



Reading the Earth: Ecocriticism and Nature Writing in English Literature

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Article information

Received: 10th February 2026

Received in revised form: 16th March 2026

Accepted: 19th May 2026

Available online: 20th June 2026

Volume: 3

Issue: 2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63090/IJELRS/3049.1894.0040>

Abstract

Ecocriticism, the study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment, has emerged over the past three decades as one of the most intellectually vital and politically urgent fields within English literary studies. Born from the recognition that the ecological crises of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and environmental injustice, have profound cultural and imaginative dimensions that literary criticism is uniquely equipped to address, ecocriticism has expanded rapidly from a modest academic movement into a field of global reach and interdisciplinary ambition. This theoretical and literature review introduces undergraduate students to the historical origins, theoretical frameworks, and landmark literary texts of ecocriticism and the nature writing tradition in English. Drawing on the foundational contributions of Raymond Williams, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Rob Nixon, and Ursula Heise, and examining literary works by Gilbert White, William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, Mary Oliver, Ted Hughes, Barry Lopez, Richard Powers, and Robin Wall Kimmerer, the review explores how literature has represented, constructed, and contested human relationships with the natural world across several centuries of English literary history. The paper argues that ecocriticism offers not merely a new set of readings of familiar texts but a fundamental reconceptualization of what literature is for at a moment of planetary ecological emergency.

Keywords:- Ecocriticism, Nature Writing, The Pastoral, Place, Environmental Literature, Slow Violence, Cli-Fi, The Anthropocene, Nonhuman, Buell, Nixon, Garrard, Wordsworth, Thoreau, Kimmerer, Powers, Ecological Crisis, bioregionalism

Introduction

In the summer of 1845, the American writer Henry David Thoreau moved into a small cabin on the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, and began the experiment in deliberate, attentive living that would produce one of the most influential works of nature writing in the English language. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) is simultaneously a record of Thoreau's two-year sojourn in the woods, a philosophical meditation on the conditions of a good life, a critique of the economic and spiritual impoverishment of modern commercial society, and an extended act of close attention to the natural world in all its seasonal particularity. What makes it a founding text of both the nature writing tradition and

the ecocritical imagination is its insistence that the natural world is not merely a backdrop to human drama but a subject in its own right, deserving of the same quality of attention, the same moral seriousness, and the same literary craft that has traditionally been reserved for the human world (Thoreau 8; Buell 23).

Ecocriticism, the study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment, emerged as a named critical practice in the early 1990s, though its roots extend much further back into the traditions of nature writing, landscape poetry, and pastoral literature that have been central to English literary culture since at least the eighteenth century. The term itself was coined by William Rueckert in 1978, but it was the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996 and the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) that established ecocriticism as a recognized academic field with its own journals, conferences, and theoretical debates (Glotfelty and Fromm xix; Garrard 3).

The urgency that drives ecocriticism is inseparable from the ecological crises of the present moment. Climate change, the sixth mass extinction, deforestation, ocean acidification, and the pervasive contamination of natural systems by industrial and agricultural chemicals are not merely scientific or political problems but cultural and imaginative ones: they reflect ways of thinking about the relationship between human society and the natural world that literature has both shaped and can help to transform. Ecocriticism proceeds from the conviction that how we imagine and represent nature in literary texts is connected to how we treat it in practice, and that a criticism attentive to those representations can contribute to the cultural work of imagining and enacting more sustainable and just relationships between human beings and the rest of the living world (Garrard 5; Nixon 2).

This review is organized around five thematic sections. The first examines the historical traditions of nature writing and landscape representation in English literature. The second surveys the foundational theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism. The third explores key ecocritical concepts through selected literary texts. The fourth addresses questions of environmental justice and the intersection of ecology with race, class, and colonial power. The fifth considers the emerging literature of climate change and the Anthropocene.

Historical Traditions of Nature Writing and Landscape Representation

The Pastoral and Its Discontents

The pastoral, the literary mode that celebrates rural life and the natural world in idealized contrast to the corruption and complexity of urban society, is the oldest and most persistent tradition within English nature writing. From the classical pastorals of Virgil and Theocritus, through the Renaissance pastoral poetry of Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney, to the Romantic lyric and the Victorian nature essay, the pastoral has provided English literature with a repertoire of images, conventions, and attitudes toward the natural world that have shaped how generations of readers have imagined their relationship to landscape, place, and the non-human world. Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973) remains the most important critical analysis of the pastoral tradition in English literature, demonstrating with forensic precision how the idealization of rural life in English poetry and fiction from the sixteenth century onward systematically obscures the actual conditions of agricultural labor and the social relations of rural property (Williams 9).

Williams argued that the pastoral is not an innocent genre but an ideological one: its celebrations of the natural and rural world are consistently produced from the perspective of those who own rather than work the land, and its conventions of timeless, harmonious nature serve to naturalize and conceal the social conflicts, economic inequalities, and historical transformations that actually characterize rural life. For ecocriticism, Williams's analysis is

both indispensable and insufficient: indispensable because it provides the tools to read literary representations of nature ideologically, attending to what they reveal and what they conceal; insufficient because it tends to subordinate the natural world itself to the social relations that shape its representation, leaving the non-human largely absent from the critical picture (Williams 12; Garrard 33).

Gilbert White and the Naturalist Tradition

Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789) occupies a foundational place in the English nature writing tradition, establishing a model of patient, place-based observation of the natural world that would influence generations of subsequent writers from John Clare to Richard Jefferies to Roger Deakin. White spent his entire life in the Hampshire village of Selborne, and his letters to the naturalists Thomas Pennant and Daines Barrington, which form the body of the book, record with meticulous care and affectionate attention the seasonal rhythms of plant and animal life in and around the village, from the migration of swallows to the behavior of earthworms, from the flowering of plants to the song of birds in different weather conditions (White 14; Mabey 6).

What distinguishes White's writing from the purely scientific natural history of his period is the quality of his literary attention: a prose style of quiet precision and genuine delight in the particularity of individual creatures and places that established the literary-naturalist essay as a distinct and enduring genre. White's commitment to the single place observed over a lifetime, and to the accumulation of detailed local knowledge as the foundation of ecological understanding, anticipates the bioregionalist strand of contemporary ecocriticism, which argues that sustainable human habitation of the earth requires deep knowledge of and attachment to particular places rather than the abstract, decontextualized relationship to nature characteristic of modern industrial culture (White 3; Garrard 55).

Wordsworth and the Romantic Landscape

William Wordsworth is the central figure of English Romantic nature poetry, and his influence on the subsequent tradition of nature writing in English, both in Britain and North America, has been immeasurable. *The Prelude* (1799-1850), Wordsworth's autobiographical poem recording the growth of a poet's mind through formative encounters with the natural landscapes of the Lake District, establishes the central paradigm of Romantic nature writing: the experience of nature as a source of moral education, spiritual revelation, and psychological restoration, mediated through a consciousness that is simultaneously formed by and formative of the landscapes it inhabits (Wordsworth 4; Bate 9).

Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000) represents the most influential ecocritical reading of Wordsworth, arguing against the long-dominant view that Romantic nature poetry is primarily about the human mind rather than about nature itself. Bate contends that the best Romantic nature writing achieves genuine moments of ecological attentiveness, of what he calls dwelling, in Heidegger's sense: a mode of inhabiting the world in which the boundaries between the self and the natural environment become permeable and the human is understood as part of rather than apart from the living earth (Bate 23). Poems such as *Nutting* (1800) and *Lines Written in Early Spring* (1798) exemplify this mode, attending to the nonhuman world with a care and precision that ecocriticism has helped us to recognize as itself a form of ecological ethics.

Theoretical Frameworks of Ecocriticism

Buell and the Environmental Imagination

Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) is the most comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated account of the nature writing tradition in American literature

and one of the founding texts of academic ecocriticism. Buell's central project is the rehabilitation of what he calls environmental nonfiction, and above all the work of Thoreau, as a serious literary tradition worthy of the same scholarly attention that has traditionally been lavished on canonical fiction and poetry. More importantly for the theoretical development of the field, Buell developed the concept of environmental texts as those that invite readers into forms of attention and engagement with the natural world that might contribute to a more ecologically responsible culture (Buell 7).

Buell proposed a set of criteria for what he called environmentally oriented texts: the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that matters; human interest does not automatically take priority over nonhuman interests; human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and the natural world is understood as a process rather than a static backdrop. These criteria, while not prescriptive, provide a useful starting point for identifying and evaluating the ecological dimensions of literary texts across a wide range of genres and periods, and they have been widely cited and contested in subsequent ecocritical debate (Buell 7; Garrard 14).

Garrard and the Key Tropes of Ecocriticism

Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004) provides the most accessible and comprehensive introduction to the field for undergraduate students, organizing the major concerns and debates of ecocriticism around a series of key cultural tropes through which human societies have imagined their relationship to the natural world: pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, the pastoral, dwelling, animals, and the earth itself. Each of these tropes, Garrard argues, embodies a particular set of assumptions about the relationship between culture and nature, human and nonhuman, and each can be traced through a wide range of literary and cultural texts from antiquity to the present (Garrard 9).

Garrard's trope of wilderness is particularly important for understanding the central tensions within the nature writing tradition. The idea of wilderness as a space untouched by human presence and therefore pure, sublime, and restorative has been central to the American tradition of nature writing from Thoreau and John Muir through Edward Abbey and Gary Snyder. Yet this idea has been subjected to powerful critique on multiple fronts: environmental historians have shown that most apparently wild landscapes are in fact deeply shaped by human activity; postcolonial scholars have demonstrated that the romantic wilderness ideal required and enabled the erasure of indigenous peoples from the landscapes they had inhabited and managed for millennia; and environmental justice critics have pointed out that the celebration of wilderness tends to deflect attention from the degraded environments in which most people, and especially poor and minority communities, actually live (Garrard 59; Cronon 7).

Nixon and Slow Violence

Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) represents one of the most significant theoretical contributions to ecocriticism of the past two decades, introducing a concept that has transformed how the field understands the relationship between environmental harm, narrative representation, and political attention. Nixon defines slow violence as a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, that is typically not viewed as violence at all (Nixon 2). The slow accumulation of toxins in a community's water supply, the gradual erosion of coastal land by rising seas, the multigenerational health effects of industrial pollution in a low-income neighborhood: these are forms of environmental harm that are no less devastating for being invisible to the media cultures that privilege dramatic, instantaneous spectacle.

Nixon's central argument is that narrative itself is a crucial site of struggle over which forms of environmental harm become visible and which remain unseen. Writers who give

imaginative form to slow violence, who find the stories, images, and narrative strategies capable of making gradual, dispersed, and temporally complex environmental harm apprehensible to readers and political communities, perform an essential cultural function. Nixon explores this argument through readings of writers including Wangari Maathai, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Arundhati Roy, and Njabulo Ndebele, all writers from the global South whose literary work has engaged with forms of environmental destruction that have been largely invisible to the wealthy nations most responsible for producing them (Nixon 4).

Key Literary Texts and Ecocritical Readings

Thoreau and the Attentive Eye

Walden remains the central text of the nature writing tradition in English, and its ecocritical richness has only deepened with time. Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond was driven by a conviction that the dominant culture of commercial society in mid-nineteenth century America was producing a form of human impoverishment that could only be addressed by radical simplification and radical attention: by stripping away the accumulated anxieties and appetites of economic life and attending, with full and unhurried consciousness, to the actual texture of the world immediately at hand (Thoreau 6). The famous injunction to simplify, simplify is not a call to pastoral escapism but to a more demanding and more rewarding relationship with the world than consumer capitalism makes possible.

Thoreau's prose at its best achieves a quality of attention to the natural world that is genuinely rare in literary writing: a patience of observation, a precision of language, and a willingness to follow the nonhuman world on its own terms rather than subordinating it to human purposes or projecting human emotions onto it. His description of the thawing of the sand bank in spring, one of the most remarkable passages in American prose, traces the way in which the melting frost produces patterns in the sand that seem to anticipate the forms of organic life, as though the earth itself were an organism unfolding according to its own internal logic. This is ecocritical writing before the term existed: writing that genuinely attends to the nonhuman and discovers in it a complexity, a beauty, and a meaning that is irreducible to the human (Thoreau 262; Buell 115).

Ted Hughes and the Violence of Nature

Ted Hughes's *Crow* (1970) and his earlier *Lupercal* (1960) and *Hawk in the Rain* (1957) represent a very different tradition of nature writing from Thoreau's patient naturalism: one that insists on the violence, indifference, and otherness of the natural world rather than its harmony, beauty, or therapeutic potential. Hughes's animals, from the pike lurking in the dark pond in *Pike* to the hawk roosting in the wind in *Hawk Roosting*, are presented with an intensity that refuses both the sentimentalization of animal life and the anthropocentric assumption that the nonhuman world exists for human purposes or reflects human values (Hughes 19; Sagar 7).

Hughes's ecological imagination is informed by a profound sense of the human as a latecomer to a natural world that preceded us by billions of years and that regards us, if it regards us at all, with the same elemental indifference with which a hawk regards the field below it. This vision has been criticized for its masculinism and its celebration of predatory violence, and feminist ecocritics have drawn attention to the gendering of Hughes's nature as simultaneously threatening and desired. Yet Hughes's insistence on the otherness of the nonhuman, on the danger of projecting human meanings onto a world that does not share our frameworks of value, is itself an important ecocritical contribution, anticipating the posthumanist strand of contemporary ecocriticism that seeks to decenter the human in our understanding of the natural world (Hughes 12; Gifford 8).

Mary Oliver and the Practice of Attention

Mary Oliver is perhaps the most widely read American poet of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and her popularity rests on a body of nature poetry that has made the practice of attentive observation of the natural world accessible to a vast general readership. Oliver's poems, written across more than five decades of walking the marshes, forests, and beaches of New England, are characterized by an intense, almost devotional attention to particular creatures, plants, and places, and by the capacity to move from precise observation to expansive moral and spiritual reflection without losing the concreteness of the original encounter (Oliver 3; Perez 5).

The poem *Wild Geese*, one of Oliver's most celebrated, exemplifies her characteristic movement from nature to ethics. The poem begins with the geese heading south in the soft autumn air and arrives, through a series of quietly radical gestures, at the assertion that you do not have to be good, that the world calls out to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting, announcing your place in the family of things (Oliver 14). The natural world in Oliver's poems is not a backdrop or a symbol but a moral presence: it offers, through the sheer fact of its ongoing existence and its indifference to human self-judgment, a kind of permission and a kind of belonging that human culture too often withholds. For undergraduate students encountering nature writing for the first time, Oliver's poems offer an accessible entry point into the genre's central concerns.

Robin Wall Kimmerer and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013) represents one of the most significant contributions to the nature writing tradition of the twenty-first century, and one that has transformed the ecocritical conversation about the relationship between science, indigenous knowledge, and literary representation of the natural world. Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, weaves together the frameworks of Western plant science, Potawatomi cultural and spiritual traditions, and her own personal experiences as a scientist, a teacher, and a Native American woman in a culture that has systematically devalued both her scientific and her indigenous knowledge (Kimmerer 9).

Central to Kimmerer's ecological vision is the concept of the grammar of animacy: the insight that Potawatomi and many other indigenous languages grammatically distinguish between animate and inanimate beings in ways that English does not, treating plants, animals, rivers, and mountains as subjects with their own agency and personhood rather than as objects for human use. The poverty of English, in Kimmerer's formulation, is that it forces us to speak of a living being, a bay, a tree, a bird, as it rather than as him or her or them, grammatically reducing the living world to the status of things (Kimmerer 57). This linguistic analysis has profound implications for ecocriticism: it suggests that the ways in which language constructs our relationship to the nonhuman world are not merely metaphorical but materially consequential, shaping the ethical frameworks through which we relate to and make decisions about the natural world.

Richard Powers and the Novel of Ecological Crisis

Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, represents the most ambitious attempt yet made in American literary fiction to bring the full resources of the novel form to bear on the ecological crisis, and specifically on the destruction of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. The novel's formal structure is itself ecological: it begins with a series of apparently separate character vignettes that gradually weave together, like the root systems of a forest, into a larger narrative of environmental activism, loss, and the

slow, patient temporality of trees, which live on timescales that dwarf human lifespans and human attention spans (Powers 3; James 11).

The Overstory is explicitly in dialogue with the scientific literature on tree intelligence and forest ecology, incorporating the findings of researchers including Suzanne Simard, whose work on mycorrhizal networks has demonstrated that forests are not collections of competing individuals but cooperative communities in which trees exchange nutrients and chemical signals through underground fungal networks. Powers uses this science not as background detail but as a fundamental challenge to the anthropocentric assumptions of conventional literary fiction: if trees communicate, cooperate, and remember, then the novel's insistence on centering its narrative on human characters and human timescales is itself a form of ideological distortion (Powers 141; James 14).

Environmental Justice, the Anthropocene, and Climate Fiction

Environmental Justice and the Literature of Contamination

Environmental justice criticism has argued that mainstream ecocriticism, in its focus on wilderness, landscape, and the pastoral, has systematically neglected the environmental experiences of communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities, for whom the most pressing environmental issues are not the preservation of distant wilderness areas but the contamination of their immediate living environments by industrial pollution, toxic waste, and the unequal distribution of environmental hazard (Stein 4; Gaard 7). Nixon's concept of slow violence is central to this critique: the communities most exposed to slow environmental violence are precisely those who are least visible in dominant environmental discourse and whose suffering is least amenable to the dramatic representation that media cultures prize (Nixon 3).

The literature of environmental justice encompasses a wide range of genres and traditions, from the testimonial writing of communities affected by industrial pollution to the novels of writers such as Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Karen Tei Yamashita, whose fiction engages with the intersection of environmental harm and racial injustice with a literary power and political urgency that challenges the predominantly white and middle-class traditions of canonical nature writing. Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), for instance, weaves together Laguna Pueblo oral traditions, the history of uranium mining on Native American lands, and the psychological aftermath of the Second World War to produce a novel in which environmental destruction and cultural survival are inextricably bound together (Silko 3; Stein 9).

The Anthropocene and Climate Fiction

The concept of the Anthropocene, the proposal that human activity has so profoundly altered the earth's geological, biological, and atmospheric systems that we now live in a new geological epoch defined by human impact, has become one of the most generative and contested frameworks in contemporary ecocriticism. Originally proposed by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the Anthropocene concept has been embraced and debated across the humanities and social sciences, raising profound questions about human agency, historical responsibility, and the future of planetary life (Crutzen and Stoermer 17; Chakrabarty 197).

For literary studies, the Anthropocene raises the question of what forms of narrative and imagination are adequate to a situation of genuinely planetary scale and multigenerational temporal reach. The genre of climate fiction, or cli-fi, has emerged as one response to this challenge, producing a growing body of novels, stories, and films that attempt to render the human experience of climate change in literary form. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World*

is *Forest* (1972), Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) all engage, in different ways and with different degrees of directness, with the ecological crises of the present moment, exploring how communities and individuals experience, understand, and respond to environmental catastrophe (Ghosh 5; Garrard 115).

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016), a work of nonfiction that is itself an important contribution to ecocritical thinking, poses the question of why literary fiction has been so slow to engage with climate change directly, given that climate change is arguably the defining challenge of our historical moment. Ghosh's answer is that the realist novel, the dominant form of literary fiction since the nineteenth century, is structurally unsuited to the representation of climate change, because its conventions of individual psychology, domestic space, and narrative probability cannot accommodate the planetary scale, the nonhuman agency, and the temporal uncanniness of climate change (Ghosh 9). This argument has provoked productive debate among ecocritics and writers alike, raising fundamental questions about the relationship between literary form and ecological awareness.

Discussion: Literature and Ecological Responsibility

The survey of ecocriticism and nature writing undertaken in this review reveals a field animated by a sense of genuine urgency. Unlike most other critical movements in literary studies, ecocriticism is driven not only by intellectual curiosity but by a conviction that its work is connected to one of the most consequential challenges facing human civilization: the need to develop new ways of imagining the relationship between human society and the natural world before the ecological damage wrought by the existing imagination becomes irreversible. This conviction gives ecocriticism a political dimension that some literary scholars find uncomfortable, but that its practitioners regard as inseparable from its intellectual seriousness (Nixon 4; Garrard 6).

For undergraduate students, ecocriticism offers a particularly valuable set of critical tools because it so clearly demonstrates the connection between literary analysis and the real world. To read Thoreau's *Walden* attentively, to follow Kimmerer's meditation on the grammar of animacy, to engage with Nixon's concept of slow violence, is to develop not only a richer understanding of specific literary texts but a more nuanced and more critical relationship to the representations of nature that pervade contemporary culture: in advertising, in journalism, in political discourse, and in the everyday language through which we make sense of our relationship to the living world.

The field's most significant ongoing challenge is to develop forms of literary analysis and nature writing that are adequate to the scale of the Anthropocene: that can hold together the local and the planetary, the human and the nonhuman, the scientific and the imaginative, the historical and the speculative, in ways that might contribute to the cultural transformation that the ecological moment demands. This is a challenge not only for ecocritics but for all who care about the future of literature, since the question of what literature can do in the face of ecological crisis is, ultimately, a question about what literature is for.

Conclusion

This review has introduced the major historical traditions, theoretical frameworks, and literary texts of ecocriticism and nature writing in English, tracing the field from its roots in the pastoral and naturalist traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the theoretical innovations of Buell, Garrard, and Nixon, and the literary achievements of Thoreau, Hughes, Oliver, Kimmerer, and Powers. What unites this diverse tradition is a shared conviction that the relationship between human beings and the rest of the living world is not a marginal concern for literature but a central one, and that the literary imagination has a

distinctive and indispensable role to play in how human societies understand, represent, and ultimately respond to the ecological conditions of their existence.

For undergraduate students approaching this literature and criticism for the first time, the encounter with ecocriticism is likely to be not only intellectually stimulating but personally transformative. To read nature writing attentively is to develop new habits of attention to the natural world, new capacities for the kind of patient, precise observation that Thoreau and White and Oliver modelled in their prose, and new frameworks for understanding the political and ethical dimensions of the environmental crisis that surrounds us. At a moment when the relationship between human civilization and the living earth is the defining question of our time, the study of how literature has imagined, celebrated, mourned, and fought for the natural world is not a luxury but a necessity.

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