Chapter I

Writing the Earth: Literature and the Environment

As modern man increasingly arrogates to himself dominion over his environment, the earth lies in subjection, its resources taken for granted, its landscapes despoiled and degraded. In his proprietary arrogance towards the earth, man has been oblivious to the fact that the threat he poses to the earth is a threat to him as well. By the twentieth century, however, man has come to recognize the disastrous consequences of his suicidal arrogance, and to grudgingly acknowledge that his obsession with progress, and blind faith in science and technology may soon render his habitat uninhabitable. A profound change—of perception, thinking, and values—is needed before any trenchant measures are taken to check the degradation of the earth. With the inevitability of destruction as a result of environmental damage looming large over the earth, a paradigm shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric values has to be achieved before man can effectively commence his attempt to avert disaster. An enquiry into man’s relations with nature in the past will yield the realization that the origins of environmental crisis lie deep in the cultural traditions of man and reveal the fundamental factors responsible for anthropocentric arrogance.

In “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White, Jr. censures the Judeo-Christian religion for its anthropocentric arrogance and dominating attitude toward nature. Emerging victorious over paganism, Christianity contributed a great deal in establishing the dominance of man over the rest of God’s creatures. It taught that God, having created man in his own image, exhorted him to go forth and multiply and to subdue the earth, and have dominion over its creatures, thus apparently reconfirming man’s notions of superiority. It established a dualism of man and nature
and insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his benefit. White observes:

In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. (ER 10)

Christopher Manes, in "Nature and Silence," points out that animists have, to a great extent, succeeded in avoiding the kind of environmental destruction that is prevalent in modern society. Manes holds that exegesis, the branch of religious studies that interprets the Bible, further eroded the animistic view of nature. Exegesis concluded that behind the littera, the literal meaning, lay some moralis, a moral truth established by God. Beyond that, lurked some divine purpose, the anagogue, which was difficult for human intellect to grasp. The things of nature thus became mere signs that helped to discover deeper realms of underlying meaning, symbols for the glory and orderliness of God (ER 19).

The advances in science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also contributed to a change from the medieval notion of a living universe to the concept of the world as a machine. Galileo Galilei reduced science to the study of phenomena that could be measured and quantified. The material world, including living organisms, was a machine for René Descartes, which could be understood completely by analysing it in terms of its smallest parts. Newtonian mechanics further
strengthened the notion of the world as a perfect machine governed by exact mathematical laws, and effectively distanced man from the idea of a living planet that should be perceived as a harmonious whole.

Harold Fromm, in "From Transcendence to Obsolescence," examines what has happened to man's conception of his relationship with nature as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Man has attained a mental assurance of domination of nature, and this arrogance in his own powers is described by Fromm as "modern man's own peculiar mythology: The Myth of Voluntary Omnipotence." It is "the contemporary form of the Faust legend, a legend which in all of its variants ends the same way" (ER 35). Fromm concludes that, oblivious of his roots in the earth or unwilling to acknowledge them, intent only upon the desires of his unconquered mind, man refuses to see that his well-nurtured body and Faustian will are connected by fine tubes—a "life-supporting system."—to the earth. But he is also quick to point out that the struggle between the necessities of modern life and the environment is the age-old struggle between the individual will and the universe, the substance, in other words, of classical tragedy. The "problem of environment [...] must ultimately be seen as a central philosophic and ontological question about the self-definition of contemporary man" (ER 38).

Yet another factor that has contributed to man's presumptuousness and created a dangerous dichotomy between man and nature is the philosophy of humanism. Humanism combines a belief in the nobility of the human race, a supreme confidence in human intelligence and capabilities, a blind faith in science and technology and an overwhelming urge to tame and subdue nature. The condescension implicit in the humanistic assumptions has destroyed the closeness and kinship that early man used to have with nature. Questioning the unwholesome assumptions of humanism would
help to diminish the arrogant tendency that exults in man’s ability to manipulate the earth, and help us to adopt a more flexible and sensible attitude at a critical juncture.

The idea of the “Great Chain of Being,” a depiction of the world as a vast filigree of lower and higher forms, with humankind’s place above that of beasts and a little below that of angels, became a confirmation of human superiority over the natural world. Christopher Manes observes: “Drawing on humanity’s position in the Great Chain between dumb beasts and articulate angels, humanism insisted that there was an ontological difference between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the biosphere” (*ER* 20).

A reconsideration of these existing cultural assumptions—Christian, humanistic, technological—has to be the first step if man is to be able at least to attempt a turnaround before it is too late. Manes writes that we require a viable environmental ethic to confront the silence of nature—the fact that in our culture only human beings have status as speaking subjects. Deep ecology has stressed the need to establish communication between human subjects and the natural world. It sees a link between listening to the non-human world and reversing the environmentally destructive practices of modern man. We require a language of ecological humility, a language free from the “directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentred, post-modern, post-humanist perspective” (*ER* 16-17).

Amidst the humanistic garrulity of the modern world in which nature has lost its voice, stray voices were heard occasionally, albeit in the wilderness, proposing alternative views. In his essay, which sees Christianity as responsible for the ecologic crisis, Lynn White describes Saint Francis of Assisi as one who tried to propose an alternative Christian view. Francis believed in the virtue of humility, not merely for the individual but for man as a species. He tried to depose man from his monarchy
and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures. His view of nature and of man included all things, animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of God, who, in the “ultimate gesture of cosmic humility, assumed flesh, lay helpless in a manger, and hung dying on a scaffold” (White, ER 13). But Francis could not jolt the anthropocentric complacency of Christian dogma.

Living in an age of environmental anxiety has made man realize that a reconsideration of hitherto accepted assumptions is necessary. In the modern world, with its reduced and circumscribed landscapes, the time has come for man to be ready to explore natural systems as models of diversity offering patterns of survival. In “Revaluing Nature: Towards an Ecological Criticism,” Glen Love writes: “Looking at, listening to, the natural world seems an act of sanity, of deference to natural systems and communities that work and survive—in a world context of momentous human mismanagement” (WAL 25: 203). Landscape-oriented literature, with its emphasis on the non-human, offers a needed corrective to the notion of human superiority.

Ecology, which is the study of the interrelationships between organisms and their environment, offers a scientific point of view that questions traditional human-centred concepts. The need to see the smallest, most remote part in relation to a very large whole is the central intellectual action required by an ecological vision. In the view of Carolyn Merchant, ecological thinking offers the possibility of a new relationship between humans and non-human nature that could lead to the sustainability of the biosphere in the future:

The assumptions of the ecological paradigm contrast with those of the mechanistic, resting on a different set of assumptions about nature: 1) everything is connected to everything else in an integrated web; 2) the
whole is greater than the sum of the parts; 3) nonhuman nature is active, dynamic, and responsive to human actions; 4) process, not parts, is primary; and 5) people and nature are a unified whole. (203)

Ecology also offers a viable ethic for grounding human relations with nature.

Ecologists like Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner and Aldo Leopold have tried to develop ecological visions, which can be translated into social, economic, political and individual programmes of action. In *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold puts forward his land ethic: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (224 - 25). Such an ecological vision enlarges the boundaries of the community to include “soils, waters, plants and animals or collectively: the land” (204). Barry Commoner, in *The Closing Circle*, summarized the major “laws” of ecology for laymen: 1) Everything is connected to everything else. 2) Everything must go somewhere. 3) Nature knows best. 4) There is no such thing as a free lunch. Rachel Carson combined scientific training in biology and ecology with a deeper ecological sensitivity. Her book on the ecological consequences of the widespread use of pesticides, *Silent Spring* (1962), can probably be considered to have ushered in the “Age of Ecology.”

The concern over the earth’s future has infused a number of disciplines with an ecological awareness. Historians like Donald Worster are now writing environmental histories, studying the reciprocal relationships between humans and land through the ages, and tracing patterns of change in cultures as they evolve. Anthropological studies of primal cultures help us to know and respect their value systems and rituals that have helped them to live in harmony with their surroundings. New perceptions of nature evolved by deep ecology, ecological philosophy and
ecofeminism are trying to reconceptualize man’s relation to nature. Ecophilosophy tries to understand and critique the root causes of environmental degradation and to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical foundation for right relations with the earth.

Man’s responsibility to the environment can be seen and interpreted variously. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines “Environmental Ethics” as a topic of applied ethics, which examines the moral basis of environmental responsibility. It outlines three distinct theories of moral responsibility to the environment. Environmental anthropocentrism assumes that we have an indirect duty to the environment to assure that the earth remains environmentally hospitable for supporting human life. The second approach is that our duty to the environment hinges on the environmental interests of animals. The third and most radical approach called ecocentrism maintains that the environment deserves direct moral consideration, and not one that is merely derived from human and animal interests.

Stan Rowe in “Ecocentrism and Traditional Ecological Knowledge,” defines Ecocentrism as a “value-shift from *Homo sapiens* to planet earth: Ecosphere.” Ecocentrism sees the ecosphere as the prime reality. While implying equal importance to all components—air, water, earth and organisms—it also emphasizes that the Ecosphere is more important than any of its constituents. Ecofeminism finds explicit parallels between the exploitation of the land and the exploitation of the female body. As Gretchen T. Legler writes in “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism,” ecofeminists argue that “the uses and abuses of the environment that have led to what they see as the potentially catastrophic present are largely due to a patriarchal environmental ethic that has conceptualized land as ‘woman’.” (228). Arne Naess’s
deep ecology recognizes the inherent value of all other living beings, celebrates biodiversity and strongly condemns anthropocentrism.

The ecophilosophical changes now being called for are strongly reminiscent of poet Robinson Jeffers’s idea of ‘inhumanism,’ which he describes as “a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and a recognition of the transhuman magnificence” (The Double Axe xxii). The shift to such a transhuman focus and into a more ecologically informed discourse will strengthen man’s sense of relationships and will help him to re-examine the implications of existing attitudes.

In theology, ancient Earth Goddess worship, Eastern religious traditions and Native American wisdom, which view the earth itself as sacred, are increasingly being explored, as much needed correctives to Western anthropomorphism. A sacramental awareness of the world is implicit in James Lovelock’s geophysiology (formerly called the Gaia Hypothesis). The theory holds that the Earth is a self-regulating, self-sustaining entity, which continually adjusts its environment in order to support life, and as such is endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts. The revival of the perspectives of animism—with its belief that the phenomenal world, animate as well as inanimate, is alive and that not only is the nonhuman world alive, but it is filled with articulate subjects, able to communicate with humans (Lowie 99-135)—is in keeping with the attempts to lend voice to nature.

Ecopsychology explores the links between the environmental conditions and mental health and regards modern man’s estrangement from nature as the basis of social and psychological ills. As Theodore Roszak writes, in “Ecopsychology: Eight Principles,” it “seeks to heal the fundamental alienation between the recently created urban psyche and the age-old natural environment.” Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in Topophilia:
A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes and Values, has proposed replacing modern man's estrangement and alienation from the land with "topophilia," an affection for places, which preserves their aesthetic value and sustains ethical behaviour towards the earth.

The response of literary study and analysis to the ecological consciousness of the twentieth century has been broadly categorized as ecocriticism. The term was first coined in 1978 by William Reuckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." By ecocriticism, Reuckert meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." But such a definition would be rather restrictive, concerned specifically with the science of ecology. Ecocriticism now includes all attempts that analyse environmental implications in literary texts. Cheryl Glotfelty in her introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, an earth-centred approach to literary studies (xviii):

all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world. Ecocriticism has as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

(Glotfelty ER xx)

In an effort to clarify the concept, Glotfelty has also listed a few questions that can be raised by an ecocritic: "How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play
consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre?” (ER xix).

The taxonomy of this green branch of literary studies is still being discussed. In 1972, Joseph W. Meeker in his path-breaking study *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology,* introduced the term “literary ecology” to refer to “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works” (9).

Scholars like Stephanie Sarver, who are uncomfortable with the term ecocriticism, argue that though the terms ecology and environment are often conflated in popular opinion, they are two different concepts: whereas ecology is the scientific study of the interrelationships between organisms and their environment, environmentalism comprises all practices that promote the well being of the earth. They argue that these studies reflect not the science of ecology, but an environmental sensibility.

Ecocriticism does not have a single theory, but is united by a single focus, the environment. It draws on existing theories to illuminate the understanding of how human interactions with nature are reflected in literature. As such, it can be better described as an environmental approach to literature strengthened by some of the basic concepts of ecology.

Ecocritics deal primarily with the works of writers like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson who not only meditate upon the relationship of nature and human culture, but also dramatize the relationship. Ecocritical interest extends to all works which display a greater than average interest in the natural world, for example, the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, W. S. Merwin and Gary Snyder and the novels of Willa Cather and Edward Abbey. Texts that critically present existing social norms and patterns of behaviour related to the natural environment are examined, and counter-images of ecologically sustainable
relationships between human kind and nature are highlighted. As Ian Marshall points out in “The Ecocritical Heritage,” those critics who have defined, studied, and applied concepts such as “pastoralism,” “romanticism,” “transcendentalism,” “naturalism,” or “the frontier,” and those who have examined the role of the land in shaping national character, were all exploring the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Ecocriticism examines how literary figures contribute to shaping social and cultural attitudes toward the environment. Analysing the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature, it explores the values attributed to nature and how perceptions of nature shape literary works. The ecological or environmental consciousness that it evokes, generates attentiveness to or awareness of the natural world that puts in perspective man’s position in the natural scheme of things. Ecocriticism has a distinct socio-political agenda as it asserts the rights and interests of an oppressed group—the non-human part of the planet—and critiques the dominant, privileged attitudes of human superiority. It introduces environmental concerns into mainstream discussions that mostly centre on social issues like gender, ethnicity, nationalism, and seeks to redress the marginalization of the natural environment in critical trends. As Michael Branch elucidates in “Ecocriticism: The Nature of Nature in Literary Theory and Practice,” ecocriticism gives increased attention to literary representations of nature, and is sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character, or work in the natural system. Branch continues:

It values highly the literary “sense of place,” not as setting but as essential expression bonding with or alienation from a specific natural context. It examines the architectonic interrelationship between literary and organic form. It also looks to literature to provide speculation upon the relationship between human and nonhuman
nature. and to suggest ways in which that relationship might be
reinterpreted or reformed. It is integrative rather than reductive, in the
sense that it wishes to demonstrate how elements of literary texts work
together, rather than how they may be taken apart. This holistic quality
also applies to the criticism itself, which is often broadly
interdisciplinary in its construction of interpretative contexts.

Understanding the interconnectedness of all things involves the reconnection of the
disciplines that have become rigidly compartmentalized. Ecocriticism thus implies
the holistic ideal found in ecology, serves as an umbrella under which
comprehensiveness of perspectives are encouraged, and makes use of a variety of
approaches or even combinations of approaches.

Based on Elaine Showalter’s models of the three developmental stages of
feminist criticism, Cheryl Glotfelty provides a useful scheme for describing three
analogous phases in ecocriticism (ER xxii-xxiv). The first stage of feminist criticism,
the “images of women” state concentrates on how women are portrayed in literature.
Analogous efforts in ecocriticism study how nature is portrayed in literature, so that
awareness of stereotypes, distortions or omissions of representations of nature is
couraged. Showalter’s second stage in feminist criticism serves the important
function of consciousness-raising as it rediscovers literature by women. In
ecocriticism, similar efforts are on to rediscover and recuperate celebrated and
hitherto neglected nature writers. Mainstream genres are examined, and writers whose
works manifest ecological awareness are identified—Willa Cather, Robinson Jeffers,
Gary Snyder, W.S. Merwin and many others. Ecocritics also study the environmental
conditions of an author’s life—the influence of place on the imagination—
demonstrating that where an author grew up, travelled and wrote is pertinent to an
understanding of his or her work. The third stage that Showalter identifies in feminist criticism is the theoretical phase, which draws on a wide range of theories to raise fundamental questions about gender and sexuality in literary discourse. Glotfelty clarifies that analogous work in ecocriticism includes examining how literary discourse has defined the human. A critique of such a definition questions the dualisms present in Western thought, “dualisms that separate meaning from matter, sever mind from body, divide men from women, and wrench humanity from nature” (ER xxiv). William Reuckert in “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” suggests trying to develop an ecological poetics by experimenting with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology—as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision—has great relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in. Describing the poem as stored energy, Reuckert explains that reading is an energy transfer and that critics and teachers act as mediators between poetry and the biosphere, releasing the energy and information stored in poetry so that it may flow through the human community and be translated to social action (73).

In the article, “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight” (ER 371 – 89), Michael J. McDowell points to a few other areas that would lend themselves to a meaningful application of ecological criticism. It is possible to attempt an analysis of how ecoconscious writers have achieved their naturally sympathetic literary forms. He also suggests a radical critique of dominant Western attitudes to nature; currents of non-Western thought flowing into the mainstream of Western tradition need analysis. An analysis of metaphors specifically related to landscape can be attempted. Yet another concern is to analyse how each writer has modified existing genres and modes such as pastoralism to incorporate an understanding of the complex relationships
within nature. A third concern is the method landscape writers have used to enable a
dialogical interplay of voices and values in contradiction to each other and to each
writer's own views.

McDowell says that one of the major shifts in our scientific worldview in the
twentieth century has been to recognize the importance of systems and relationships
in the phenomenal world. The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail
Bakhtin has incorporated into his literary theories much of the thinking about systems
and relationships. Consequently his work provides an ideal starting point for an
ecological analysis and landscape writing. McDowell observes:

Bakhtin's theories might be seen as the literary equivalent of ecology,
the science of relationships. The ideal form to represent reality,
according to Bakhtin, is a dialogical form, one in which multiple
voices or points of view interact. Monological forms, in contrast,
encourage the singular speaking subject to suppress whatever doesn't
fit his or her ideology. In discussing this theory of dialogics, Bakhtin
names authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, and
the speech of characters, as means the writer employs to achieve an
interplay of social voices and a variety of relationships among them.
The effect is a kind of dialogue among different points of view, which
gives value to a variety of socio-ideological positions. Beginning with
the idea that all entities in the great web of nature deserve recognition
and a voice, an ecological literary criticism might explore how authors
have represented the interaction of both the human and nonhuman
voices in the landscape. (*ER* 372)
Ecocriticism can also focus on the ways in which writers use place to establish meaning. Writers like Thoreau, Cather and Jeffers tend to emphasize their sense of place and to create narratives that are so geographically rooted, that a significant interaction occurs between author and place, and between character and place. In these writers the landscape plays a role as important as the roles of the characters and the narrator. The role of the narrator assumes importance while analysing the values that a writer recognizes in a landscape. Focusing on such values and techniques will help to root the text firmly in the earth, and create an awareness of the relationship between man and the physical world. In the words of Joseph Meeker:

Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures [. . .]. If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behaviour and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction? (3 – 4)

As Cheryl Glotliity points out, the most important task of an ecologically focused criticism is consciousness-raising (ER xxiv). To solve problems one has to be aware of them, and has to start thinking about them. Ecocriticism encourages one to think seriously about the relationship between man and his environment, about the ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how literature can
transmit values with profound ecological implications and foster greater environmental concern.

II

Even a casual survey of literature down the ages reveals that ecology, though a new word and a new science, has been an ancient theme in literary works. A great deal of literature has dealt explicitly with nature, either to express an aesthetic appreciation of its beauty or to explore the man-nature relationship. As Michael Branch points out in "Ecocriticism: The Nature of Nature in Literary Theory and Practice," literature has exerted a tremendous influence upon changing conceptions of natural systems and man's role within them. The works of Theocritus, Virgil and Horace introduced the pastoral concept of nature as a serene retreat from the artificial environment of the court and the town. During the middle ages, writers like Thomas Aquinas expressed the orthodox Christian view that nature was the symbol of the glory and orderliness of God's design. Renaissance and early seventeenth century writers such as Francis Bacon expressed the modern worldview by applauding human superiority over the natural world. In the eighteenth century, Robert Burns's poetry and Gilbert White's natural history helped establish more congenial attitudes toward nature, which had been relegated to insignificance during the Age of Reason. In the nineteenth century, the writings of Charles Darwin drastically influenced western man's perception of nature and questioned man's presumptions of centrality. The European Romantic movement, beginning with Jean Jacques Rousseau's challenge to an overly civilized Europe and continuing with Goethe and the English Romantic poets, was a reaction against the growth of industrialism and materialism of the age.
in which nature became a mere commodity to be utilized by man. This movement continued in America with Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau and Muir. And in the twentieth century, with increasing awareness of an environmental crisis, the most eloquent voices for an ecologically integrative vision of nature have come from writers like Rachel Carson, Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder.

Michael Branch also points out that literature has struggled with questions of value comparable to those being asked by ecophilosophy. Questions about the proper role of humans in the cosmic scheme have always engaged the literary imagination, and concerns about maintaining or restoring a right relationship with nature are both thematically and symbolically present in the literature of every culture. In the plague in Oedipus Rex, and in Adam's expulsion from Paradise, the ethical propriety of individual action is seen to affect the health and balance of nature. Branch also points out that even the aesthetic categories by which our feeling for nature are understood, the beautiful, the picturesque, the sublime, the scenic, the wild etc. have been defined largely through their use in literary and critical contexts. Thus literature has always conditioned our philosophical understanding of nature.

Today, when the threat to the environment has assumed overwhelming proportions, man's relationship to nature requires a redefinition. The time has come for a reaffirmation of age-old concepts like pastoralism, romanticism, transcendentalism and naturalism, which define and explore man's relation to nature. The pastoral contrasts the purity and simplicity of shepherd life to the corruption and artificiality of the city. It portrays a natural world to which urbanites withdraw in search of solitude and tranquility, where they attain a vision of simple life, which will presumably sustain them when they return to civilization. The pastoral retreat thus becomes a temporary release from the urban world, which is implicitly the real world.
Glen A. Love in the article “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” feels that the pastoral mode reflects the same sort of anthropocentric assumptions which are in dire need of reassessment. Love, however, admits that the lasting appeal of the pastoral is “a testament to our instinctive and mythic sense of ourselves as creatures of natural origins, those who must return periodically to the earth for the rootholds of sanity somehow denied us by civilization” (*WAL* 25:207).

Donald Worster in *Nature’s Economy*, writes that understanding the romantic point of view will contribute to our understanding of the ecology movement, because like ecology, romanticism also targets the presumptuous notions of science, the values and institutions of progress and the bias against nature in Western religion. The basic aspects of romanticism include: an interest in nature, especially its wild manifestations; a return to a natural, primitive way of life; a subjective interpretation of nature; an emphasis on natural religion; a belief in the goodness of man, most notably expressed by Rousseau with the subsequent cult of “the noble savage;” a tendency to exalt the individual and the power of the imagination and a revolt against rationalism. Worster states that the Romantic approach to nature was fundamentally ecological—it is concerned with relation, interdependence and holism (58). At the same time, the celebration of nature notwithstanding, by exalting the individual and attaching too much importance to the power of the imagination, it nurtures egocentrism, which has to be purged to attain an ecocentric vision. The transcendentalist belief that God is immanent in man and nature and that individual intuition is the highest source of knowledge also led to an optimistic emphasis on individualism, self-reliance and rejection of traditional authority. Both the transcendental and romantic points of view with their emphasis on the self also seem to be in need of reassessment in the context of the ecological crisis. Environmental
pressures have tended to increase the importance of such literary movements focusing on nature, which when shorn of their anthropocentric implications can emerge as cultural forces which reaffirm the need for right relations with the earth. In “Revaluing Nature,” Glen Love elucidates:

The redefinition of pastoral, then, requires that contact with the green world be acknowledged as something more than a temporary excursion into simplicity [. . .]. A pastoral for the present and the future calls for a better science of nature, a greater understanding of its complexity, a more radical awareness of its primal energy and stability, and a more acute questioning of values of the supposedly sophisticated society to which we are bound. These are the qualities which distinguish much of our best western American literature, where writers characteristically push beyond the pastoral conventions to confront the power of a nature, which rebuffs society’s assumptions of control. (210-211)

Love concludes that in the light of the present environmental awareness, redirecting human consciousness to a full consideration of its proper place in a threatened natural world can be the most important function of literature today (213). How man responds to the crisis will determine the quality of his future existence on the earth. This awareness is particularly palpable in contemporary American literature. Very few people would be as painfully aware of the rape of the land as the Americans who have witnessed in a relatively short span of time the ravages man can wreak on the environment. The transition from pristine wilderness to an industrialized society has not been a gradual one in America as compared to other cultures. An examination of American literature down the years reveals how the spirit of place haunts American writers, instilling in them a point of view that looks askance
at modern man's blind rush towards "progress," forgetting that he is connected to the earth by life-sustaining roots. A brief overview of American poetry reveals how the major American poets have portrayed their environment and how their ecological sensitivity and awareness have shaped their poetry and vision.

The concern with the American environment has been basic to American literature from the very beginning. David D. Anderson, in *Sunshine and Smoke: American Writers and the American Environment*, notes that American writers have always been concerned with the "nature and quality of the environment as its affects the life and well-being of the individual. In this sense, many American writers can be called environmentalists, and American literature, approached from an environmental point of view, can often tell us more about the nature of America and American life and literature than literary theories and approaches which stress aesthetics, economic or environmental determinism or organic cyclical rhythms" (5).

The earliest American writers saw a land of abundance that promised a good life for all. Thomas Hariot in "A Brief and True Report of the Newfound Land of Virginia," describes a land limitless in its potential, able to fulfill man's vision of a perfect society. Many writers described the close relationship between the people and their land, as they strove to subdue the wilderness before them and mould it to their needs. As Arthur C. Clough states in *The Necessary Earth*, the "frontier" became the "natural symbol for resolution, [...] the confrontation of hard realities from which there is no convenient escape, the courage of the individual fighter who can rely on none other for his salvation" (78). Early accounts of this land of abundance were exaggerated, as attempts were on to encourage colonization. By the middle of the 18th century, as the ties with the mother country grew tenuous, the settlers became increasingly aware of the land of promise that was theirs, and reasonably accurate
accounts of land and its potential were documented. With a number of journals, letters, diaries, travel documents and scientific documents being written, documentation of the American environment increased during the second half of the eighteenth century. Thomas Jefferson, in “The Foundations of an Agrarian Society,” defines a natural way of life in which life is simple and men are free. In “On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures of an American Farmer,” Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur shares the Jeffersonian vision of an agrarian society composed of a close relationship between free men and the natural world of which they were a part. In his article “Indexing American Possibilities,” Michael Branch points to the work of natural history writers of the period, William Bartram, Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon, as important contributions to environmental literature. As Branch says: “Bartram’s advocacy of nature and his criticism of anthropocentric pretensions to superiority clearly prefigure the “ecocentric egalitarianism” of much contemporary philosophy; his criticism of the traditional hierarchical paradigm of the chain of being suggests a respect for the dignity of all nature, and powerfully expresses the romantic belief that divinity is diffused throughout nature” (ER 289). Branch concludes that it is important to recognize that the sensitivity to the natural world and the concern for its preservation seen in Bartram, Wilson and Audubon, make their views anticipate the ethics of the modern American environmental concern.

Expansion and growth characterized by the increasing misuse of the environment, brought with it the awareness that man’s needs could be fulfilled not by subduing and exploiting nature but by living in harmony and understanding with it. The poetry of the period too reflected this growing awareness of nature’s significance. William Cullen Bryant’s poems reveal an undeviating preoccupation with nature. Whitman describes Bryant as the “bard of the river and the wood, ever conveying a
taste of open air, with scents as from hayfields, grapes, birch-borders” (*Specimen Days* 267). In “The Prairies” (*Poetical Works* 130-33), human presence is diminished and transitory, but the sheer power and glory of the natural world is present in all its force:

Man hath no power in all this glorious work:

The hand that built the firmament hath heaved

And smoothed these verdant swells, and sown their slopes

With herbage, planted them with island groves,

And hedged them round with forests. (131)

Bryant’s preoccupation with death is reflected in his view of the landscape. In “An Indian at the Burial-Place of His Fathers” (*Poetical Works* 58-60), he reiterates the nineteenth century glorification of nature as “the plantations of God.” But he can also view the land from the Indian’s point of view. While the white man’s vision is confined to the lawns and the meadows, the Indian’s vision rises to the mountains and the forests. The Indian longs for a lost landscape, to “see these vales in woods arrayed, / [.] And herds of deer [. . .] (59).” Finally, even the nostalgia is overtaken by the inexorable westward movement of the whites:

They waste us—aye—like April snow

In the warm noon, we shrink away;

And fast they follow, as we go

Toward the setting day, —

Till they shall fill the land, and we

Are driven into the Western sea. (60)

The Indian accepts his extinction as inevitable in the natural order. But at the same time, he can visualize the white man’s imminent destruction: “their race may vanish
hence, like mine. / And leave no trace behind" (60). He strikes a prophetic stance as he visualizes the glorious vision of the land of abundance, so prevalent in nineteenth century literature, being replaced by a barren wasteland:

Those grateful sounds are heard no more,
The springs are silent in the sun;
The rivers, by the blackened shore,
With lessening current run;
The realm our tribes are crushed to get
May be a barren desert yet. (60)

From the vantage point of the twentieth century, it is tempting to read rudiments of environmental concern in Bryant.

The faith that man's needs could be fulfilled by living in harmony and understanding with nature is described in Ralph Waldo Emerson's Nature, which is an attempt to define the meaning of man, God, and the universe. Emerson turned to nature for his religion: nature was beauty, solace and meaning. He declares that the ultimate reality, the unity of all things in nature, is spiritual. He insists that intuition is the means whereby that spiritual unity can be found; and he points out that man's responsibility is to understand in himself the manifestation of this spiritual unity. In Nature, he writes:

In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith [. . .]. Standing on the bare ground. —my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space. —all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I
“I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” (Anderson 98)

Though Emerson is able to apprehend the unity of all things, his understanding of man’s role in nature falls short of an ecological point of view, for he seems to privilege man over nature. He writes in *Nature*: “He [man] is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life (Anderson 104). His humanistic view of man’s role at the centre of creation reveals his inability to get rid of the anthropocentric shackles of the nineteenth century, quite unlike his friend Henry David Thoreau, who attempts to forge an entirely natural relationship between man and the natural world of which he is a part. In “Walking” he writes: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part or parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society”(Anderson 126).

Thoreau’s work is a record of observation, understanding and participation in the things of nature. The central theme of *Walden* is the continuity of man with nature; man growing out of nature and finally returning to it. Scott Slovic identifies two modes of apprehending the natural world in Thoreau’s *Journal*. One is that of “correspondence,” a belief in the mirroring of man and nature, and a sharing of vital rhythms. The other mode is that of nature’s “otherness,” the recognition of the polarity of man and nature and at the same time the possibility of interaction between the two poles (21).
Thoreau was an active field ecologist, a philosopher of nature whose ideas anticipate much in the mood of the twentieth century. Donald Worster comments that in his life and work we find a key expression of the romantic stance towards the earth as well as an increasingly complex and sophisticated ecological philosophy, a remarkable source of inspiration and guidance for the subversive activism of the recent ecology movement (58). Thoreau believes that man must learn to accommodate himself to the natural order rather than seek to overwhelm and transform it. Chris Angus-in his introduction to Walden, describes Thoreau as one of the first prominent American ecologists; he studied the relationships between creatures and their environments, practiced frugality and conservation, understood the fragile link between the earth and its inhabitants. Thoreau thus seems to have contributed to the development of the arcadian ethic into a modern ecological philosophy.

The sea, in its formlessness, its unsearchable depths, and its vast power, dominates Herman Melville’s Moby Dick. The novel can be read as an allegory of man’s self-destructive attempt to conquer nature. Captain Ahab becomes increasingly insane in his effort to destroy Moby Dick, the great white whale. Finally nature prevails and the Pequod, that microcosm of the human world, is destroyed. Melville seems to be contrasting Ahab’s arrogant obsession for conquest with the lone survivor Ishmael’s comprehensive point of view that is able to see man as an insignificant part of a greater whole.

Walt Whitman shows an extraordinary physical sensitivity to every minute manifestation of living things, sight and sound, man and nature and an amazing empathy with all in nature. The starting point of his vaulting imagination, as it spans the American continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific and records the endless diversity that is America, is always his native scene and soil. His wonder and
amazement are evoked not just by the stars, but also by the humblest and most familiar objects: "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars, / And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren." (Selected Poems 49). His democratic spirit insists on including those most scorned within the embrace of his wonder and affection. He is the champion of the marginalized voices that are yearning to be heard:

Through me many long dumb voices,

Voices of interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,

Voices of the diseas’d and the despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,

[... ] Through me forbidden voices. (41-42)

In Specimen Days, Whitman notes the affinities of his poetry—the primitiveness and abandon—with wild nature:

"I have found the law of my poems," was the unspoken but more-and-more decided feeling that came to me as I pass’d, hour after hour, amid all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon—this plenitude of material, entire absence of art, untrammel’d play of primitive Nature—the chasm, the gorge, the crystal mountain stream, repeated scores, hundreds of miles—the broad handling and absolute uncrampedness—the fantastic forms [...]. (259)

Whitman’s feeling for nature was profound, intense and intimate. There is the nineteenth century doctrine of “back to nature.” The contrast between artificial man and the non-human aspects of nature is implied in his poems:

I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals . . . .

[ . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . ]

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied . . . not one is demented with the mania of
owning things (50).

Landscape is generally the appropriate background for man’s life or else it stands symbolically for the larger nature, which includes everything and relates itself to the divine.

Joseph Warren Beach in The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century Poetry feels that Whitman’s enthusiasm for the universe down to its very least creature and aspect is doubtless native and temperamental; but it was given intellectual support by his belief that the universe is rational and moral like man, and that nature and man are alike parts of a unified coherent scheme, which however difficult it may be to understand in detail, is in the large an affair of “great laws and harmonious combinations” (379). He insists that one must never take any person or object separately: “The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme—myself disintegrated, everyone disintegrated, yet part of the scheme” (142) Whitman repeatedly dramatizes the natural world in sexual terms, constantly exploring the intimate kinship of nature and man.

The cyclical quality of all natural things is emphasized—nature constantly regenerates itself and turns death into life through chemical transformation. Whitman envisages an exchange of life forms through decomposition and re-growth, and fashions metaphors that vivify the idea of the ceaseless springing of life from death: “Tenderly will I use you curling grass, / It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men” (20).
Whitman has been described as a poet of cosmic consciousness. In *Start With the Sun*, Karl Shapiro describes cosmic consciousness as the capacity of the individual consciousness to experience a sense of total unity with all Nature, or the universe, or some degree of that experience. Cosmic consciousness differs from human consciousness in that human consciousness is ordinarily consciousness of oneself as distinct from all other objects and beings in the universe. In cosmic consciousness there is a sense of identification with the universe, an intellectual enlightenment or illumination which may last only briefly but which places the individual on a new plane of existence (30-31). In Whitman, such an ability to identify with the universe engenders an ecological vision, which—in spite of his celebration of the self and his faith in progress—emphasizes the recognition of the interrelatedness of all objects of the universe:

A vast similitude interlocks all,

All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,

[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]

All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes.

All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages. (163)

As ecologist Barry Commoner points out in *The Closing Circle*, the complex web in which all life is enmeshed, and man’s place in it, are clearly—and beautifully—described in the poems of Walt Whitman, in Melville’s Moby Dick, in Mark Twain and in Emerson and Thoreau (46-47).

The United States that emerged after the Civil War was urban and industrial. David Anderson remarks that “the Civil War marks the watershed of American history—on one side the drying springs of romanticism, on the other the gathering of
realistic waters soon to become a flood" (252). The Civil War destroyed romanticism and its vision of fulfilment. Violence, aggression, exploitation became admired virtues; industries flourished. The industrial revolution in America laid the foundation for the new American environment. The exodus from the rural areas and the influx of European labourers to man the factories resulted in the expansion of the urban environment.

The first group of writers to define the post Civil War American environment concentrated on exploring regional and local phenomena. These "local colorists" sought to define the uniqueness of the locales of their origins (Anderson 253). One of these who rose above the local colour tradition was Mark Twain. In his writings, he is concerned with the nature of the American environment and its impact upon man. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* he contrasts the natural freedom of Huck's life and the unnatural limitations of life in a civilized society. James Fennimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* is the perfect woodsman, who is part of nature and is uneasy when he gets anywhere near a human settlement. *The Prairie* is a lament that sums up the conflict of this "natural man" with the civilization he is always trying to leave behind him. Lawrence Buell considers John Muir as the most striking case of a spontaneous pantheism, who could look at a rock and see "a portion of Spirit clothe itself with a sheet of lichen tissue," and declare that it was no "more or less radically divine" than all other life forms (192). Buell emphasizes the ecological thrust of Muir's thought that derives from the awareness of all orders of creation as a community of equal companions and the realization that the environment is not created in humanity's special interest.

Slowly the faith and optimism of the earlier age began to give way to darker elements of fear and futility. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, as a
reaction to the American optimism came naturalism “a doctrine of a mechanistic
universe in which men are the pawns of impersonal forces against which they have
small or no control” (Clough 169). The naturalist sees human behaviour as
predetermined by the implacable laws of nature, which are mechanical, and
indifferent to man. Naturalism in literature is an approach that proceeds from an
analysis of reality in terms of natural forces like heredity, environment and physical
drives. The naturalists tend to concern themselves with the harsh, often sordid aspects
of life. Naturalism in philosophy is a position that believes that everything that exists
is a part of nature and they can be explained by means of strictly natural categories.
Naturalists place emphasis on unifying the scientific viewpoint with an all-
encompassing reality. Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Hamlin Garland look at their
own environment and see man pitted against impersonal, larger-than-human forces.
Nature, to these poets, is not beneficent, nor cruel, nor treacherous, but indifferent.
Frank Norris portrays nature as “relentless, a gigantic engine, a vast power, huge,
terrible; a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no
tolerance: crushing out the human atom with soundless calm” (The Octopus 124).
Naturalism heralded a more objective view of man and nature and emphasized the
ecological concept of considering man as just another form of life.

Industrial growth inevitably led to the despoliation of a pristine continent and
novelists of the early twentieth century portray in their works an intense
preoccupation with the degradation of the American environment. Willa Cather paints
the Nebraska prairies with an aching regret over vanishing landscapes, a lonely
attachment to the place, and outrage at what had replaced the open country. John
Steinbeck in The Grapes of Wrath stamps on American minds an unforgettable image
of “Okies” driven out of the dust bowl of the Middle West and permitted to enter
California as labourers. Steinbeck touchingly describes "Westering," the historic migration to California in *The Grapes of Wrath*, which portrays the characters' attachment to the land that sustains them. In *To A God Unknown* Joseph Wayne works to tame and cultivate the harsh wilderness of a remote valley in California and perceives too late, the futility of man's vanity and the emptiness of his purpose.

Alfred Kazin describes Ernest Hemingway as the most deliberate native artist in landscape after Thoreau, and comments on his profound and even desperate love for the American land (215). William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* most profoundly depicts the shifting balance between man and nature. In "The Bear," Ike McCaslin has to relinquish every mechanical contrivance that link him to civilization and yield himself to the woods to see the bear, to experience nature. In the course of the story, Old Ben is killed, the last of the half-Indian hunters dies, the virgin forest is sold to lumber companies, invaded by railroads and whittled away by encroaching farms. Faulkner is concerned in "The Bear" not just with the conflict between nature and civilization but also the loss of pristine wilderness.

The twentieth century saw poets becoming so absorbed in the workings of their own minds that they ignored the objective existence of nature. Nature was internalized and made subjective or regarded as scenery or a mere background. Joseph Warren Beach remarks that the philosophical concept of nature has virtually disappeared in contemporary poetry: "It was as if a great weariness had come over the literary mind, making it loath to grapple with cosmic problems, including the problem of man's place in nature" (547). But poets like Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost and Robinson Jeffers, acutely aware of the interrelationships that sustain man in his environment, resisted the prevailing trends of modernism, which ignored the kinship between the nonhuman and the human. A sensitive feeling for landscapes is seen in
the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters who holds that man’s great agony is to feel separate from nature, and that his salvation lies in recovering a state of communion with her.

Robert Frost’s poems have rural settings; his characters are the simple folk tied to the land, and he has been frequently hailed as the pastoral poet of America. In poem after poem, Frost reminds man of his eternal dependence on nature’s silent machinery. In “It Bids Pretty Fair,” man appears safe and secure on his globe; but what if the sun goes out—“the lighting?” He is deeply aware of the isolation, the loneliness and the stoic acceptance of the simple country folk of New England, and often expresses, with a kind of pragmatic detachment, contempt for modern America and modern civilization. Aware of man’s relationship to nature, Frost is also able to see that the reason for modern man’s alienation is his inability to understand the nature of that relationship.

Robinson Jeffers in Carmel sees his God in the savagely beautiful wild coast he inhabited. Defining his philosophy of inhumanism as “a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence” (The Double Axe xxii), he sets himself against modernism, which stresses form over content, and shifts emphasis from physical reality. Much of Jeffers’s poetry argues against the humanistic and egocentric assumptions of the modern world and suggests that man’s restlessness is the result of his attempts to elevate himself against his natural origins. He believes that contemporary urban life only removes men further from their inherent animal natures. In order to get back into accord with nature, man needs to return to it and view it as a sacred balance. He advocates a pantheistic view, where the universe itself is God; man’s attempt to understand this God begins by understanding man’s insignificant
position within the universe. He uses the technique of distancing himself from abject humanity and viewing it as an infinitesimal yet integral part of a universal process.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw Robinson Jeffers emerging out of years of devastating critical neglect as a pertinent force in an age that acknowledges environmental realities and questions or contradicts the prevailing belief in the rightness of man's attempts to dominate nature through technology. Earlier writers had showed an inclination to emphasize the needs and aspirations of man. To writers like Wordsworth and Emerson, nature offered a haven from the growing distastefulness of industrial civilization. Although the romantics did not endorse the outright material exploitation of nature, they still looked upon it primarily in terms of its potential human utility. Later such short-sighted assumptions were called sharply into question by poets like Gary Snyder, W. S. Merwin, A.R. Ammons.

Jeffers's followers in the development of a new environmental consciousness celebrate the whole of life, and recognize human potential for creative rather than destructive participation in it. David Copland Morris in "Celebration and Irony: The Polyphonic Voice of Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire" remarks that Edward Abbey was profoundly marked by Jeffers's poetry. "Jeffers' "inhumanism" is like a steel reinforcing rod in the structure of Abbey's thought" (WAL 28 23). John Elder points out the ecological thrust of the writings of A. R. Ammons:

Interest in nature's dynamic particularity, and a conviction of the inherent importance of each particular, weave together the diverse levels of Ammons's writing—his explicit statements about ecology, his inclusiveness of subject matter and interest in science, his open-ended constantly re-centering verse forms. The intensity with which
the poet notices and appreciates the details of the natural world fuses
mind and nature (146).

W. S. Merwin shares with Jeffers an ecological vision; both proceed from
similar assumptions, particularly those involving nature and its relationship to the
human race, transcending the solipsistic limitations of many contemporary poets. Like
Jeffers, Merwin stresses the hypocrisy and arrogance of the human perspective and
writes about the separation of humans from the natural order. Gary Snyder draws on a
variety of religious systems to present a philosophical alternative to Western
logocentrism. Patrick Murphy in “Beyond Humanism: Mythic Fantasy and
Inhumanist Philosophy in the Long Poems of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder,”
comments on Snyder’s implication that America lacks a balanced relationship with
nature because it consists of a rootless population, one that does not contribute to the
cyclic growth and maintenance of its place of origin. Snyder is able both to affirm the
earth-centred values and to foresee a reassertion of them after the follies of this age
have passed. In “For the Children” in Turtle Island he recognizes the potential for
disaster in mankind’s immediate future. He asserts that the cycles of human life only
achieve health and wholeness in a community, which also includes the earth’s
nonhuman processes and entities. Post-humanism values all living things and the
inorganic environment on which they depend, and recognizes that all life and the
conditions that sustain life are interrelated. It asserts that man can be, if he abandons
his anthropocentric assumptions, a contributor to, rather than the destroyer of, the
pattern of nature. In yet another article, “Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder and the
Problem of Civilization.” Murphy states that Jeffers has been a crucial formative
influence on Snyder, and remains a figure looming large in Snyder’s appraisal of
American poetry (Galaxy 93). In an interview in 1992, Snyder gave Jeffers major
prominence in the poetry of the American West: “The mapping of the Far West, or of the Pacific Slope, is not all that old. One could say that it pretty much begins with Robinson Jeffers, who is an inspiration and, to some small extent, an irritant to us all.” (16). Snyder shares with Jeffers a concern for evolving a post-human philosophy of nature.

As Kirk Glaser points out in “Desire, Death, and Domesticity in Jeffers’s Pastorals of Apocalypse,” Robinson Jeffers proclaims an early ecological manifesto barely heard of in the 1920s and 30s by relocating humanity from the centre of creation to an insignificant thread in nature’s web:

He has [...] re-imagined and developed crucial elements of American nature poetry. He has helped to bring back into modern consciousness ideas of nature’s primacy and our consciousness as an expression of nature—perceptions that such nineteenth century writers as Muir and Thoreau began to express. His visions and ideas parallel developments in ecological and scientific theories and have provided points of departure, whether the influence be direct or indirect, for many poets and twentieth century writers concerned with the natural world. Such perceptions are at the heart of poets like Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder. Jeffers’s work also dovetails with ideas expressed by Native American poets such as Ray Youngbear, Joy Harjo and Linda Hogan (though these poets draw images of nature from their traditional cultures rather than from a European-American lineage of writers). (Dimensions 170)

Thus Jeffers’s perception of nature develops against the backdrop of the great tradition of Thoreau and Whitman; he now occupies a place of prominence in the canon of American poets, as he anticipates a post humanist vision acceptable to a
younger generation of poets in the late twentieth century, who attempt to question western anthropocentric presumptions.

Notes

1 This reference is to the Christian story of creation in *The Bible*: “And God blessed them, and God said to them “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1.29).

2 *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996 ed. defines humanism as “1. any system or mode of thought or action in which human interests, values, and dignity predominate. 2. devotion to or study of the humanities”


4 Deep ecology, first formulated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, involves commitment to respect the intrinsic values of richness and diversity. This in tum leads to a critique of industrial society and anthropocentrism.

5 In “The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective,” Paula Gunn Allen looks at some native American assumptions about the universe that make American Indian Literature different from Western literary traditions (*ER* 241 – 263). “The American Indian sees all creatures as relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central) as offspring of the Great Mystery, as co creators, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts of an ordered, balanced, and living whole” (*ER* 246).


8 Ecologically informed criticism was not recognized as a distinct school or movement till the nineties when some universities in the United States began to include literature courses in their environmental studies curricula. Cheryl Glotfely became the first Associate Professor in Literature and Environment in 1990. In 1991, Harold Fromm and Glotfely, organized a special MLA session entitled “Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies.” In 1992 Glen Love introduced environmental literature as a new subject of literary studies and teaching by chairing American Literature Association symposium entitled “American Nature Writing: New Contexts, New Approaches.” The same year, at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, a new Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed with Scott Slovic as its first president. Its objectives were to promote the exchange of ideas pertaining to literature that consider the relationship between human beings and the natural world and to encourage scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research. The next year, Patrick Murphy established a new journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. By 1993, ecological literary study had emerged as a recognizable critical school.

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