

Rosey Minnick: Ecocriticism in Poetry

The Earth has been calling for help, yet its calls continue to be ignored. The Earth is as much of a home for human beings as it is for other plants, animals, and creatures that roam, swim, and soak in the sun we all share. We should be considered the imposters. During the time that humans have found a home on Earth's soil, we have made the natural environment our own. As we continue to hack away at the natural treasures beneath our feet, we have created a vicious cycle of near irreversible damage for our own selfish gain. Now that we are more able to see the polluted waters, air, and land, we begin to realize that we are nearing a point of no return, but realization and environmental awareness alone is not enough. It is crucial to take the warnings told by Earth and share its story.

Ecocriticism in poetry displays an effective and creative way of sharing this story. This literature draws readers past the facts and statistics seen in daily life. Ecopoetry is a term that is used to describe the ecological emphasis present in poetry. Several poets are passionate and concerned about the environment, practicing ecocriticism in their pieces. Ecopoetry can be written and interpreted in several ways, including emphasizing natural beauty amid environmental crises, written warnings about the future, and the devastating reality of the effects of pollution. Reading and writing ecopoetry is an art that intrigues people to read about the dangers of climate change from a literal and emotional perspective that advocates for environmental activism and awareness.

Poet Matthew Olzmann portrays a sense of warning in his poem "[Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now](#)." He begins by listing the assumptions that someone might have when looking back at our present time from fifty years in the future. He introduces his poem by providing a pessimistic point of view on the present-time state of our planet saying, "It must seem like we sought to leave you nothing / but benzene, mercury, the stomachs / of seagulls rippled with jet fuel

and plastic.” At the surface, these descriptors may come off as unnecessarily graphic and exaggerated, but the terrifying truth is that this is no exaggeration, and that is exactly what Olzmann aims to expose in his writing. The exceptional imagery he uses in this line and throughout his poem casts a cautionary light on the future consequences we are nearing. This idea also grasps the emotional attention of readers and informs them of the reality of the environmental tragedy we are currently in and its effects of worsening. The poem continues to speak to future readers about the natural beauty we once had, providing a sense of joy that was present when we still had constellations in the sky, forests, lakes, bees, and flowers . . . then suddenly Olzmann ends with “all the bees were dead.” Contrasting the beauty with the reality of natural depletion serves as a gut punch for the reader, fully engulfing them with a sense of utter fear for the fate of the environment and all that has once induced joy. Olzmann encourages a series of emotions in his poem, stressing the impact of joy, grief, guilt, and regret throughout the reading experience. The artistic approach of poetry used to portray Olzmann’s message also simplifies the challenging aspects of the climate crisis by creating relatable instances for his general audience. The sense of warning and emotional draw that is present in his ecocritical poetic approach prevails a call to urgency advocating for the environmental crises. This resonates with the reader in an attempt to save all that is dying, including the bees.

Olzmann portrays a warning by alluding to the future based on the current degradation we are inflicting on our environment. The emotions and relatability used in this example of Olzmann’s poetic language differ greatly from the information you find in research by scientists. An article from *The Times of India*, “Can ‘Ecopoetry’ Drive Climate Action? These Poets Think So,” explains this difference: “Professor Nawaz emphasizes that the response to the climate crisis can’t be left to scientists. ‘Science alone cannot solve the problem particularly when the solution itself

entails making choices about how we live. Poetry or any other art can help us understand climate change in a relatable way, and more importantly, it can make us feel” (Sonal). It is shown that providing a sense of familiarity gains the readers’ trust and heightens their response to change. This connection using feelings and relatability has a greater tie to encouraging environmental activism. Olzmann’s attempt to achieve a creative approach to warning his readers about the environmental crises and the fate of our future has a more dependable effect on individuals. The resonating relationship proposed in Olzmann’s message of warning its readers influences a drive for change from a personal level, fueling the importance of taking environmental action.

Taneum Bambrick adopts an ecopoetic approach in her poem, “[Litter](#).” Bambrick tells of her experiences collecting litter and does not hold back with her descriptive language. She uses exceptional imagery to describe the painfully sickening reality of pollution and its detrimental consequences on plants and wildlife. She also uses comparison tactics to describe the relationship between pollution and natural life, which inflicts feelings of disturbance. Her lines, “Peel condoms off rocks / beside fire pits—call / them *snakeskins*.” describes a shameful association between garbage and the natural world to coax guilt for all of humankind that has contributed to this act of littering. Bambrick also recounts this comparison in an example relating wildlife to a lifeless human object:

I shovel a pit bull
from a plastic tub
in a parking lot—he’s
dense and flat at the belly,
a figurine.

The disturbing link between unnatural objects and surroundings such as “a plastic tub” and the “parking lot” credits humankind for the means of death inflicted on the poor pit bull, now nothing but a lifeless figurine. Bambrick’s artistry is unique in explaining the unsettling familiarity we

have made between human objects and wildlife and accuses those responsible who are none other than us, the imposters. The allusion from pollution to nature and wildlife leaves a bad taste in readers' mouths, as humanity is being held accountable for these acts of selfishness against the natural world with our disgusting habits.

This relationship between pollution and nature in Bambrick's "Litter" shows that the domination of humankind holds responsibility for the lifeless figures of nature we have contributed. She projects that unfortunate consequences will occur due to the forced imbalance and absence of equality and coexistence between the lifeforms of humans and nature. This relationship is described by Susanna Lindström and Greg Garrard in their research on ecopoetry: "It is also present in numerous poems that emphasize the relationship between animals and their environment over the individual in its own right so that the ideal form of existence is when perfect unity exists between an animal's instincts and signs in its environment." Poetry as a powerful form of literacy accentuates the unfair living conditions of nature due to the *lack* of unity between lifeforms and therefore supports nature's extinction. This tragic truth is portrayed most effectively in ecopoetry, as it provides a factor of fear and guilt as a motivator for environmental activism. Ted Hughes's work also explores this unique connection: "For Hughes, the connection between natural and human creativity is especially strong in poems, due to their formal characteristics, which he suggests are more 'elemental' than those of other genres. By linking the creativity behind a plant or an animal to that of the poet, Hughes compares, with surprisingly literal intent, the capturing of an actual animal to the capture of its spirit in a poem" (Lindström and Garrard). This point by Hughes provides support for the idea that poetry is the most effective form to encapsulate the "spirit" of animals and nature, having the greatest results of promoting this sense of unity required for humans to coexist with nature rather than destroy it.

The study and recognition of the term “Anthropocene” is a common theme in research on climate change and environmental crises. Anthropocene describes the current geological age, noting that human activity is the most dominant influence on climate and the environment. Poet dg nanouk okpik demonstrates the idea of the Anthropocene as it appears in locations around the world in her poem ["Anthropocene Years."](#) The theme throughout her poem presents a sense of place and provides examples of how human activities have affected these environments. Her lines “Here not here. / Elsewhere but not anywhere.” describe the unstable conditions of environments worldwide. okpik frames the focus on setting with the impact of the Anthropocene by creating an unsettling and regretful piece to last in readers’ minds. Gearing the blame onto her audience, okpik uses exceptional descriptions to make her point. For example, her lines “Place fogged lenses on telescopic eyes. / Here brilliant colors of pollution so high.” accentuate the Anthropocene as a phenomenon that is shielded from public eyes as humanity continues to pollute the Earth without seeing the consequences that lie right in front of our faces. The approach that okpik takes in her poetry is meant to share the eerie and unknown factors of the climate crisis while holding humankind responsible for their destructive actions.

“Anthropocene Years” intensifies the regretful actions of humankind as they impact each place and environment. An interview conducted by *Poets.org* asked okpik how the sense of place in her poem relates to the title considering human-driven climate change. She answered: “Human-driven climate change and actual change are variables up in the air. Selfish ideas are responsible for climate ruin. Man has control of these changes occurring to the Earth and can slow them down. Finding ways of slowing down is key, then humans can find a clear path of evolution.” She explains that these factors of human-driven climate change and change on its own are not entirely validated, and how her poem is meant to name responsibility for environmental crises due to the

selfish actions of humans and our loss of control. As discovered in this interview, okpik adds that there is hope for change by suggesting the solution of gaining control of our actions by “slowing down.” The compelling language and mention of the Anthropocene that okpik uses in her poem to describe the loss of control and carelessness over time is an essential attempt to educate readers on the true extent of the damage being done. In doing so, she identifies a solution to reverse this impact.

Instances caused by the Anthropocene as described in okpik’s “Anthropocene Years” encapsulate the negative effects that human action has inflicted on the environment. To enhance this meaning with further research, it is found that poet and scholar Joyelle McSweeney adopted a term in 2014 called the [Necropastoral](#), defined as “a political-aesthetic zone in which the fact of mankind’s depredations cannot be separated from an experience of ‘nature’ which is poisoned, mutated, aberrant, spectacular, full of ill effects and affects” (McSweeney). The Necropastoral terms the significant relationship between politics and the acts of humankind’s damage to the environment to be a helpless invasion of human control. Studying this relationship is crucial to understanding the variables of human destruction and selfish motives presented in the rise of climate ruin as okpik mentioned. In determining these crucial variables, the impact behind okpik’s “Anthropocene Years” places blame and regret. This encourages humans to take responsibility for reversing these effects, which can be identified in understanding the political relationship between mankind and nature. In attaining this level of knowledge as provided in ecopoetics, readers are increasingly more adaptable to carve a path for change that will regenerate the environment.

Ecocriticism depicts the widespread issues occurring within our environment. The strengthening of this belief in poetry presents an approach that results in the self-recognition of the damage that humanity has caused. It is shown through the tactics of ecopoetics that this form of

literature has a great impact on promoting environmental activism during environmental crises. With the works of poets such as Olzmann, Bambrick, and Okpik, strategies of poetic interpretation including emotion, warnings and urgency, imagery, and knowledge of human impacts take an effective and fascinating route to support the need for change. It is crucial to know these alternate sources, especially literary approaches, to advocate for a larger impact. The unique approaches made through the interpretation of poems such as these will in turn resonate with the population initially responsible for the dreadful state of the environment, and influence motivation to take action.

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