

Out of the Woods: Finding Our Way toward a Cognitive Ecocriticism

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Abstract:

This talk argues that a fundamental understanding of how humans evolved as wayfinders can provide ecocritics with some fruitful points of origin in their literary inquiries. Practitioners of ecocriticism are skeptical about grounding their work in cognitive psychology and evolutionary social science, largely because they remain enamored of romantic conceptions of *nature, environment, and ecosystem*. However, until ecocriticism grapples with what science teaches us about how the human mind orders reality, it will be frustratingly stuck in the binary constructions it abhors. The purpose of this talk is to *sketch out* how the fundamental, evolved psychology of humans is broadly connected to literary output.

I assume at the outset, then, 1) that humans exhibit species-specific biases, and 2) that they construct and utilize *environment* to meet species-specific needs. In other words, all our knowledge is framed, broadly speaking, by the demands of human survival, and this includes our knowledge of the nonhuman natural world. Humans are a wayfinding, knowledge-seeking species; far-ranging but home-based, they evolved the higher intelligence and social groups necessary to negotiate a varied, extensive environment. Strong memory, environmental attunement, causal thinking, generalized information-gathering (vs. immediate reactive response), goal orientation, problem-solving, and synthesizing intelligence all serve the wayfinding mind. A strongly social disposition, a preference for narrative cognition, and a preferred order for certain elements within the environment are all ubiquitous in human

cognition, and they all leave their mark on literature. Since ecocritics are especially concerned with the treatment of nonhuman nature, they should note the importance of human relationships in coloring attitudes toward physical locations. This is an outgrowth, I suggest, of the *essential* importance of the social group in human evolutionary survival.

The modes, forms, and content of literature attest to their grounding in a species-typical cognition, and the second part of this talk will indicate some broad connections between wayfinding cognition and literary modes, forms, and content. First, nature writing bears witness to the human sensitivity to the nonhuman natural world. Whereas much ecocriticism is engaged in a quest for the most realistic depiction of nature, analysts are better occupied asking what contexts inform each author’s depiction of the nonhuman natural world. Second, many forms of writing—travel literature, the picaresque, the bildungsroman, the long poem, and so on—involve journeys, which coheres with the basic phenomenology and epistemology of wayfinders. Understanding the special challenges of modern travel—by train, or alone, for instance—is aided by knowledge of evolved cognition. Third, narratives that depict confinement (literally or metaphorically) exploit this evolved, wayfinding sensibility. Confinement can limit knowledge, or it can operate metaphorically to depict social control. This portion of the talk will enlist a range of literary examples.



This talk is based primarily on the essay “Cognitive Ecocriticism: Human Wayfinding, Sociality, and Literary Interpretation”; *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine, Johns Hopkins UP, 2010, 257-102. An earlier theoretical essay arguing for the centrality of evolutionary and cognitive psychology to ecocriticism is “’Loving Ourselves Best of All’: Ecocriticism and the Adapted Mind,” *Mosaic* 37.3 (2004) 1-18. An extensive book chapter on

ecocriticism is included in *What Is Literature For? Biocultural Theory and Interpretation*, a recently completed manuscript (under submission).