# How does Toni Morrison present nature?

## 1 What is ecocriticism?

Ecocriticism is interested in how culture relates to, presents, exploits, admires….nature. Interdisciplinary in nature, it brings the arts, humanities, and social sciences into critical conversation with ecology and conservation. Ecocriticism examines human life and the world surrounding us, critiquing the way that we represent, interact with, and construct the environment, both “natural” and manmade. It is as concerned with environmental justice and the climate crisis as with literary explorations of ecology and nature.

Questions which eco-critics (or scholars in the environmental humanities) ask include:

* How is nature represented in a text? How is the setting of the play/film/text related to the environment?
* Which metaphors are used to represent the land, wilderness, nature or other related ideas, and what are the implications of these metaphors?
* How do we see issues of environmental disaster and crises reflected in popular culture and literary works?
* How are animals represented in this text and what is their relationship to humans?
* How do the roles or representations of men and women towards the environment differ in this play/film/text?
* Where is the environment and nature placed in the power hierarchy of a text/film?
* How is nature empowered, exploited or oppressed in this work?
* What parallels can be drawn between the sufferings and oppression of groups of people (women, minorities, immigrants, etc.) and treatment of the land?
* What rhetorical moves are used by environmentalists and activists, and what can we learn from them about our cultural attitudes towards nature?
* Would a shift toward an ecological perception of nature change the ways humans inhabit the Earth?
* Do authors impute certain values and make assumptions when they present the environment and nonhuman life in their works?
* How does one avoid binary oppositions, or should one perceive human nature in an I/it or I/thou relationship?

**Task: Highlight the questions which are particularly pertinent to *Beloved.* How would you begin to answer them? Which sections of the book / characters/settings would you look at?**

## 2 Which different ecocritical angles and ideas can you detect in these quotations?

**Stacy Alaimo:**

*“Rather than continuing to pose nature/culture dualisms that closet queer animals as well as animal cultures, and rather than attempting to locate the truth of human sexuality within the already written book of nature, we can think of queer desire as part of an emergent universe of a multitude of naturecultures.”*

*“Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the ‘environment.’”*

**Rob Nixon**

*“Ours is an age of onrushing turbo-capitalism, wherein the present feels more abbreviated than it used to be – at least for the world's privileged classes who live surrounded by technological time-savers that often compound the sensation of not having enough time. Consequently, one of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice. If, under neoliberalism, the gulf between the enclaved rich and outcast poor has become ever more pronounced, ours is also an era of enclaved time wherein for many speed has become self-justifying, propulsive ethic that renders "uneventful" violence (to those who live remote from its attritional lethality) a weak claimant on our time. The attosecond pace of our age, with its restless technologies of infinite promise and infinite disappointment, prompts us to keep flicking and clicking distractedly in an insatiable –often insensate– quest for quicker sensation".”*

**Lawrence Buell:**

*Perhaps the commonest attraction of environmental writing is that it increases our feel for both places previously unknown and places known but never so deeply felt. The activation of place-sense that comes with this vicarious insidership is apt to subside quickly, however, unless it is repeatedly jogged. Whether from laziness or a desire for security, we tend to lapse into comfortable inattentiveness toward the details of our surroundings as we go about our daily business. Place is related to complacency psychologically as well as etymologically; we reassure ourselves by converting abstract space into familiar place and subsisting in the unconsciousness of its familiarity. We thus face the constant challenge of keeping the familiar fresh, so that we do not reach a level of complacency where placesense dwindles into a caricature of itself. This is true for both writer and reader. […] Environmental literature launches itself from the presumption that we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to. […]The best environmental writers continually recalibrate familiar landscapes.*

**Task: Which of these angles are interesting in the context of *Beloved?* How so? Which further angle would you add when creating an ecocritical approach to *Beloved*?**

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