ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO ENGLISH LITERATURE 
IN A CHINESE CONTEXT

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Abstract
English literature is of great importance to the Chinese learners of English. This paper seeks to find some solution to the decline in the teaching of English literature in a Chinese context. Problems in a Chinese class are first analyzed. And then from a constructivist perspective that knowledge can be best mastered when students find their personal involvement with what they are learning. A proposal is put forward that a critical attitude and response to the literary texts are important. To introduce critical activities into class, one has first to help students overcome their “theory anxieties.” The term is brought forth by the advanced development of critical theories. Ecocriticism as an ethical critical approach to literature does not hold a big corpus of new and academic terms, and thus is a most desirable substitute which also cares for the current issues of ecological calamities. Sample students’ reactions to ecocriticism in a Chinese class are offered.

Key words
ecocriticism teaching English literature constructivism

1 The marginalized English literature course

In China, where college curriculum mainly provides preparations for a vocation or a job, English literature is being marginalized even to the majors of English. Yin Chen 2002. Most colleges and students are now directing their attentions to the more practical “business English” or some other kinds of more “useful” English. And it is now almost impossible to avert this pragmatic trend of college education. But the truth is that to exclude English literature from the curricula is to ruin education—especially at a time when the nation is haranguing the slogan of “Cultivate multitalented foreign language majors.”

We don’t have to spend too much of our effort trying to figure out the importance of literature education to English learners—no matter from a language learning perspective or the cultural humanistic ones—we have a long list of the advantages that might be brought forth by English literature. Elaine Showalter 2003 has summarized in her book Teaching Literature as “to make people better human beings and better citizens” “to moralize, to civilize, and humanize” or to be “the chief weapon against the corruption and vulgarity of mass urban industrial society.” Therefore, facing the educational “conveyor belt,” it is as far as English literature is still on the curriculum, it is no use complaining about the ill-treated course. What we need to think about is a way to teach English literature just as the saying goes, “if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.”

2 The problems before us when teaching English literature

Before finding any feasible solutions, we also need to have a general idea of the existing problems in

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English literature teaching in a Chinese class The Chinese traditional way of teaching English literature is to provide the learners with a holistic view of the history of English literature excerpts of some classical works The class activities mainly revolve around the teacher's dominance For students who have been immersed in the teacher's analysis of difficult language points this kind of class is definitely challenging. It is to a great extent similar to the intensive reading class of English where much effort is put on the language points such as explaining some difficult words and phrases paraphrasing difficult sentences summarizing the main idea of the passage read analyzing the author's language characteristics for their writing techniques and offering cultural notes etc. These approaches might be of some importance to the Chinese students however such information is hardly available with easy access to the Internet in most of the Chinese colleges In a literature class where they are offered or challenged with these kinds of information or knowledge and where the teacher dominates the class for most of the time the students are likely to lose their interest. For teachers who are more student-oriented class discussions are provided usually under the guidance of the teachers well-formed questions Seldom are the students asked to write some thing of their own understanding of a work they have read. Students are evaluated by examinations given in the form of information checking to see how well they have learned about the facts in the works

3.1 Ecocritical practice of teaching English literature a possible way but

3.1 Constructivist approach to teaching literature

When faced with the negligence of English literature from outside the curriculum and the ineffectiveness of our teaching activities Deng proposes to "read with criticism" even in a pre-critical way. Deng 2004 As far as teaching activities are concerned where the teacher is likely to be the central focus they mainly fall into the trap of dividing a novel into "story" and "discourse" and further into "plot" "narrative voices" "focalization" and so on. These elements are important to a literary student but from the constructivist perspective of learning the students need to construct their own systems of the language where "hand-on" activities are essential to their mastery of the knowledge. A critical attitude toward what they are learning may engender detailed reading of the literary text and a logical organization of their own critical observations rather than assuming the status of a passive acceptant of the literary text. Spiro et al. 1991 argue that various forms of conceptual complexity and case-based irrelevancy in knowledge domains referred to collectively as structuredness pose serious problems for traditional theories of learning and instruction. To face up to these problems we have to address the irregularity of English literature in our class without any static presupposition of the facts about literature.

Constructivism declares the futility of "teacher-fronted" classroom activities in a literature course which undoubtedly belongs to the unstructured domains that are by nature non-linear and multidimensional across and between different cases Spiro. Jehng 1990 which eventually determines the necessity of adopting a constructivist approach to English literature classes.

3.2 Theoretical approaches to literature teaching

There are also practitioners of elsewhere teaching and criticism for example advocate the introduction of critical theories into college English literature classes which appears to be an appealing solution. But on second thoughts given the limited course time and complex confusion of critical theories the mere panorama of the list of critical literary terminologies may well scare away a lot of ardent students who otherwise might develop their interest in English literature. Within the practice of literary criticism we are now facing a fact that "literary" technicians Guerin et al. 1998 have rigorously pursued their studies to such an extent that they are likely to take in accurate discriminations Culler 1982.

3.3 The introduction of ecocriticism

We need some compromise to nurture English literature education in a Chinese context and fortunately ecocriticism offers us the opportunity. As Cokinos 2004 puts it in a summary ecocriticism is "the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it." In an English literature class here this time we put our emphasis on the
Ecocriticism—a theory or a practice

Ecocriticism can either be defined as or not as a literary critical" theory"—it all depends on how we understand the definition of a" theory". Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary offers some definitions which include the analysis of a set of facts in their relation to one another—a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena. The first definition assures that ecocriticism which analyses the relationship between literary texts and nature as a theory Culler also says in his Literary Theory that a" theory" is but a" bunch of mostly foreign names" and is like to include works of anthropology, art history, film studies, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, science studies, social and intellectual history, and sociology. Furthermore, a" common sense" is theory. From this perspective therefore, it is quite natural that we likewise regard ecocriticism as a theory which also entertains the scholarly call for literary theory in class.

But the rub is that whenever we are talking about a" critical theory" as the other above listed definitions suggest, we intend to mean more systemic and scientific principles of critical study in this sense it is a self-closed system within which closely related steps should be followed before a conclusion can be drawn which is characteristic of today's theoretical approaches to literature. While as Cokinos 2004 observes, ecocriticism necessarily entails a shift away from approaches that strictly privilege language and the difficulty of referentiality to approaches that reemphasize the real work of words in a world of consequence joy and despair. Hence the exclusion of ecocriticism from the category of theories at least systemic and scientific ones.

The intention of excluding ecocriticism from the category of critical theories is to remove the student's critical anxiety from theoretical pressures to help overcome the phenomenon of reading literature without criticism in our literature classes. Due to the ever-increasing academic pressure from the maddening academic competition, how far more effort has been directed towards literary research or "publications" than on literary teaching which is in my view of greater importance than literary research. If we take into consideration the necessity to enlarge the corpus of potential interested members of English literature and the ecosystem.

In this light, ecocriticism should not as Cokinos 2004 puts it become merely another ism machine for publication and tenure, thus transforming it from crucial professional and social necessity to just another generator in the academic factory. First and foremost, ecocriticism has its roots in the globalized concern of the ever-increasing corruption of our physical environment. Every responsible global citizen, Chinese or otherwise, has to one way or another share this concern and work out some feasible countermeasures to help renovate the environment. Glen Love and Cheryl Glotfelty Glotfelty 2003 urge that the time had come for literary scholars to respond more actively to the environmental crisis. The essential significance of enhancing students' ecoconsciousness taken into consideration ecocriticism can easily establish its place in our English literature class. The litmus test for ecocriticism as Christopher Hitt 2004 sums up is that ecocriticism rather than being the generic label for a cluster of related interests as many ecocritics still seem to define the field is in fact a perspective defined by its politics. To write ecocritically means to make value judgements about the literature we study value judgments based on a common concern about the exploitation and overconsumption of nature by certain human cultures.

On the other hand, ecocriticism without any intent to exclude literary theory is a predictable way of avoiding the attack of being pre-criticism assuring the students convenient and applicably theoretical means to a text.

It is an indisputable fact that literary criticism can do without critical theories. But the main purpose of a critical theory is to serve literary criticism rather than to discriminate. And it is natural that there are people who would disparage the narrow focus of ecocriticism and environmental literature Slovic 1999 which is in my view due to their ignorance of ecocriticism rather than its intrinsic deficiency. On the contrary, ecocriticism has a capacity to embrace almost all other theoretical
approaches which can be viewed as a natural development of literary criticism. It wouldn’t be a surprise to anyone if ecocriticism will eventually turn out to offer some appeasement to the chaotic battles between other critical theories. Hilt (2004) observes that ecocriticism shares with a number of other critical approaches—feminism, Marxism, and postcolonialism—to name a few—the conviction that literary criticism should assume an overtly ethical stance and may offer to add a shade of “green” to any other critical approaches.

3.3.2 Some initial practice

However, what is ecocriticism and how can we properly adapt it to an English literary class in a Chinese context? In a larger perspective, in her introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader, Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. And it has undergone three main developmental stages: to study how nature is presented in literature; to recover and describe the genre of nonfiction nature writing; and in addition, to identify and study ecologically oriented fiction, poetry, and drama and to examine how literary discourse has constructed human nature. Glotfelty (2003) Under the guidance of this canon, students attempt to write on a literary work will only have to investigate how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or aesthetic genres and tropes and what assumptions about nature underlie genres that may not address this topic directly. 

Heise (1997) Furthermore, in my opinion, it also concerns the construction of human nature. The “second nature” of human beings—culture and society—is also the ecocritical concern besides the physical environment.

But before we can manage to offer a new and scientifically valid theoretical basis for ecocriticism and for literary study as a whole, Love (1999: 8) we need a starting point: a recruitment of potential academics associated with these ecological activities. Armed with this assumption, I started my ecocritical teaching of English literature in Zhejiang Forestry College in 2004. I started a selected course in ecocritical reading of English literature. With an enrollment of one hundred and twenty students from more than twenty different majors, such as Industry Engineering, Management of Resources and Environment, International Trading, Gardening and Designing. To name only a few, classroom activities such as opinionated discussions seem impossible—the size of the big class discourages our timid Chinese undergraduates. So after two brief lectures respectively about English literature and ecocriticism outside and inside China, I told them: starting from our physical nature, try to write down what they could find in the reading assignments about nature. This had no challenge to them. From one of the assigned books—Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea, they all made long lists and some began to feel lost in them. To help them out of their misgivings of their own findings by a sample analysis, I directed their attention to the lion. The animal in the wilderness carries meaning in human culture with the text of association with “youth,” “the circular nature of life,” and also “harmony between the opposing forces—life and death, love and hate, destruction and regeneration” of nature. 

Inspired by this interpretation, heated discussion evolved among them. Further more, they began to build up their confidence in ecocriticism of what they are reading and associations between the text and nature began budding in them. Their findings might be nothing especially appealing to the critical eye, but they started to read and write something besides the “story” out of the literary text and something of their own.

There are also eight seniors of English majors recruited in my class who are doing their graduate dissertations on English literature. Former students here who enrolled in English literature would write their impression of carefree association between the text and the author, a summary of what they have read or a mechanical translation of other Chinese critical works in concerning fields. Here I have a list of what the English graduates in the year 2003 did with the authors names omitted: Analysis on Jane Eyre, Rebellious Consciousness,” “Searching for Perfect Passion—A Study on D.H. Lawrence Pursuit of Sexual Awareness,” “The Rainbow,” Jane Austen, View On Money in Pride and Prejudice,” A Study on Marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy—by Observing Entails side in Pride and Prejudice.” It seems that most students of English literature were interested in the authors, intention of writing the book.
if their teachers had warned them against the “intentional fallacy.” To them the novel is akin to a biography of the author. The writing on the author’s intention will turn out to be of little help to their future involvement with English literature. These kinds of activities are not even to be included into a “pre-critical response.”

On the contrary, reading of the text besides exempting them from the anxiety of adopting literary theories can help the students especially those who are beginners of English literary criticism to specify their eye span. which does not mean just to explore how writers have imagined and represented the physical environment but mainly to investigate the relationship between human society and nature and the ecological way of thinking of human beings as part of nature.

Chinese students would first choose the topics from the authors point of view or from the theme. A case in point is Fang Jiao from the group who proposed to tackle the marital theme of Pride and Prejudice from a “social” perspective. Thus “marriage is a social problem” —she declared as the topic of her thesis. I challenged her that other people can likewise choose to say so without any knowledge of the novel. Helping her to narrow down her topic then offered a hint by inviting her to look into marriages which at first sight seemed impossible turned out to be successful. We managed to change the first sentence of Pride and Prejudice that “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” into “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man must be in want of a wife” and still further into “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman must be in want of a husband” Boldface mine. She nodded her agreement but what does this mean in relation to Nature? she countered back. So we can see at the initial stage it is easy to think that we are only dealing with the physical environment as nature. Facing this frustration we started looking for more direct instructions from the eccocritical doctrine. Buell and Weil 2004 tell us in their preliminary introduction of eccocriticism to their Chinese critics in “Making a Dialogue on Chinese American Eccocriticism” that “the eccocriticism is not so much to encourage putting people back in touch with nature but to install awareness of the environment of human existence.” Naturally a human being is to be understood but as part of the environment and should follow its natural course so far as marriage is concerned. This first sentence of the novel leaves much room for interpretation. Therefore we decided within the group not to merely comprise a physical environment in our study. By looking into the difference between the two altered statements Fang begins her way into the conception of the “nature” of a marriage by changing her topic to “An Ecocritical Analysis on Marriages in Pride and Prejudice” which echoes the above mentioned Glotfelty’s third phase of “how literary discourse has constructed human.” To the extreme this critique is to revert human beings to its natural animal status. If marry two human beings of the opposite sex without any concern of other added social values then on the basis of assumption to consider what values can be added and what are of immediate necessity. Because Fang refused to give up her interest in “marriage” while urging them to adopt eccocriticism his third phase of eccocritique might be of some challenge to her. But she decided to face up to it and there is one thing I am quite sure —what she is going to tackle in her essay is something of her own rather than relics from others findings.

Huang another from our group offered to explore the “conflict of value system” in Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers because he is interested in the marital fissure an expression he borrows from Xiaoqing’s English title of “The Tragedy of the English Industrial Civilization Manifested Through the Marital Fission in the Sons and Lovers” in Journal of Aqing Teachers College Social Science Edition 2002 Vol. 21 No. 6. He decided to begin his thesis with a “general introduction of the author” and a “general evaluation of sons and lovers” in the introductory part. And then “in the first chapter he planned to talk about the social background of the novel the change of the social condition” the influence of the industrialization on people’s life. In Chapter two “The marital fission of Mr.” and Mrs. Morel.” Chapter three “The value system transplant from Mr.” to Paul. Before his proposal I had assigned them to find definitions of eccocriticism from the Internet offering the url-address of ASLE The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment where abundant information of eccocriticism can be found. And most of them had done quite good jobs to recite from their findings the definition of it. But from Huang’s proposal I saw no referentiality to it. When I discussed it with him he complained that the “nature” or “environment” in the novel is not worth any effort of analysis. More
appealing terms seem to be “oedipal complex” because many a scholar has done comprehensive analysis concerning this perspective. I assured him that he could as well talk about “oedipal complex” with the help of ecritical canon rather than repeating others’ gratuitouslavishment of attention to this issue. After some discussion he decided to add a subtitle “A Green Reading of The Pilgrim’s Progress” Xuan Xueqin Good and Evilin Man—an ecritical approach to Moby Dick etc. Besides their ambitious topics I believe they will form a deeper insight into ecritical theory.

4. Conclusion

One of my primary concerns is to help the student out of the “theory anxiety” when starting to write an essay on English literature and consequently help them to write something from their own observation and understanding. As a teacher of English literature I have always been obsessed by the seemingly familiar ideas prevalent in the students’ writings. It is not something to be solved by preaching “academic integrity” or warning against “plagiarism”. While with the help of ecriticalism which is fairly new in Chinese context I just hope to cast some new light on their writing from a theoretical perspective. I am not in a position to and I don’t wish to offer them any final solutions to their writings— it is up to them to work their way out. What I have to do is to help keep them in the right ecological direction.

This practice is not to be judged a success though no failure either. We are not tackling the far more complex issues as the climate change—the melting icecaps and glaciers—the raging forest fires—devastating storms and equally destructive floods that have ravished many parts of the planet or other possible unprecedented crisis which are undoubtedly the real essence and purpose of ecriticalism. But we are now on the way. The ecological awareness of the literary text together with their attempt to read green elements besides the simple purpose of reading for pleasure is an important yield together with some of the immature output of some academic relationships between text and nature.

References

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