

How green is your Bard?



*Scholars to discuss
literature of ecology*

BY LEAH C. WELLS
Special to Going Green

THOREAU WENT TO THE WOODS to live deliberately.

Jon Krakauer, in his book “Into the Wild,” chronicled the peripatetic life of Chris McCandless who ventured solo throughout North America.

John Candy and Dan Aykroyd took their fictional families on a camping trip to get closer to each other and to nature in “The Great Outdoors.”

The Eco-Challenge sends teams of people to pit their survival skills against some of nature’s toughest terrains.

“Getting back to nature” is a familiar modern theme but not a novel idea. In fact, it is one that has been pondered for centuries.

We can trace the evolution of ecological thought by rereading literature from previous eras, to see how various authors dealt with the subject of human interactions with nature.

Dr. Robert Watson, professor of Shakespeare and English Renaissance poetry at the University of California, Los Angeles, is coming to Memphis to discuss his research on ecology and literature.

Watson was educated at Yale and Stanford, taught at Harvard, and was the recipient of the 2006 Elizabeth Dietz Memorial Prize for the year's best book in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies, as well as the winner of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment prize for the Best Book of Ecocriticism of 2005-2006.

His March 26 lecture at Rhodes College, "Green Shakespeare: Environmental Criticism and the Bard," will focus on the play "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Shakespeare's life bridges the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment, a time early in the development of empirical science when

humans were beginning to explore the ways in which they could gain mastery over the natural environment.

Through ecocriticism, a field of study also known as "green cultural studies" and eco-poetics, scholars evaluate contemporary ecological problems and



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locate solutions through a close reading of interdisciplinary literary sources.

Through the works of Shakespeare and others, we can learn how people made sense of mysterious processes like sleep and dreams, healing wounds and curing illnesses, as well as social forces like

technological developments, changes in religious perspectives and the rise of Protestantism, and development in the economic system.

And we may be able to apply their wisdom to current problems.

"Nature," says Watson, "is a kind of code for lost intimacy with real experience. 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' is a parable for ecological consciousness, a pre-scientific way of thinking of the ecological aspect of human life."

Examination of Shakespearean perspectives on early green themes is not simply an academic exercise, however.

According to Watson, some contemporary debates can be unlocked through historical examination. Scientific rifts over issues like climate change and environmental stewardship have become entrenched in society and have divisive political ramifications. Furthermore, these issues are so complex that it is nearly impossible to disentangle environmental questions from other issues like

poverty and economics.

However, Watson contends that there are ways in which people can understand the value of nature. The issue is not solely about getting back to nature, but of having experiences that are real and meaningful, unmediated by technology and apolitical.

In other words, it is possible to conceive of the man versus nature debate in a highly personalized way without overtly political implications.

The social connections that sustain projects like the Greater Memphis Greenline, Memphis Farmers' Market, Sow to Grow or GrowMemphis are evidence of this.

Despite the rise in urbanization and decline in rural residence in the past century, urban gardens and dedicated green spaces have begun to flourish in former brownfields.

While more people live in cities, populating concrete jungles thick with smog, filled with noise and light pollution and distinctly separate from the natural world, individuals are making concerted attempts to bridge urban and rural.

Some reasons are pragmatic, such as the desire to know that vegetables are pesticide-free or that animals for food were treated humanely. Other reasons are aesthetic, such as the simple joy of pondering photosynthesis not solely for the nutritional gains or the bounty of the plants, but for the experience of seeing nature at work and contemplating our place in the natural cycle.

Or, as Watson says, "The art of what we're doing in ecocriticism is not just to tell people to join political campaign under an environmental banner, but rather our best service is to awaken people to the beauty and complexity of nature and tolerate a more complex vision of the world we inhabit."

Leah C. Wells is a staff member at BioDimensions and is pursuing a doctorate in political science at the University of Mississippi.

ECOCRITICISM SYMPOSIUM

Rhodes College's symposium on ecocriticism brings together several international scholars to discuss how ecological concepts and "green" issues apply to the interpretation of William Shakespeare's works.

The free symposium will be held from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, March 26, in Blount Auditorium of Buckman Hall.

The event begins with a keynote lecture by Dr. Robert Watson (University of California, Los Angeles) on the "Ecology of Self," or permeable human boundaries in "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

His lecture will be followed by a roundtable discussion with four participants: Daniel Brayton (Middlebury College); Simon Estok (Sungkyunkwan University, Republic of Korea); Sharon O'Dair (University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa); and Karen Raber (University of Mississippi).

The symposium is co-sponsored by the Pearce Shakespeare Endowment and Rhodes' Environmental Program, with additional support from Rhodes' Center for Outreach in the Development of the Arts (CODA).

For more information, contact Prof. Scott L. Newstok at newstoks@rhodes.edu, or consult the Shakespeare at Rhodes Web site at rhodes.edu/shakespeare.