

Revaluing nature: toward an ecological criticism.

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Revaluing Nature: Toward An Ecological Criticism

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

G L E N A. L O V E University of Oregon Revaluing Nature: Toward An Ecological Criticism Describing the early rejection of the manuscript for his widely admired book, *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean recalls in his acknowledgments the cool dismissal from one New York publisher: "These stories have trees in them." The renowned English historian Arnold Toynbee, in his narrative history of the world entitled *Mankind and Mother Earth*, published in 1976 at the end of his long career and also at the time of the first worldwide recognition of the possibility of environmental disaster, concluded somberly that our present biosphere is the only habitable space we have, or are ever likely to have, that mankind now has the power to "make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by short-sighted human

greed" (9). In the intervening decade-plus since Toynbee's statement, we have seen little in the way of the prompt and vigorous concerted action which he calls for, and we must consider ourselves further along the road to an uninhabitable earth. The catalogue of actual and potential horrors is by now familiar to us all: the threats of nuclear holocaust, or of slower radiation poisoning, of chemical or germ warfare, the alarming growth of the world's population (standing room only in a few centuries at the present rate of growth), mounting evidence of global warming, destruction of the planet's protective ozone layer, the increasingly harmful effects of acid rain, overcutting of the world's last remaining great forests, the critical loss of topsoil and groundwater, overfishing and toxic poisoning of the oceans, inundation in 202 Western American Literature our own garbage, an increasing rate of extinction of plant and animal species. The doomsday potentialities are so real and so profoundly important that a ritual chanting of them ought to replace the various nationalistic and spiritual incantations with which we succor ourselves. But rather than confronting these ecological issues, we prefer to think on other things. The mechanism which David Ehrenfeld calls "the avoidance of unpleasant reality" remains firmly in place (243). For the most part, our society goes on with its bread and circuses, exemplified by the mindless diversion reflected in mass culture and the dizzying proliferation of activity among practitioners of literary research. In the face of profound threats to our biological survival, we continue, in the proud tradition of humanism, to, as Ehrenfeld says, "love ourselves best of all," to celebrate the self-aggrandizing ego and to place self-interest above public interest, even, irrationally enough, in matters of common survival (238-39). One would hope and expect that our field of English would respond appropriately to the radical displacements accompanying ecological catastrophe. Consider, however, that our society as a whole and our profession in particular have, as Cheryll Burgess points out, been faced with three crises in the last thirty years: civil rights, women's liberation, and environmental degradation (2). All three of these problem areas have been the subject of widespread social concern. All have become, to a greater or lesser extent, world issues. The discipline of English has addressed the concerns of civil rights, equality for minorities, and women's liberation through widespread attention and no small amount of action in such crucial areas as hiring and promotion practices, literary theory and criticism, and canon formation. Race, class, and gender are the words which we see and hear everywhere at our professional meetings and in our current publications. But curiously enough, as Burgess points out, the English profession has failed to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment, the acknowledgment of our place within the natural world and our need to live heedfully within it, at peril of our very survival. Curiosity must give way to incredulity at our unconcern when one reflects that in this area the problem-solving strategies of the past...

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Revaluing Nature: Toward An Ecological Criticism

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