

EcoGothicism: the Terrifying Unknown

When one thinks of the word “EcoGothic” there is unlikely an immediate definition. It is a lens that does not have a lot of time and research invested into it. However, the amount of EcoGothic literature is overwhelming. This is not a new genre of media, but it is extremely specific—a combination of ecocriticism and the Gothic—and attempts to describe the relationship between us and the unknown. This lens encapsulates disturbing and unsettling interactions with the nonhuman. One thing that EcoGothic literature pieces have in common is the concept of ecophobia. Ecophobia was born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and centers around environmental destruction and degradation (Estok). Themes of colonialism—and the genocide of Indigenous populations and lands—run just under the surface of EcoGothic American works (Hansen). EcoGothic literature is meant to make you feel uncomfortable.

One popular concept in American EcoGothic literature is something called “prairie madness.” According to Vanessa Steinroetter, the definition is “any severe mental or emotional decline in white settlers which was attributed to the harsh living conditions and farming in the Plains.” The poem “Alien” by Jessica Royer Crafton demonstrates the feeling of isolation and abandonment in the desolate landscape when she writes: “Beneath me the fissured earth powders barren in my hands; / my taut, dry body knows the earth’s pain.” The image of *fissured, barren* earth creates discomfort. One can almost feel and taste the dust. Steinroetter writes that the unfamiliar place and crop-growing methods meant for different soil perhaps exacerbates the feeling of isolation. Of course, settlers from Europe would find the Western Plains particularly eerie if they were used to a completely different landscape and acquired the land through treachery and murderous means. It’s easy to see why many felt like they were being haunted.

Mrs. Wright from Susan Glaspell's 1916 play *Trifles* is a character that appears to be under the spell of prairie madness. She is described as once loving to sing and dress up by her neighbors, who also express guilt for not visiting her more often. Mrs. Wright is essentially alone, her only point of contact is her husband, and a key facet of prairie madness is isolation in a rural area. It's also the early 20th century, when industrialization took off. Considering the factors of their lineage, Mr. and Mrs. Wright are most likely white Americans with European ancestry, and the setting is (an implied) Iowa, which is a part of the Great Plains region of the United States. Without mentioning it at all in the play, EcoGothicism forces you to look at the genocide of the Indigenous people who once inhabited that land to make room for settlers. Perhaps prairie madness is a revenge for atrocities committed against the people who once lived there. One could think of it as an infliction or maybe even an entity that affects the mind and brings out things you would not normally do in a good mental state. When Mr. Wright's dead body is found, Mrs. Wright is extremely calm, nonchalant even, which is strange considering that her husband was killed during the night. It is strongly implied that Mrs. Wright is the one that killed him after her neighbors find her beloved dead bird under a quilt.

A short story that fits well into the EcoGothic is "The Damned Thing," written by Ambrose Bierce in 1898. This story radiates an aura of quiet foreboding as it centers around the point of view of William Harker, who is presiding in court telling his account of the death of Hugh Morgan, a strange and solitary man. Hugh Morgan, according to the results of the jury, was killed by a mountain lion, but William knows differently. Upon looking through Hugh's diary after his death, there is an entry from October 3 that says "I shall not go—it shall not drive me away. No, this is *my* house and my land. God hates a coward" (Bierce). There is also an entry from September 2:

“Looking at the stars last night as they rose above the crest of the ridge east of the house, I observed them successively disappear—from left to right. Each was eclipsed but an instant, and only a few at the same time, but along the entire length of the ridge all that were within a degree or two of the crest were blotted out. It was as if something had passed along between me and them; but I could not see it, and the stars were not thick enough to define its outline. Ugh! I don’t like this . . .” (Bierce).

Morgan’s foe is never described and in fact, never seen at all. One could argue that like Mrs. Wright in *Trifles*, Morgan could be under the hazy grasp of prairie madness.

A second poem that highlights the EcoGothic while stepping into more physical aspects is “Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now” by Matthew Olzmann. Anthropogenic influences tend to be romanticized and the human is located as all things good and safe (Estok). Olzmann’s poem alludes to the progress we have made and the great achievements we seek to make at the expense of everything else on the planet. This poem describes how we have polluted the environment with sulfur dioxide and benzene and that only solidifies the idea that people are an undeniable force in the changing of the planet’s biosphere (Castricano). It makes for an unpleasant image of the earth that we have created for the sake of advancing our humanity. Olzmann writes: “Most likely, you think we hated the elephant, / the golden toad, the thylacine and all variations / of whale harpooned or hacked into extinction.” It’s easy to picture a harpooned whale and other sea creatures cut into pieces. It makes you feel a sense of guilt for past actions in the name of progress. Think of oil made from blubber to power the lamps used to keep working hours into the night. Think of the countless extinct species we have failed to protect and hunted until they no longer existed. “Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now” holds your face to the light of eco-atrocity.

Ecophobia, a term related to EcoGothic, is highlighted in Olzmann’s poem. Ecophobia is “an ethical undervaluing of the natural environment that can result in cataclysmic environmental

change” (Estok). Consider all the landscapes that have irreversibly changed and have been damaged because we took them for granted. Ecophobia can take us to the roots of environmental destruction and is arguably where EcoGothicism originated. It’s supposed to make you feel uneasy when you look at what we have done as a collective society, such as when Olzmann writes: ““Hey guys, what’s transcendence?”” // And then all the bees were dead.”

The EcoGothic has a horror aspect as shown in the poem “A Monstrous Catalpa Tree Grows from a Drain” by Regan Good. She uses ominous phrasing such as “The Catalpa Tree’s leaves smother and its dagger-beans stab.” along with “We laughed at how the Catalpa eats men and cats.” This is referencing the tree’s height and how big the leaves can be. Death is an overarching theme in this poem but instead of humans killing the environment, it alludes to the environment persevering despite humanity. It’s also part of why this poem is uncomfortable to read. Death is a subject that many people, especially Western society, avoid due to the anxiety it brings up. Death is in some measure what makes the EcoGothic *Gothic*. This catalpa tree is also described as feeding “on wormseed oil and nightshade flower-shine,” both of which are incredibly toxic plants which can cause fatalities in humans.

“The Poem Grace Interrupted” by Mikko Harvey centers around a dying whale that’s on fire. Harvey describes unpleasant chemicals and fuels that “rode through her.” A “sick and beautiful” planet. It’s important to remember that fossil fuels come from the remains of “rotting plants and decaying corpses” and “over time turn into amorphous masses of gas, coal, and oil” (Edwards). The earth is personified in this poem and trying to tell the atmosphere that she is sick and needs help, so she creates a whale on fire. He becomes long-forgotten by the planet because he was one of the many examples she used in her cries for help.

Overall, EcoGothic scholarship is under-published, and it was difficult for me to find consistent informational sources. Because so few people have written about it, definitions vary from person to person as with qualifications that make pieces of literature EcoGothic. In my research, I have compiled a few traits that one can use to determine whether it falls under that lens. Firstly, the piece must make one feel disquieted and uneasy; there needs to be a sense of the loss of control over one's world, internal and external. The environment must be of primary focus, or the setting is an integral part of the story. Death, murder, and overall demise are always underlying features: it could be human versus nature or human versus human that takes place in an iconic setting. Some elements may have a realistic aspect to them, and others might be purely fictional, meaning more as entertainment than as a warning.

I believe it would be beneficial to place more time and emphasis on the EcoGothic because it brings awareness to topics such as death, genocide of Indigenous people, and overall destruction of our environment by our own hands. By studying the EcoGothic, we would not only be forced to take accountability for our actions, but it would be a good motivator to resolve what humanity has done. This isn't a new genre by some definitions—there are so many works out there that fall under this perspective—it's just a new way of considering how we have affected our environment. The EcoGothic also suggests the question of how humanity as a whole fits into the bigger picture.

One could argue that we ourselves are currently living through an EcoGothic era. Scientists all over the world are constantly reporting on the poor state of the Earth and how it will affect us in the future. The oceans are rapidly warming and acidifying, forests are being destroyed, species of animals that have existed for centuries are suddenly going extinct. One could anthropomorphize the Earth and say that she will take revenge on each of us for trying to kill her. Not only do we have the power to destroy the Earth because of our own fear, but the Earth has the power to destroy

us. Remembering that balance and studying the EcoGothic will bring about feelings of admiration and respect for where we live. The Gothic primarily feeds off the concept of human fear and the state of dreadful anticipation most of us are in. When you combine those ideas with the current ecology of the world, a new way of looking at the situation is born.

Ecohorror and EcoGothic are often thought of as the same thing and because so few people have written about either, I have had time to consider what makes them different from each other. The most notable factor of Ecohorror is there is a labeled, primary antagonist such as a vengeful forest spirit, or a man-eating plant. In the EcoGothic, it's more about circumstances and the environment and how it affects humanity or elements of humanity, such as with prairie madness. The isolation and desolation of the landscape wreaks havoc on the human mind. There isn't an obvious villain or person to blame in this situation but if you begin considering factors of the past, you uncover heinous acts committed by people against people or against the environment. It raises the idea of the land itself being an unforgiving spirit, taking its revenge. One could even argue in support of the land being vengeful and seeking reparations for what has been done to it.

The idea of prairie madness as a diagnosable mental disorder is also something I would like to see in the future. As mentioned earlier, prairie madness infects the mind and has a history of affecting the wives of settlers of the West. Granted, it really doesn't occur that often in the modern world due to most places being adequately settled, but I think it would make this concept arguably more Gothic and add to the overall fear of the EcoGothic.

The EcoGothic is about death, the unknown, and human fear. It comes full circle because people's ideas about the EcoGothic are mostly unknown as well. I believe that this genre could benefit from input by environmental scientists adding to the urgency it brings to readers. I also think it would help in the shift to more sustainable actions preserving the Earth. Art, after all, is

extremely influential, especially in modern society. In the future, I would enjoy seeing more discussions about this lens, possibly joining together Ecohorror and the EcoGothic. It would make this genre more accessible and less daunting, not to mention the influx of new movies, books, poems, paintings and art of all kinds that would inspire many to create their own works, inviting further discussion.

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