What’s Nature?

*American College Dictionary*

- the material world, esp. as surrounding man and existing independently of his activities
- the universe, with all its phenomena
- reality, as distinguished from any effect of art: true to nature
- a primitive wild condition; an uncultivated state
Ralph Waldo

- NATURE, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. ART is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that an impression so grand as that of the natural world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.
Nature

- From Latin *natura*, “birth, constitution, characteristic, course of things”—ultimately from *nasci*, to be born. Related words: nation, native, natal, pregnant (Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 8)

- Snyder prefers “The physical universe and all its properties,” but also recognizes and “the outside” or “other-than-human” is a common meaning.
Nature

- Soper distinguishes between nature as a “realist concept” (the structures, processes, casual powers that are constantly operative within the physical world”) and nature “as a ‘lay’ or ‘surface’ concept (denoting ordinary features as “natural” rather than produced).
Place

- “We experience slums, prairies, and wetlands all equally as ‘places’” (Snyder 27).
- Says geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, place differs from space in that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6). If we experience space as an idea, we experience places through sensory impressions—the seen, heard, felt, smelled, tasted.
- Place and the sense of place is related to region and bioregion. Take the “bioregional quiz.”
Nature Writing

- A nonfiction work that is lyrical, often personal, informational, and sometimes political
- Mixes literature, science, philosophy
The First Writers Were Nature Writers

- Writing developed in agricultural societies as means of off-loading mental information. Mnemonic device. Narrative, also, was a way of remembering what happened where. Pictographs on walls of hunts, stories about it, as ways to recall (keep track of) the animal tracks. Early narrative functioned as a map. “Thus a deer-hunt story” Silko tells us,” might also serve as a map.”

- Writing, too, developed as a way of counting, tallying (etymologically related to telling). When we tell a story, we re-count it.
What is an Environmental Text?

from Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*

- Human concerns are not the only concerns. Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is more environmental than “Ode to a Nightingale” by Keats.

- Nature is a process to which humans are accountable. Ethical orientation to nature.

- Allows for affective responses. Awe. Wonder. Reverence. We don’t know how to quantify those responses. Skepticism is not the dominant mode. “These stories have trees in them.”

- Place is more than just a "setting."
Env. Lit. Cont’d

- Interdisciplinary – nature is a process more than a constant or a given.

- McKibben distinguishes it from nature writing, and “America’s single most distinctive contribution to the world’s literature”

- Says environmental texts have resulted in social change (whereas the Civil War would have happened without *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*)
Purpose of Env. Writing

- Connect readers with other’s experiences
- . . . . Places, but interested in more than description.
- Direct thought toward alternative futures
- Affect one’s caring for the physical world
Ecocriticism

- Ecocriticism investigates the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of languages and literature. “As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land” (Woodlief).

- How we “image” a thing affects our conduct to it. Often, environmental preservation has followed depictions of landscape, literary or artistic, that infuses them with meaning.
Ecocrit. Cont’d

- Response to crises—women, civil rights, environmental.
- Some say a response to the excesses, shall we say, of deconstruction. *Compost-structuralism.* Return to engaging the world rather than the text and infinite play of language.
Ecocrit

- “a sum of several contributing methodologies from various disciplines, brought together in service of either/both (a) exploring a particular though ever-shifting "canon" of literary works (which is what justifies it as an academic niche), and/or (b) addressing any or all of a few different ethical commitments, including (i) concern for environmental degradation, (ii) nurturing sense of place in people's lives, (iii) quest for spiritual meaning in nature, (iv) challenging oppressive and damaging structures of modern life and culture” (Steven Holmes, ASLE post).
Glossary

- **Pastoral** -- presents rural life as idyllic, innocent and good (outmoded, or relevant?)
- **Environment** -- the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded
- **Ecology** – Coined by German Ernst Haeckel in 1866. Comes from Oikos, Greek word for “home.” Study of the relationships between organisms and their environment
- **Landscape** – from a Dutch word referring to a painting of a natural scene. Land as it is shaped. Scene.
- **Anthropocentric** -- considering human beings as the most significant entity of the universe
- **Cartesian** – From the French philosopher Renee Descartes, mind and matter are separate, the mind-body dualism, coordinate system
Orientations of our Texts / Authors

- **Personal, Psychological, Spiritual** -- epiphany of place, gestalt, experience of being “found”
- **Aesthetic** -- place as beautiful, complex, wild
- **Political** -- power interests that inform the valuation or devaluation of place, nature
- **Scientific** -- ecosystems
- **Discursive** -- foregrounds the extent that the place is shaped by discourse, by specific cultural values (myths, narratives of place)
Major Tropes

- Pollution
- Pastoral
- Wilderness
- Place
- Animals
- Apocalypse
- What’s Next?
Two Final Quotes . . .

- In the end, we will conserve only what we love, love only what we understand, and understand only what we have been taught.
  --Baba Dinor

- We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.
  --Aldo Leopold