

# Teaching North American Environmental Literature

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## Asking Ecocritical Questions

As an ecocritically minded teacher of literature, I begin with the premise that the environment matters. Then, borrowing tactics from many kinds of criticism, I ask all sorts of questions about the texts I read, and I teach my students to do the same.

Of course all questions are not equally productive: some dead-end quickly, some evaporate into the vast spaces of speculation; some are not really questions at all but are disguised as arguments, rants, or emotional reactions; some require information that is hard to come by in a classroom; some are too easy. So it matters how questions are constructed, how we ask them, how we teach students to develop their own. If questions are carefully handled, I have learned, even the simplest ones will open up into layered mazes of complications—and into unexpected illuminations.

What I offer here is a sample set of the questions I explore with my classes on the literature of nature and the environment. Some of these questions are what I see as necessary basics; others open into current ecocritical issues. Because all questions (and their key terms) can and should be qualified, modified, and elaborated for specific texts and contexts, and because when they are asked about particular texts they expand quickly, in this essay I have simplified them and made them generic, though I

have occasionally gestured toward well-known and potentially productive examples. With a little coaching and thoughtful, talkative students at any college or graduate level, each paragraph below can easily fill a class period and provoke several term papers.

### Beginning with the Text

In recent years I have found myself returning to the classic formalist questions about character, plot, point of view, imagery, theme, and so forth. These simple but potentially incisive questions can cut equally well through the smooth and nearly invisible surface of a book like Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, the charismatic shield of a book like Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, and the challenging complexities of something like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. They are tools that help students grasp the basic structure and ideas of texts and also what the writer might have wanted to accomplish—two things I think it is important to consider from the start.

What kind of character is the person or narrator whose “voice” we are “hearing” as we read? What is this voice like? What kinds of sentence structures, words, images does the speaker use? What is his or her rhetorical stance? (Abbey's stance in *Desert Solitaire* is very different from Rachel Carson's in *Silent Spring*: but exactly how, and so what?) What is the primary grammatical point of view, and does it change? How is this technical choice connected to the conceptual (or perceptual) point of view? Anthropologists often act as participant observers, a concept that fits much environmental literature. Is the narrator an outsider-observer, an insider-participant, or both? In what proportions? (Compare Columbus with Lewis and Clark: where do they observe? where do they participate?) Does the narrator's conceptual point of view change through the text?

What other characters are important? Are some of them nonhuman, even inanimate? Is the setting a character, and, if so, how? Can a rock be a character? Can a blizzard? Can a farm? How about *Walden Pond*? the Missouri River, the Mississippi, the Colorado? How does each character add to the text? How does the narrator relate to these characters? How does the narrator filter what we learn about other characters?

How are animal characters perceived, described, and valued? As stimulus-response machines? As products of evolution, fighting to survive? As objects of our scientific inquiry? As servants to humans, or as imitation humans? Does the author personify or anthropomorphize animals? With what

purposes and results? Does the text see animals as beings equal in value to humans, partly like us and partly different—partly mysterious? Consider Abbey's dancing snakes, John Muir's dog Stickeen, Barry Lopez's wolves or polar bear, Diane Ackerman's bats and penguins: how do these authors talk about these animals, why, and to what effects?

What is the basic structure of the text? Is it an almanac, journal, journey, rant, quest, physical or mental exploration, jeremiad, meditation, something else? Compare Leopold's almanac with the winter-to-winter time frame of Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* or *Walden*'s summer through spring: their structures are similar but not the same, and their differences are interesting. What if we think about Meriwether Lewis's and William Clark's journals as a quest narrative? And what about a more complicated book like Terry Tempest Williams's *Red* or Dillard's *For the Time Being*?

How many plots are there? Can we distinguish, say, an event plot (what happens when), a telling plot (how the story unfolds), and a thematic plot (so what?)? Are there layers of plots? Is there a story behind the story? Do the climaxes of all the plots coincide? If not, why? If the text has chapters or subsections, how are they related to each other and to the plot? Does each part have its own plot, or are they, rather, installments in a book-long plot, or both? Is there an exterior plot and an interior plot, a physical one in the landscape, a second emotional or conceptual one in the narrator's mind? If so, does one direct the other? How else are they related?

### Thinking about the Landscape

Environmental literature typically (or perhaps by definition) foregrounds the landscape, and ecocritics typically do the same thing in any text we read: that is, we assume at least as a hypothesis that places operate as more than just background settings and sources of imagery. When we consider the land itself as a critical factor, we most clearly distinguish ecocriticism from other current modes of literary study, but we also share with other current critical approaches an interest in human cultural, social, and political issues. These subjects are extremely difficult to separate, of course, and there are often excellent reasons not to try.

What kinds of nature and environment are of interest in this text? How does the author define these terms (explicitly or implicitly), and how useful are these definitions? What kinds of landscapes (wild, agricultural,

toxic, restored, domestic, urban, suburban, feral, garden, etc.) are important, and how? (Contrast the desert wilderness of *Red* with the urban alleys of Robert Sullivan's *Rats*, the woodlot retreat of *Walden* with Leopold's farm.) What are the text's attitudes toward these landscapes? Do these attitudes challenge those held by the larger culture at the time the text was written? Now?

How intimately, how thoroughly, and in what ways does the author-narrator know these places? How many kinds of lenses are used to look at a place? How involved are the author-narrator's body, senses, imagination, heart, memory, curiosity, intellect, passion?

How aware is the author of the other living things in this place and how they relate to one another? How much does she or he think about what is not visible to a human observer, at this time? Is the human history of this place considered? Its environmental history? How it is (and has been) linked to other places through commerce, politics, ecology? Disturbing things about the place, such as pollutants and extinction? How the place has changed, recently and over deep time? What relations are visible in this text among the local, regional, and global? Are these categories understood in terms of bioregions, human cultures, political boundaries, watersheds, economics, ecosystems, worldwide forces (like climate change), something else?

What kinds of scientific information are present? How are facts framed and used? What scientific assumptions and models underlie them? What understanding of issues like evolution, environmental change, ecological relations, and so forth? How much faith in science is visible? How much is the information provided by science integrated with cultural information? What kinds of research has the author done? How much scientific literacy—or knowledge of the history of the natural sciences—do we need to be good readers of this text? What different things should we know to read William Bartram and David Quammen, and what is it like to read Bartram from the time of Quammen?

How might we describe the text's environmental politics? Is the author-narrator an environmental fundamentalist or a relativist? Is he nostalgic for something that has been lost? If so, is that nostalgia sentimental or robust? What is her attitude toward contemporary life—globalization, multinational corporations, sport-utility vehicles, virtual reality, shopping malls, agribusiness, consumer capitalism, other forces and issues of our time? If the text is older, what is its attitude toward the comparable issues of its own time? Is the text subversive or resistant to dominant forces and patterns? What alternatives does its response suggest?

When human desires (for jobs; mobility; prosperity; children; moving to richer, safer countries) conflict with other environmental values, how does the author-narrator choose? How concerned is the text with climate change, species extinction, habitat loss, toxic pollutants, resource depletion, population increase, warfare, desertification, disease, hunger, and so forth? What kinds of solutions does the text offer, if any? Are these solutions nostalgic? Misanthropic? Idealistic? What are their conceptual and practical implications? Is the author or the text activist? How? Compare Thoreau with Carson or with Rick Bass: what kinds of politics and activism does each enact?

What seem to be the author's religious, spiritual, moral, and ethical values, beliefs, and emotions? Does she or he regard the land (all or just parts?) as sacred, and, if so, how might we describe that vision of sacredness and its cultural contexts? Does the text use religious language or refer to specific religious beliefs or stories? (Dillard, Williams, and Gary Snyder speak overtly about religious ideas; how do their investigations compare with the ethical questions asked by Leopold or Kathleen Dean Moore?) How does the author understand the human position on the planet, our responsibilities to the rest of its occupants? What vision of happiness, fulfillment, or a good life does the text offer? (Think about the *zest for life* that is so evident in Thoreau's and Muir's books. What is its source?) What balance does the text offer between prohibitions (don't do this) and encouragements (do this)?

In what ways does the text deal with human cultural issues of identity, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, power, justice, and so on? Are race and ethnicity foregrounded, or not? Is this author conscious of the effects of his or her ethnic, racial, and class positions and their cultural histories? Does the author accept or resist these effects? Does the author's gender and sexual orientation affect the text? (How should we read Abbey's comments about women?) Does the text have anything to say about masculinity or femininity, about gender and sexual identity, perception, and behavior? (Compare Gretchen Legler's *All the Powerful Invisible Things* with Williams's *Red*.) What human power relations are evident, either present or past? Are some of them colonial or imperialistic? Are they economic, or class-based? What is the stance of the text toward these topics?

With these issues, does the text seem to be retrograde, old-fashioned, conventional, progressive, inventive, quirky? What connections does the text make or suggest between these human issues and the land, or between these issues and human relationships with the land? Is identity conceived

of as partly, or significantly, ecological? Is place, or natural environment, seen as part of what creates identity? (Consider the work of Gary Paul Nabhan, Gary Snyder, Leslie Marmon Silko, or Keith Basso.) What is the author's or narrator's attitude toward other people on the land sharing the same place? What cultural issues beyond those directly connected to land are present in this text? Are they linked to land issues or seen as separate?

### Carrying on the Conversation

Like other literary critics, ecocritics are interested in the cultural work done by texts and in the conversations that develop in communities of writers, books, and readers. The following questions address, in different ways, these conversations.

In what genres or subgenres is this text? What conventions does it make use of? Into what literary traditions does the author seem to be entering? (Think about what Robert Sullivan does with the model of *Walden* in his *Meadowlands* and *Rats*.) Does the text change, challenge, stretch, alter any significant conventions or traditions? Does it cross boundaries of genre, subgenre, literary tradition, or academic discipline? How, why, and so what? (What can we make of a highly unconventional book like Dillard's *For the Time Being*?) In what historical and current conversations—about what issues—is this text taking part? What are its contributions to these conversations? (What happens to the literary tradition of solitary encounters with wild nature when a writer like Kathleen Dean Moore has her children with her on river trips?) What elements of the author's life and historical circumstances seem important in shaping these contributions?

As readers, we're part of these conversations, too: what is the text's relationship to us? What does the author seem to want from us? What kind of reader does the text seem to want us to be, at least for a while? What if we are that kind of reader or can imagine ourselves to be? What if we aren't and can't or won't? What kinds of (ironic, skeptical, critical, historical) distances might we have as readers from the narrator's position? Can we try to read two ways at once, from our own assumptions and values and from those of the writer? What imaginative work does it take for us to see through the eyes of Christopher Columbus or Mary Rowlandson?

What are the main questions the author is exploring in this text? How overt or how subtle are these questions? (Some books foreground their questions—Rebecca Solnit's *Savage Dreams*, Dillard's *For the Time Being*,

Thoreau's *Walden*, and Moore's *Pine Island Paradox* are excellent examples. But all texts can be seen as asking them.) Are they common questions or startling ones? Concrete and specific or giant and cosmic? No single person, much less a single text, can ask all questions or consider all possible answers. To which questions is this text blind? Which questions does the author simply choose not to consider in this text? What does the text do with the questions it asks? Does it offer answers? Possibilities? Illuminations and insights? Does it simply embody, enact, or elaborate the questions? Does it see some questions as unanswerable?

What does this text help us understand about the world? about other people's perceptions of it, their ways of being in it? about all the other beings that share it with us? about our own perceptions, values, curiosities, passions? about actions we might wish to take? about our own possible places in the world? about the kinds of lives we wish to live?

### Using These Questions in Classrooms

I use questions like these in two main ways. I ask them of myself as I read and prepare for class; they help me make sense of new texts and challenge me to think about familiar ones in fresh ways. I think about which are the most important, discussable, and incisive ones to ask about each text, and I revise and tailor them to focus on the issues I want to cover in class. Then I pose them to my students to start and continue class discussions. I also very often assign them as homework. That is to say, I ask students to write their own "good thinking questions"—clusters of focused, text-based and text-directed, open-ended, challenging questions, mixed (optionally) with bits of data, speculations, and thinking. (I typically ask upper-level undergraduates to bring to each class meeting two to four clusters of roughly 250 words each.) Then I'll have them use these questions to direct whole- and small-group conversations. This assignment takes a couple of weeks of intensive training at the beginning of the term and then runs itself.

In all the ensuing discussions, we mix big with small, giant generalizations with textual details; we zoom in and zoom out. We balance simplifications with complications. And we resist premature answers, if someone has a good answer, we try to build another question on that answer. I discourage questions like, will we ever learn to treat animals well? I ask instead that we think about what the author at hand might have to say

about this “world question.” I find that our discussions stay much more focused and that we do end up talking about the world issues anyway, just indirectly. I think often of an article I once read that suggested metaphors for kinds of class discussions. Some discussions, this article said, are like body-building or beauty contests, with each student parading his or her ideas before the rest of the class, whose job it is to admire and judge. Some are like wrestling matches, in which the best argument pins the weaker ones to the mat. And some are like barn raisings and quilting bees: everyone contributes a little something (a nail, a bit of stitching), and the product is truly communal. Classrooms full of questions, I believe, produce barns and quilts—or, to drop the metaphor, they produce students who can themselves recognize, create, and pursue good questions. I hope, in courses on environmental literatures, this may also mean that they produce good environmental citizens who will help create a healthy future.