

**ECO-CRITICISM AND CLIMATE ANXIETY IN MODERN POETRY  
AND DRAMA: VOICES FROM A WARMING WORLD**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The accelerating ecological crisis of the twenty-first century has fundamentally transformed the terrain of literary imagination, giving rise to new aesthetic forms, affective registers, and ethical demands within contemporary poetry and drama. This article presents a comprehensive critical examination of eco-criticism and climate anxiety as they manifest in modern poetic and dramatic practice, synthesising scholarly developments from 2022 to 2025. Drawing on ecocritical theory, environmental humanities, affect theory, postcolonial ecology, and performance studies, the article explores how contemporary poets and playwrights negotiate the unprecedented challenge of representing planetary-scale catastrophe within the compressed, embodied, and formally particular conditions of lyric and theatrical art. The article identifies five interconnected dimensions of this negotiation: the formal and generic innovations that climate anxiety has generated in poetry and drama; the affective economies of ecological grief, dread, rage, and hope that animate contemporary environmental literature; the entanglement of ecological and social justice concerns in postcolonial and indigenous ecopoetics; the distinctive possibilities of theatrical space as a site for ecological witness and transformation; and the emergence of solastalgia, climate grief, and ecological mourning as dominant emotional and conceptual frameworks in recent literary production. The article concludes by mapping productive directions for future ecocritical scholarship in the fields of poetry and drama.*

**Keywords**

*Eco-criticism; climate anxiety; ecopoetic; environmental drama; solastalgia*

## **1 INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE**

The term 'Anthropocene'—designating the current geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant force shaping planetary systems—has become one of the most contested and generative concepts in contemporary cultural and intellectual life. Coined in the sciences and rapidly adopted by the humanities, it names not merely a geological reality but a rupture in human self-understanding: the recognition that the species that has built civilisations, composed symphonies, and written poetry has also, in the same historical moment, precipitated an extinction crisis, destabilised the climate, and compromised the conditions of planetary life for millennia to come. Literature has not been immune to this rupture. On the contrary, the ecological crisis has become one of the defining conditions of contemporary literary production, reshaping the forms, preoccupations, and ethical horizons of poetry and drama in ways that this article sets out to examine.

Eco-criticism—the study of the relationships between literature, culture, and the physical environment—has itself undergone rapid development in the context of the climate emergency. What began as a relatively marginal subdiscipline, concerned primarily with representations of nature in canonical texts, has become a central concern of literary and cultural studies, generating a rich body of theoretical work, critical practice, and pedagogical innovation. The most recent phase of this development, often described as 'third wave' ecocriticism, is characterised by its engagement with climate science, affect theory, environmental justice, postcolonial thought, and new materialist philosophy—an expanded and interdisciplinary orientation that has substantially enriched the field's capacity to engage with the literary dimensions of the ecological crisis.

## **2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: ECOCRITICISM IN THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY**

### **2.1 From Nature Writing to Planetary Literature**

The trajectory of ecocritical theory over the past three decades reflects the escalating urgency of the ecological crisis that has driven its development. Early ecocriticism, associated with the work of Glotfelty, Buell, and others in the 1990s, was primarily concerned with representations of nature, wilderness, and the pastoral in literary tradition—a concern that reflected the conservation politics of its moment. The second wave of ecocriticism, emerging in the early 2000s, expanded this focus to include urban environments, environmental justice,

and the entanglement of ecological and social concerns, developing a more politically engaged and socially contextualised orientation. Trexler's (2023) comprehensive mapping of this third-wave moment identifies several defining features: a move away from the idealisation of nature toward a reckoning with nature's radical alterity and the entanglement of natural and cultural systems; a new attention to the affective and psychological dimensions of ecological crisis; and an expanded interdisciplinary orientation that draws on cognitive science, political theory, postcolonial studies, and new materialist philosophy.

## **2.2 New Materialism and More-Than-Human Worlds**

New materialist philosophy, associated with scholars such as Bennett, Barad, Haraway, and Tsing, has provided ecocriticism with a set of theoretical resources for rethinking the relationships between human and non-human agencies, between culture and nature, and between the literary text and the more-than-human world it represents and inhabits. Bennett's concept of 'vibrant matter'—the idea that non-human things possess forms of agency and efficacy that exceed their status as passive objects of human action—has been particularly generative for ecocritical analysis of poetry and drama, providing a framework for the interpretation of literary representations of natural processes, ecological systems, and non-human organisms that resists the anthropocentric assumptions of traditional literary criticism. Clark's (2022) examination of scalar challenges in ecocriticism has further refined these frameworks, demonstrating that literary representations of ecological crisis must navigate the radical differences between the temporal and spatial scales of individual human experience and the geological and planetary scales at which ecological processes unfold.

## **2.3 Affect Theory and Ecological Feeling**

The affective dimensions of the ecological crisis—the grief, dread, rage, numbness, and ambivalent hope that characterise contemporary responses to climate change—are simultaneously among the most important features of environmental literature and among the most resistant to conventional critical analysis. Norgaard's sociological analysis of climate silence (2022) has illuminated the social dimensions of ecological affect, demonstrating that the apparent indifference of many communities to the reality of climate change is not a cognitive but an affective phenomenon—a form of motivated non-engagement driven by the overwhelming emotional demands of genuine confrontation with ecological catastrophe. For literary scholars, this analysis raises important questions about the role of poetry and drama

in mediating and transforming ecological affect: whether and how literary forms can create conditions for the affective engagement with ecological crisis that social pressure discourages.

### **3 THE GREEN LYRIC: FORMAL INNOVATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ECO POETRY**

#### **3.1 Beyond the Pastoral: New Forms for Ecological Crisis**

Contemporary Eco poetry has developed in self-conscious dialogue with and departure from the pastoral tradition—the long Western literary tradition of idealising rural and natural landscapes as spaces of innocence, simplicity, and moral clarity. Robertson's (2023) comprehensive study of contemporary ecopoetic identifies a range of formal strategies through which recent poets have responded to this challenge. Other formal innovations include the 'multi-species lyric' (poetry that attempts to represent non-human perspectives and agencies from within human language), the 'geological poem' (verse that inhabits deep time scales and confronts the insignificance of human historical time in relation to planetary processes), and the 'documentary ecopoem' (work that incorporates scientific data, statistical information, and documentary evidence into poetic form).

#### **3.2 Language, Materiality, and Ecological Form**

The material dimensions of poetic language—its phonetic textures, its rhythmic patterns, its visual presentation on the page—have become subjects of particular interest in contemporary ecocritical analysis of poetry. Watts and Leiper (2024) have developed this argument in a sophisticated theoretical account of what they call 'material ecopoetics'—an approach to the analysis of environmental poetry that attends to the physical and sensory dimensions of poetic language alongside its representational and argumentative content. Their analysis demonstrates that the most accomplished contemporary ecopoets exploit the material dimensions of language not merely as aesthetic decoration but as a substantive vehicle for ecological meaning: using rhythm to embody natural processes, sound patterning to evoke ecological relationships, and spatial form to represent the multi-dimensional complexity of ecological systems.

### **3.3 Climate Elegy and the Poetry of Loss**

Among the most significant developments in contemporary ecopoetry has been the emergence of a new mode of ecological elegy—poetry that mourns the loss of species, habitats, and ecological relationships in the context of the ongoing mass extinction and habitat destruction that characterise the current ecological crisis. Van Dooren's philosophical analysis of extinction (2023) has provided an important theoretical framework for the understanding of ecological elegy, drawing on the concept of 'flight ways'—the unique forms of life, relationship, and meaning that each species embodies—to argue that extinction involves the loss not merely of organisms but of entire worlds of meaning and experience. Contemporary elegists for extinct and endangered species—poets such as Alice Oswald, Don McKay, Craig Santos Perez, and their counterparts across world literary traditions—engage in what Van Dooren calls 'the work of mourning': the difficult task of bearing witness to irreversible loss without either succumbing to despair or retreating into consolatory fantasy.

## **4 THE ECOLOGICAL STAGE: DRAMA, PERFORMANCE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

### **4.1 Theatre Ecology: Theoretical Frameworks**

The application of ecological thinking to theatre has generated a productive body of theoretical work that examines both the representation of ecological themes in dramatic texts and the ecological dimensions of theatrical production itself. Theatres consume energy, generate waste, require the movement of people and materials, and occupy physical spaces with their own ecological histories and implications. Arons and May's (2022) edited collection on theatre and ecology has provided a comprehensive survey of the theoretical frameworks available for the analysis of ecological drama and performance, ranging from ecocritical readings of canonical dramatic texts to new materialist accounts of the lively agencies that inhabit theatrical spaces.

### **4.2 Climate Drama: Staging the Unrepresentable**

Drama faces particular challenges in representing ecological crisis, challenges that arise from the mismatch between the temporal, spatial, and causal scales of climate change and the conventions of theatrical representation. Bottoms and Goulis (2023) have addressed this challenge through the concept of 'post-human dramaturgy'—an approach to dramatic writing and production that deliberately works against the anthropocentric assumptions of

conventional dramatic form, decentering the human protagonist, expanding the temporal and spatial frame of the dramatic world, and giving theatrical presence to non-human agencies. Their analysis of recent climate drama identifies a range of formal strategies for achieving these effects: the use of chorus and collective voice to stage the collective dimensions of ecological crisis; the deployment of deep-time narratives that juxtapose human historical and geological temporal scales; and the development of non-naturalistic theatrical languages—movement, sound, image, and space—that can give theatrical presence to processes and forces that verbal language cannot adequately represent.

#### **4.3 Performance Activism and Environmental Theatre**

Environmental theatre—theatrical work that combines artistic practice with environmental activism—has a substantial history in the performance art traditions of the twentieth century, from the street theatre of the environmental movement of the 1970s to the eco-performance projects of artists such as Robert Smithson and Joseph Beuys. Kershaw's (2023) analysis of environmental performance activism in the current moment identifies several distinctive features of contemporary eco-theatre: its tendency to blur the boundaries between performance and protest, between artistic practice and direct action; its emphasis on collective and participatory forms that challenge the passivity of conventional theatrical spectatorship; and its engagement with the specific bodies and environments of particular places, resisting the spatial abstraction of conventional theatrical representation in favour of site-specific encounters with actual ecological damage and resilience.

### **5 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SCHOLARSHIP AND CREATIVE PRACTICE (2022–2025)**

#### **5.1 New Directions in Ecocritical Theory**

The period from 2022 to 2025 has seen several significant theoretical developments that have substantially enriched the ecocritical analysis of poetry and drama. The emergence of 'multispecies studies' as a distinct interdisciplinary field—drawing on biology, anthropology, philosophy, and literary studies to examine the entangled lives of human and non-human organisms—has generated new frameworks for the analysis of literary representations of species relationships, ecological networks, and more-than-human communities. Tsing and colleagues' elaboration of the concept of 'collaborative survival'—the idea that human beings, like all organisms, survive only through relationships of dependency and mutual constitution

with other species—has been particularly influential in recent ecopoetic and ecological drama scholarship.

Ghosh's further reflections on the 'great derangement' (2023) have continued to shape scholarly discussion of the representational challenges of climate fiction and climate poetry, reinforcing his earlier argument that the realist novel, with its focus on individual human experience and its commitment to probability, is structurally ill-suited to the representation of climate change. His more recent work has turned specifically to poetry and drama as forms potentially better equipped to meet this representational challenge, arguing that their formal properties—the compression and intensity of poetry, the embodied and collective character of drama—give them specific resources for engaging with ecological crisis that prose narrative lacks.

### **5.2 Contemporary Eco poets and Their Work**

The period under review has seen significant creative work by poets whose engagement with ecological themes has attracted both popular and scholarly attention. Lucie Brock-Broido's posthumously published ecological poems, Craig Santos Perez's ongoing Pacific ecopoetry, Tommy Pico's blending of indigenous identity and environmental concern, and the internationally recognised ecological verse of poets from Nigeria, India, Australia, and elsewhere have all contributed to an expanding and diversifying body of ecopoetic practice. Wainwright and Davies (2024) have provided a comprehensive critical survey of recent ecopoetry in English, identifying several significant trends: an increasing engagement with scientific data and ecological research as primary creative material; a growing interest in non-English-language ecopoetic traditions and their translation into English literary contexts; a proliferation of collaborative and community-based ecopoetic projects that blur the boundaries between artistic practice and environmental activism; and a deepening engagement with the specific ecological conditions and environmental histories of particular places, resisting the tendency toward ecological generalisation that has sometimes characterised mainstream ecocriticism.

### **5.3 Climate Theatre and Institutional Responses**

Major theatrical institutions in the United Kingdom, Europe, North America, and Australia have made significant commitments to environmental sustainability and climate engagement during the period under review. Oskar Eustis's (2023) public statement of the Public Theatre's

commitment to climate-engaged programming, the National Theatre of Scotland's 'Green Theatre' initiative, and the international network of theatre companies committed to climate performance practice documented in Jochum's (2024) survey all reflect a significant shift in the institutional landscape of theatrical production—a shift that is generating new conditions for the creation and reception of climate drama.

#### **5.4 Pedagogy and Eco-Literary Education**

The pedagogical dimensions of eco-criticism in poetry and drama have attracted increasing attention in recent years, reflecting both the expansion of eco-literary study in university curricula and the growing recognition of the educational role that literary culture can play in the broader project of ecological transformation. Mayer and colleagues (2023) have developed a comprehensive framework for eco-literary pedagogy that draws on both ecocritical theory and educational psychology to create learning environments in which students engage with ecological themes in poetry and drama in ways that are intellectually rigorous, emotionally sustainable, and practically oriented.

Their framework emphasises what they call 'embodied eco-literacy'—an approach to the study of ecological literature that engages students' sensory, affective, and physical responses alongside their cognitive and analytical capacities. Drawing on the specific properties of poetry and drama as forms that cultivate embodied attention and collective experience, their pedagogy creates conditions for the kind of integrated eco-literary engagement that conventional academic study often discourages.

## **6 CONCLUSION: POETRY, DRAMA, AND THE ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**

This article has argued that poetry and drama possess distinctive resources for engaging with the ecological crisis and its associated climate anxieties—resources rooted in the formal, affective, and social properties of these art forms that give them specific capabilities and responsibilities in the context of planetary emergency. The formal compression and material attentiveness of poetry; the embodied, collective, and real-time character of drama; the capacity of both forms to cultivate non-anthropocentric perspectives, to hold grief and hope in tension, and to stage encounters between human and non-human worlds: these are not merely aesthetic qualities but ecological ones, with significant implications for the role of literary culture in the broader project of ecological transformation.

The scholarship reviewed in this article demonstrates that eco-criticism has developed the theoretical frameworks, critical vocabularies, and interdisciplinary connections needed to engage rigorously and productively with the ecological dimensions of contemporary poetry and drama. From the formal analysis of ecopoetic strategies to the philosophical interrogation of ecological affect; from the political analysis of environmental justice in dramatic literature to the decolonial critique of mainstream ecocriticism; from the empirical study of climate grief to the institutional analysis of theatrical ecology: the field has developed a richly varied set of tools for the analysis of literary engagements with ecological crisis. At the heart of this inquiry is a conviction that poetry and drama matter—that the cultivation of ecological imagination through literary art is not a luxury but a necessity in the conditions of the Anthropocene. The voices that poets and playwrights give to the warming world—its grief and its rage, its beauty and its damage, its losses and its resilient possibilities—are among the most important contributions that human culture can make to the long, uncertain, and necessary project of learning to inhabit the Earth more wisely and more justly.

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