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## ECO-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVES AND THE RETHINKING OF NATURE IN LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the theoretical and aesthetic dimensions of eco-centric literature, examining how a growing body of literary works challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that have dominated Western cultural and philosophical traditions. Drawing on the frameworks of biocentrism and ecocentrism — as developed by thinkers such as Arne Næss, Val Plumwood, and Patrick Curry — the article traces how contemporary and canonical writers decenter the human subject, attribute agency to non-human entities, and interrogate the binary opposition between culture and nature. Through close attention to literary form, narrative perspective, and ecological imagery, the article argues that literature offers a distinctive and powerful medium for reshaping ecological consciousness and imagining more sustainable modes of human–environment coexistence.*

### 1. Introduction: Literature at the Ecological Crossroads

We inhabit a moment of profound ecological crisis. Climate change, mass species extinction, deforestation, and the accelerating degradation of natural systems have placed the question of humanity's relationship to the non-human world at the centre of urgent cultural, political, and ethical debate. In this context, literature — long regarded as the mirror of human experience — has increasingly turned its gaze outward, toward the rivers, forests, animals, and atmospheric systems that constitute the wider fabric of life on Earth.

Eco-centric literature represents one of the most significant developments in

contemporary environmental writing. Unlike nature writing that treats the natural world as a backdrop for human reflection, or as a resource to be appreciated for human benefit, eco-centric texts fundamentally challenge the primacy of the human perspective. They ask not what nature means for us, but how we exist within nature — as one species among millions, embedded in ecological networks that preceded our arrival and will, in many forms, outlast our tenure.

This article examines the theoretical foundations and literary manifestations of eco-centric thought, tracing its roots in environmental philosophy, its expression in literary form, and its



implications for how we read and interpret texts that engage with the more-than-human world. It argues that eco-centric literature does more than describe nature: it enacts a philosophical reorientation, inviting readers to reconsider the deepest assumptions of Western modernity — the belief in human uniqueness, the legitimacy of domination, and the separation of culture from ecological process.

## **2. From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: A Philosophical Trajectory**

For much of recorded Western history, the dominant mode of understanding the natural world has been anthropocentric: that is, centred on the human as the measure and purpose of all things. From Aristotle's teleological hierarchy — in which plants exist for animals, and animals for humans — to the Cartesian reduction of nature to extended matter, devoid of sensation or inner life, Western thought has persistently positioned humanity at the apex of a cosmic order that legitimises dominion over other species and ecosystems.

This worldview has deep cultural and literary consequences. In the anthropocentric imagination, nature is typically figured as a setting, a resource, a symbolic field for human meaning-making, or a therapeutic retreat from the pressures of civilisation. The pastoral tradition, for example, often romanticises rural landscape as a site of human spiritual renewal while leaving unexamined the economic and ecological relationships that sustain or damage it. Even much of Romantic nature poetry, for all its reverence for the natural world,

frequently returns to the human perceiving subject as the source and arbiter of meaning.

The challenge to anthropocentrism gathered philosophical momentum during the twentieth century, particularly as environmental degradation made the costs of human exceptionalism increasingly visible. Two related but distinct frameworks emerged as alternatives: biocentrism and ecocentrism.

Biocentrism asserts that all living organisms possess inherent moral worth, independent of their utility to human beings. From this perspective, a beetle, a lichen, or a river-dwelling microorganism has a claim to exist and flourish that cannot be overridden simply because it serves no obvious human purpose. Literary works informed by biocentric thought tend to emphasise the inner lives, sensory experience, and moral significance of non-human creatures, inviting empathy across species boundaries.

Ecocentrism extends this ethical framework beyond individual organisms to encompass entire ecosystems — including rivers, soils, climatic systems, and geological formations — as entities of intrinsic value. Influenced by Arne Næss's philosophy of deep ecology, ecocentrism holds that ecological wholes take precedence over the interests of individual parts, including human ones. The Norwegian philosopher famously distinguished between 'shallow ecology,' which seeks to protect nature for human benefit, and 'deep ecology,' which recognises the intrinsic value of all life and the interconnectedness of all living systems (Næss, 1973).



In literary terms, ecocentrism calls for a radical decentring of the human subject. It demands narrative forms and aesthetic strategies that can accommodate the agency, complexity, and temporal depth of non-human systems. This is not merely a thematic choice but a formal one: the representation of rivers as active agents, of weather systems as narrative forces, or of geological time as a framework for human history requires new modes of description, perspective, and structure.

### **3. Non-Human Agency and the Literary Imagination**

One of the most distinctive features of eco-centric literature is its representation of the natural world as active, responsive, and agentic. In conventional narrative, agency — the capacity to act, to initiate, to affect the course of events — is typically reserved for human characters. Nature, by contrast, is the stage on which human drama unfolds: it may be beautiful or threatening, fertile or barren, but it is fundamentally passive, waiting to receive human meaning and use.

Eco-centric texts challenge this assumption by foregrounding non-human agency. Rivers shape human destinies. Forests resist clearance. Animals carry knowledge that human characters lack. Weather systems determine the outcome of historical events. These representations are not merely metaphorical: they propose an ontological claim about the world — that agency, intention, and significance are distributed across the full range of living and material processes, not concentrated in human consciousness alone.

Gary Snyder's poetry, for example, enacts this redistribution of agency through its attentiveness to landscape, geological formation, and ecological process. In *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), Snyder argues for a poetics grounded in direct, embodied engagement with particular places and their non-human inhabitants. His verse does not use nature as a symbolic backdrop for human feeling but attempts to inhabit the perspective of the ecosystem itself — registering the rhythms of predation, growth, decomposition, and renewal that constitute the actual texture of wild life.

The literary representation of non-human agency requires what might be called an eco-centric poetics: a set of formal strategies adequate to the complexity and otherness of non-human experience. These strategies include shifts in narrative perspective that move away from the privileged human viewpoint; a heightened attention to sensory, material, and spatial description that refuses to subordinate physical reality to symbolic or psychological meaning; and the use of deep temporal frameworks — geological, evolutionary, ecological — that place human history within a vastly larger story of planetary change.

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) offers a compelling example of this eco-centric poetics in practice. Dillard's narrative voice is simultaneously rigorously observational and philosophically restless, moving between microscopic attention to the life of a specific creek and creek-side ecosystem and expansive meditations on time, death, and the indifference of



natural processes to human values. The effect is to unsettle the reader's comfortable anthropocentrism: nature in Dillard's text is not a nurturing maternal presence but a violent, extravagant, and fundamentally alien process, whose beauty and terror alike exceed human categories of meaning.

Wendell Berry's essays and poetry represent a different but complementary eco-centric vision. Writing from the perspective of a working farmer in Kentucky, Berry insists on the ecological embeddedness of human culture, arguing that sustainable agriculture requires not merely technical innovation but a fundamental re-orientation of values — away from extraction and toward care, away from efficiency and toward the long-term health of particular places and communities. Berry's eco-centrism is not wilderness-focused but agricultural: it recognises the human as an ecological actor whose practices have profound consequences for the health or degradation of specific ecosystems.

#### **4. Critiquing Human Exceptionalism: The Human/Nature Divide**

Central to eco-centric literature is a sustained interrogation of human exceptionalism — the belief that humans are not merely different from but fundamentally superior to and separate from the rest of the natural world. This belief has deep roots in Western religious, philosophical, and scientific traditions, from the biblical injunction to exercise dominion over the Earth to the Enlightenment ideal of rational mastery over nature. In its modern forms, human exceptionalism underlies the treatment of natural systems as raw material for

economic development, and the willingness to discount the interests of non-human species and future generations in pursuit of short-term human gain.

Eco-centric literature challenges human exceptionalism through a variety of narrative and rhetorical strategies. It depicts human characters who discover, often through suffering or failure, the limits of their autonomy and the depth of their ecological dependency. It represents non-human entities — animals, landscapes, weather systems — as possessing forms of intelligence, communication, and value that exceed human understanding. And it deploys narrative structures that refuse the consolations of human-centred resolution, leaving readers with the unsettling recognition that the world exceeds and precedes any story we might tell about ourselves.

Val Plumwood's concept of 'ecological animism' is instructive here. In *Environmental Culture* (2002), Plumwood argues that the Western tradition's denial of agency, intentionality, and interiority to the natural world — what she calls the 'hyperseparation' of humans from nature — has both philosophical and ecological consequences. By treating the natural world as mere mechanism or resource, we foreclose the kinds of respectful, attentive relationship with particular places and species that sustainable coexistence requires. Eco-centric literature, on this reading, is not merely aesthetic: it performs ethical and political work, cultivating the imaginative capacities necessary for a



less destructive mode of inhabiting the planet.

David Abram's phenomenological approach in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997) takes this argument further, contending that the very structure of alphabetic language encourages an alienation from the animate, sensory world by directing attention inward toward an abstract, self-referential system of signs. Against this, Abram invokes oral and indigenous traditions in which language remains embedded in the living landscape, attuned to the voices of animals, weather, and season. For Abram, eco-centric writing is not merely a matter of content but of recovering a mode of attention that modernity has systematically suppressed.

## **5. Eco-Centric Literature and the Future of Environmental Imagination**

As the ecological crises of the twenty-first century intensify, the question of what literature can do — and what it cannot do — in relation to environmental destruction has never been more pressing. Eco-centric literature does not offer policy prescriptions or technical solutions. What it offers is something more fundamental: a reorientation of perception, a recalibration of value, and an expansion of the moral community to include the more-than-human world.

This reorientation is not without its challenges and tensions. Critics have pointed to the risk of romanticising or sentimentalising nature, of projecting human values onto non-human processes in ways that obscure the genuine otherness and indifference of ecological systems. There is also a

question of representation: who speaks for the natural world, and with what authority? The long history of primitivism and colonial appropriation in Western representations of indigenous relationships with nature counsels caution about any easy claim to speak on behalf of the non-human.

Moreover, the formal demands of eco-centric literature — the decentring of human protagonists, the temporal expansion to geological and evolutionary scales, the representation of distributed and non-intentional agency — sit uneasily with the conventions of narrative fiction, which has been shaped over centuries by the assumption of individual human consciousness as the ground of story. The most ambitious eco-centric writers are those who push against these conventions, developing new aesthetic strategies adequate to the complexity and otherness of the more-than-human world.

Yet the potential of eco-centric literature remains enormous. At its best, it does what no policy document or scientific report can do: it makes the ecological crisis imaginatively inhabitable, enabling readers to feel the reality of interconnection, dependency, and loss in ways that engage the emotions and the will as well as the intellect. It cultivates what Curry (2011) calls 'ecological ethics' — not merely a set of rules or principles, but a disposition of attention, respect, and care toward the living world that sustains us.

Literature has always been one of the primary means by which cultures examine, question, and transform their deepest assumptions. In the face of an



ecological crisis that threatens the conditions of civilised life, eco-centric literature offers not just a critique of the worldview that produced that crisis but the imaginative materials for an alternative — a vision of human existence that is humbler, more attentive, and more sustainably embedded in the web of life from which it can never, in the end, be separated.

### Conclusion

This article has traced the theoretical and literary dimensions of eco-centrism, from its philosophical roots in biocentrism and deep ecology to its expression in the formal strategies of contemporary nature writing. It has argued that eco-centric literature is not merely a thematic category but a formal

and ethical practice — one that demands new modes of narration, new frameworks of value, and a fundamental reconception of the human's place within the more-than-human world.

The challenge posed by eco-centric literature to anthropocentric assumptions is not merely academic. As the ecological crises of the present century continue to unfold, the need for a transformed ecological imagination — one that takes seriously the agency, complexity, and intrinsic value of the natural world — has never been more urgent. Literature, at its most ambitious and attentive, can be one of the primary means by which that transformation is enacted and sustained.

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