?," in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, (Eds. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace), Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Christopher Manes (1996). "Nature and Silence," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, (Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens: The University of Georgia Press.