



## Sigtuna Think Piece 7

### Readings for Climate Change: Ecocriticism and Climate Change Education Research

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#### *Abstract*

*This think piece elaborates possible research connections between ecocriticism and climate change educational research, addressing the overarching question of what cultural responses to climate change can offer climate change education and climate change education research. It investigates literary critic Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading in the context of ecocriticism and suggests a few possible climate change education research questions.*

#### *Introduction*

In relation to the accelerating scientific and public concern about climate change and all its related matters, the interest in cultural responses to climate change is increasing. Consider for example the work done by the organisation *Cape Farewell* founded by the artist David Buckland in 2001.<sup>1</sup> Bringing together climate change scientists and various artists such as musicians, painters and authors, it is a good example of a trans-disciplinary and cultural response towards climate change. The belief that cultural responses to climate change have a crucial role to play in increasing knowledge and engaging the public runs through the wide variety of activities performed by scientists and artists connected to *Cape Farewell*. Another participant in the present climate change and sustainability debate is the exhibition *Green Architecture for the Future* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition addresses issues such as sustainable cities, the relationship between city and nature, climate engineering, resource scarcity, population growth and interior design. Created in relation to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009, the exhibition *Nature Strikes Back*, showing at The National Gallery of Denmark, portrays how the relationship between humans and nature has been portrayed in Western art from antiquity to today. The exhibition does not have an explicit focus on climate change as such. Rather, the aim is to give an historical background to present day views of nature and climate change.<sup>3</sup> Both *Cape Farewell*, the Louisiana exhibition and *Nature Strikes Back* are creative and innovative examples of how climate change and sustainability can be addressed through the creative arts and architecture. As participants in the climate change debate, these initiatives emphasise the importance of finding new ways of addressing and communicating climate change and its related matters to the public in ways that move beyond scientific discourse. However, telling stories of natural disasters, environmental catastrophes and human responses to events such as climate change is nothing new for authors

and filmmakers. The theme of human struggle for survival in *Robinson Crusoe*, the fight against extreme weather conditions in the film *The Day After Tomorrow* and the struggle for life after the extinction of the planet earth in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* are just a few examples.<sup>4</sup> It was not until quite recently however, that literary scholarship began paying attention to environmental issues.

This think piece pays special attention to possible research connections between ecocriticism and climate change educational research, addressing the overarching question of what cultural responses to climate change can offer climate change education and climate change education research. It focuses in particular on the reading of literature and investigates literary critic Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading in the context of ecocriticism, and elaborates a few possible climate change education research questions, as discussed in more detail below.

### *Ecocriticism*

Ecocriticism developed as a response to the modern global environmental crisis in the 1990s and has taken literary criticism to previously unexplored fields. The most commonly cited definition of ecocriticism derives from the first introductory ecocritical reader, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996: xviii):

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.

Ecocritical scholarship was started through authors primarily interested in non-fiction nature writing portraying 'wild' nature involving classical authors such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, John Muir and others (Glotfelty, 1996:xxiii; Garrard, 2004:59–84; Lyon, 1996:276–282; Buell, 1995). The genre of nature writing contains a wide variety of approaches and subgenres but can briefly be defined as first-person narratives about the natural environment combining scientific and philosophical observations and reflections of the natural world (Lyon, 1996:276–282). Nature writing often takes on an enthusiastic and admiring attitude towards nature and there is frequently a strong divide between the natural world and the cultural world. Texts portraying the natural world have dominated much ecocritical scholarship. Accordingly, traditional ecocritical issues of interest concern representations of nature and human impact on the environment answering questions such as: 'How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?' (Glotfelty, 1996:xviii–xix).

Texts portraying urban and 'intoxicated' environments were marginalised within early ecocritical research. However, voices calling for expansions of ecocritical boundaries both regarding research questions and texts have been emerging for quite a while. As a result,

modern ecocritical research has moved into the cities, to fiction and other kinds of visual narratives such as films, plays and, albeit to a lesser extent, artworks have also gained recognition around the ecocritical table.<sup>5</sup>

One aim of ecocritical research and ecocritical teaching is to contribute to an increased understanding of environmental issues in times of environmental crisis and is engaged in questions regarding the promotion of sustainable thinking. For example, on the home page of the main organisation for ecocriticism, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), the 'mission' of the organisation is stated as:

... to promote the understanding of nature and culture for a sustainable world by fostering a community of scholars, teachers, and writers who study the relationships among literature, culture, and the physical environment ...

Thus, there is a clear ambition to increase knowledge and understanding regarding how we relate to and act on natural and cultural environments. Following this, ecocriticism seems to be a potentially valuable theoretical vantage point that can help to investigate what ecocriticism can offer climate change educational research. However, even though ecocritical boundaries have been expanded since its beginning, it seems to me that ecocritical research boundaries need to be even further expanded in relation to the development of climate change educational research.

Despite the interest in increasing awareness of environmental issues, few investigations focus on what students of ecocriticism learn while studying literature. Consequently empirical investigations of learning processes and meaning making in relation to the reading of texts are rare within ecocritical research. Therefore, in order to qualify the discussion about the meaning of ecocritical readings for learning about issues related to climate change, I believe that a more explicit research focus on students' responses to the reading of texts used in ecocritical classrooms would be fruitful and add knowledge to the meaning of reading in climate change education.

In the forthcoming section I will turn to Louise Rosenblatt's theory of reading as a transactional process, which serves as a guide for the forthcoming discussion of research connections between ecocriticism and climate change education research.

### *Reading as a Transactional Process*

In *Literature and Exploration*, Rosenblatt (1938/1995) develops a theory of reading as a transactional process regarding meaning as being created in the encounter between reader and text. By using the concept of transaction, rather than interaction, Rosenblatt (1938/1995:xvi) emphasises the constituent relationship between reader and text:

*Interaction* ... suggests two distinct entities acting on each other like two billiard balls.  
*Transaction* lacks such mechanistic overtones and permits emphasis on the to-and-fro,

spiralling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text in the making of meaning.

In the discussion of the reader as an active participant in the meaning making of texts, Rosenblatt distinguishes between 'efferent' and 'aesthetic' reading purposes. This line of thought is based on the idea that it is possible for readers to have different stances, or different 'focus of attention during the reading-event' (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994:23). The term 'efferent' derives from the Latin *efferre* and implies that 'the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out' (Rosenblatt 1978/1994:23). Questions such as analysis of characters, summaries of plots and how female and male roles are played out in texts could all demand efferent activities. The same goes for the examples of ecocritical questions introduced in the beginning of this piece focusing for example on how nature is portrayed in particular texts.

Contrastingly, in aesthetic reading, the attention is directed to what happens during the reading-event, which means that the reader pays attention to personal associations, feelings, and ideas and 'the reader's attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text' (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994:25). Such readings would rather focus on eliciting readers' personal feelings and opinions in relation to the reading. Instead of focusing on what Thoreau means by 'to live deliberately', what he considers to be 'the essential facts of life' or his style of writing in the famous quote from Thoreau's *Walden*:

I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (<http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden02.html>)

Illustrating an 'efferent' approach, an aesthetic reading would gear students' attention to their immediate responses to the passage giving them the opportunity to express their personal thoughts in relation to the reading.

Rosenblatt claims that efferent reading approaches are more common than aesthetic reading approaches within the teaching of literature excluding the possible aesthetic 'lived through' experiences that the reading of literature can offer. Rosenblatt (1978/1994:29) is however careful to make sure that an aesthetic reading is something more than just 'free associations' and claims that 'The concept of transaction emphasises the relationship with, *and continuing awareness* of the text.' Furthermore, she (1938/1995:3) gives literary and aesthetic experiences special status within education and emphasises their importance for the development of self-understanding. She argues, 'In contrast to the analytic approach of the social sciences, the literary experience has immediacy and emotional persuasiveness' (1938/1995:7).

From this follows that the same text can be read both aesthetically and efferently (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994:25) depending on which attention, or which stance is adopted. The purpose of the reading will accordingly shape the meaning being made in the reading. For the purposes here, it becomes relevant to investigate what 'readers do in different kinds of reading' (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994:23) related to climate change topics. In order to be able to make claims on the place

of and the meaning of literature within climate change education, knowing what readers do and what activities they carry out in relation to the reading of various climate change texts may contribute to the development of a climate change education based on empirical research.

Adding Rosenblatt's theoretical perspective to empirical ecocritical research might be a fruitful way of addressing questions relevant to climate change education research. In relation to the uncertainties commonly connected to issues of climate change and Rosenblatt's claims that the reading of literary works would 'both have an intrinsic aesthetic value and make possible the development and assimilation of insights into human relations'<sup>6</sup> and play a pivotal role in developing critical readers, I find Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading useful in order to come up with potential research questions in the intersection between ecocriticism and climate change education research. Ecocriticism has by now a well-developed theoretical framework and many ecocritical analyses have been carried out. However, as mentioned above, ecocritical research has not investigated students' responses to the reading of literature. Questions such as: what can students learn from ecocritical readings?; what happens during the reading process?; and do the readings have any bearing on the students' actions in every day life? are crucial questions for climate change education research.

### *Expanding the Boundaries: Ecocriticism and Climate Change Education Research*

#### **Empirical studies**

Turning the attention to empirical investigations of ecocritical practice is my first suggestion of how the boundaries of ecocritical research can be expanded in order to become a fruitful contribution to the development of climate change education research. Due to the lack of empirical studies within ecocritical research, I think one potential area for this research would be to carry out empirical studies of students' responses to ecocritically relevant texts in order to find out what meanings are produced in these encounters. How do students respond? Empirical studies of students' responses to ecocritically relevant texts would also make it possible to test the potential of literary investigation for promoting environmental awareness and sustainable thinking. For example, in a forthcoming study we (Hansson & Östman, forthcoming) study students' responses to the reading of Thoreau's *Walden* focusing on how the students use the text to discuss their own views of nature and how they relate the text to their personal nature experiences. Taking Rosenblatt's ideas of aesthetic and efferent reading stances into account, it would also be relevant to investigate what stances dominate ecocritical teaching. Are the students given the opportunity to 'live through' the literary texts and/or are efferent stances more common? Is there equal emphasis on efferent and aesthetic readings within ecocritical teaching? How are literary works related to 'real' environmental and development challenges? In relation to climate change education research it would furthermore be relevant to investigate students' responses to different kinds of texts within the climate change discourse elaborating on different reading stances. For example, in what ways may aesthetic readings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) reports and efferent readings of climate change poetry and fiction help enhance understanding of climate change issues?

### **Asking questions relevant to climate change**

Another expansion would be to investigate how climate change matters are addressed within ecocritical teaching. Is ecocritical teaching still traditional in the sense that the genre of nature writing dominates ecocritical classrooms? The challenges we are facing when it comes to the future of urban development in a changing climate make texts portraying such issues crucial from a climate change education perspective and therefore highly relevant for climate change education research. Therefore, it becomes significant to continue the critical discussion concerning the identity of the texts in focus for ecocritical teaching in relation to climate change. Issues such as for example adaptation and mitigation, insecurity and conflicting values are all crucial in the climate change debate and for all the people affected by climate change. Whether such issues are addressed in ecocritical classrooms seems another relevant research question to be addressed in climate change education research.

### **The meaning of art and aesthetic experience**

The emphasis on aesthetic experiences expressed by Rosenblatt and the growing interest in cultural responses to climate change as mentioned above, makes the meaning of the arts and aesthetic experience within educational settings a potential research area in itself. What is the meaning of aesthetics and the arts in climate change education and in students' meaning making? How are the arts used in education? What aesthetic experiences do students express in relation to the reading of literature? Do artistic expressions automatically lead to aesthetic experiences and emotional expressions and responses to issues related to climate change? Such questions need to be empirically investigated as well.

### ***Conclusion***

In developing the arena of climate change education research, I think it is crucial that the arts do not only become mere appearances in relation to more established fields such as climate change science in the ongoing discussion about climate change in general and climate change education and research in particular. Viewing the arts as an equally important participant in addressing issues related to climate change – with equal status to scientific observations and investigations – will hopefully lead us a bit closer to the goal of a sustainable future in a changing climate.

### ***Notes on the Contributor***

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### ***Endnotes***

1 <http://www.capefarewell.com> (accessed 27 November 2009).

- 2 <http://www.louisiana.dk/uk/Menu/Exhibitions/Green+Architecture+for+the+Future> (accessed 27 November 2009).
- 3 <http://www.smk.dk/naturestrikesback> (accessed 27 November 2009).
- 4 Editor's note: It is difficult not to make the links to the Namafe paper in this edition here.
- 5 See for example Bennet and Teague, *Urban Ecocriticism* (1999) and Steven Rosendale, *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment* (2002), Greg Garrard, Ecocriticism: The Ability to Investigate Cultural Artefacts from an Ecological Perspective, in Arran Stibbe and Heather Luna (eds), *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy*, <http://www.sustainability-literacy.org/multimedia.html> (2009).
- 6 Interview with Louise Rosenblatt at <http://www.education.miami.edu/ep/Rosenblatt/> (accessed 27 November 2009).

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