

ENVIRONMENTALISM

in the Realm of

SCIENCE FICTION

and

FANTASY LITERATURE

Edited by

CHRIS BARATTA



Environmentalism in the Realm of Science
Fiction and Fantasy Literature

Edited by

Chris Baratta



**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature,
Edited by Chris Baratta

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2012 by Chris Baratta and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3513-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3513-8

Environmentalism in the Realm of Science
Fiction and Fantasy Literature

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Part I: Industrial Dilemmas	
Chapter One.....	11
The Secret Life of <i>The Death of Iron</i> Frederick Waage	
Chapter Two	31
"No name, no business, no Precious, nothing. Only empty. Only hungry": Gollum as Industrial Casualty Chris Baratta	
Part II: The Natural World, Community, and the Self	
Chapter Three	47
Seeking Spaces: An Analysis of Environmental Solutions in Science Fiction and Utopian Literature Annette M. Magid	
Chapter Four	59
Nature, Community and the Self in Octavia Butler's <i>Parable of the Sower</i> and Nicola Griffith's <i>Slow River</i> Susan Bernardo	
Chapter Five	69
Sugared Violets and Conscious Wands: Deep Ecology in the <i>Harry Potter</i> Series Melanie Dawson	

INTRODUCTION

CHRIS BARATTA

The Earth faces environmental problems right now that threaten the imminent destruction of civilization and the end of the planet as a livable world. Humanity cannot afford to waste its financial and emotional resources on endless, meaningless quarrels between each group and all others. There must be a sense of globalism in which the world unites to solve the real problems that face all groups alike.

—Isaac Asimov¹

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson²

The idea for this collection began with the creation of a panel for the 2011 NeMLA convention. And, it was a combination of factors that led me to develop the focus for the panel, which was titled *Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*. As a child, I, surely to the surprise of my parents and siblings, balanced the traditional childhood activities of baseball and *Star Wars* with a more intimate activity: my love of reading. I remember shuffling through my father's *National Geographic* magazines to satiate my love of nature and wildlife; at first, I was content with the photographs of landscapes far different than my suburban environment, and of photos of cheetahs, giraffes, and great white sharks. But as my curiosity grew, I began reading the stories of scientists and activists who were able to travel to these distant lands. My

¹ Isaac Asimov, *I, Asimov: A Memoir Paperback* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 129.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1968), 6.

love of reading grew, and I soon came across Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Dragonlance* tales, given to me by a neighbor. Using these novels as a starting point, I soon ventured into the world of *Forgotten Realms* and, of course, into Middle-Earth. I remember the first paper that I wrote for 9th grade English: an analysis of R.A. Salvatore's *The Crystal Shard*. A non-traditional choice, indeed. But, other than reading Thoreau's *Walden* in high school, it wasn't until graduate school that I encountered nature writing and ecocriticism. I was introduced to the works of Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Gary Snyder, among others. I dived headfirst into a study of ecocriticism, captivated by the philosophies put forth by John Muir, Murray Bookchin, and Harold Fromm, to name a few. And it was at this point that I started to connect the world of science fiction and fantasy literature to environmentalism. I haven't looked back—though I continue to search for my paper on *The Crystal Shard*—and I continue, like science fiction and fantasy literature, to look forward to where the current environmental crisis is taking humanity. It is my hope that my continued research in the field of ecocriticism will yield some solutions to the many problems we face today. Many of these solutions, as well as the problems they need to resolve, can be found in science fiction and fantasy literature.

My attempt to articulate the need for ecocriticism in literary studies would simply fall short compared to what Louis H. Palmer has already said: "I take on one of the most vexing issues in the overlap between literary and environmental studies—the questions of stake"³. Some, those who may not be so inclined as to acknowledge the importance and the necessity of literature or environmental studies, might dismiss the notion that anything is "at stake" in literary studies. These individuals are mistaken; what is at stake—according to Palmer, and according to the contributors of this volume and the authors they have studied—is nothing less than "the ultimate survival of life on Earth."⁴ An ecocritical approach to literary analysis has shifted, to a degree, the critical angle that has dominated literary studies from an anthropocentric view to a more biocentric view. Ecocriticism urges us to embrace the fact that the study of the nonhuman world is just as important a study of the human world when we investigate current social and cultural constructs of civilization.

Science fiction and fantasy literature has been the one of the beneficiaries of the emergence of ecocriticism. Ecocritical study urges an

³ Louis H. Palmer, "Articulating the Cyborg: An Impure Model for Environmental Revolution," in *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*, ed. Steven Rosedale (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2002), 165.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

individual to embrace new ways of thinking about the natural world, and, more importantly, the relationship between man and nature. The objectives of an ecocritical study are to usher in a new way of seeing and understanding the consequences of the destruction for the natural world, humanity's impact on the environment, and the possible solutions to environmental degradation. On one hand, ecocriticism incorporates the study of empirical knowledge and the methods of scientific observation. On the other hand, it embraces the humanities, with its ability to probe "discursive constructions of experiences and ideology in the shifting seas of language and subjectivity."⁵ As any work of literature must do, ecocritical texts demand that a reader not only understand his philosophical and ideological anchors, but also understand the possible flaws in his moored way of thinking. In order to achieve success in this endeavor, an ecocritical study must do two things: disconnect the reader from the culturally and socially constructed systems of thought that are grounded in the man/nature binary and establish a connection between the reader and the natural world. This is a difficult task, obviously, but it is necessary in order to achieve an understanding of the stakes involved in the current environmental crisis. Science fiction and fantasy literature has been fulfilling these two goals for almost a century; and, the emergence of ecocriticism as an important critical theory has once again highlighted the importance of science fiction and fantasy. If we bring together a study of environmental writing and ecocritical texts with science fiction and fantasy literature, we can find answers to some important ecocritical questions: How is a text raising awareness on an issue? How is a text embracing a new consciousness? How is this new consciousness a paradigm shift in human thought?

An unfortunate aspect of science-fiction and fantasy literature that is lost on the casual reader (or the non-reader) is its importance as a genre to serve as a reflection of reality. Art, especially literature, has a unique ability to show an individual what he or she cannot see, even if it is right in front of his or her nose. Science fiction and fantasy literature brings us to new worlds; we meet new creatures, new heroes, and new villains. We are introduced to new mythologies, and we witness new atrocities and new wars. But, despite the fact that what we encounter in the text of a fantasy novel is indeed new, we should not be shocked to discover that underneath the surface, these creatures, mythologies, and atrocities are quite familiar. Science fiction and fantasy authors draw inspiration from the reality that surrounds them. And even though science fiction and fantasy literature

⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

wrenches us from our daily doldrums and propels us into unfamiliar lands, we really never leave our own reality.

In a 1999 interview, Ray Bradbury stated that “Science fiction is a depiction of the real.”⁶ Science fiction writers have tackled a myriad of issues concerning humanity and environmental destruction. For example, Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains”, which offers a stark warning for humanity’s reliance on technological progress, depicts a society that has disconnected itself from the natural world in favor of a life that resembles the warnings and consequences of technological determinism—a theory that states that a society’s technology, and not its people, drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. Science fiction chronicles changes and advancements; it presents readers with an alternative view of social, technological, and industrial progress. As humanity continues to progress, building more, exploiting more, consuming more, science fiction writers became aware of the detrimental effects that humanity’s progress is having on the natural world. Olaf Stapledon, an early 20th century science fiction writer and influence on Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, once stated that humanity’s overconsumption of natural resources would lead to its inevitable demise. This was stated in the early 1900s. In his biography on Isaac Asimov, Michael White notes that the “problem of how humankind was mistreating the environment and creating problems for the future”⁷ was of particular interest to the legendary science-fiction author.

Patrick D. Murphy, in “The Non-Alibi of Alien Spaces: SF and Ecocriticism,” cites the central themes of detachment and estrangement in science fiction literature as a corollary to ecocriticism and its role as a critique of current environmental practices. Ecocriticism acknowledges this detachment from the natural world in its critique of an anthropocentric worldview, and pushes forth with its biocentric and/or symbiotic critical approach to bridge this gap. Murphy states that “the writing and reading of SF [science fiction] are intimately linked to, and based on, getting people to think both about the present and about this world in which they live.”⁸ Combining this sentiment with the goals of science fiction and fantasy writing can provide the foundation for a new environmental awareness,

⁶ David O’Leary, “An Interview with Ray Bradbury,” *The Weekly Wire*, December 1999.

⁷ Michael White, *Isaac Asimov: A Life of the Grand Master of Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2005), 254.

⁸ Patrick D. Murphy, “The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism,” in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, eds. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: UVA Press), 263.

one that is needed for a new understanding of not only how humanity is connected to the natural world, but also to what created our disconnect. And, since science fiction writing can be dystopian in nature, we can see—through the power of allegory—into the future: we can see what could happen if we succumb to the dangerous and reckless behaviors of our current anthro-dominated commodification and destruction of the natural world.

Chris Brawley discusses the power of mythopoeic imagination in fantasy literature, which he states “provides readers with a quasi-religious experience often termed wonder.”⁹ With regards to this “wonder,” science-fiction and fantasy literature can help in two ways: it can, through creativity and awe, raise awareness for an issue in a way that reality is unable to and it can force an individual to turn bring this awareness back to the mundane world in a re-evaluation of the role of nature.¹⁰ Fantasy literature has an ability to bring reader’s out of their comfort zone—away from the daily intrusions of the media, jobs, political dysfunction—and into a world where the landscapes and characters are unfamiliar, thereby placing them within a world outside of their current modes of knowledge. In doing so, fantasy literature stirs the imagination and asks readers to step outside of prescribed, anthropocentric constructions of knowledge and into new, unfiltered modes of experience and knowledge. Brawley refers to this as “a shift from an anthropocentric paradigm to an ecocentric or biocentric paradigm.”¹¹ This is a key point where ecocriticism and science-fiction and fantasy literature converge.

This collection will discuss the environmental and ecocritical themes found in works of science fiction and fantasy literature. Through an analysis of these literary works, we can see and understand how they address the environmental issues we are dealing with today. More importantly, we investigate the solutions that these works present to ensure the sustainability of our natural world, and, in turn, the sustainability of humanity. In the section titled “Industrial Dilemmas,” industry is the focal point in a shift from environmental consciousness to one of industrial and technological “progress.” These essays look at technology as the tool that separates man from nature, and in doing so, marks a significant shift in human consciousness. Fred Waage’s “The Secret Life of *The Death of Iron*”, discusses a lesser known 1931 work written by Serge-Simon Held, an author who, it is speculated, wrote no other works. *The Death of Iron*

⁹ Chris Brawley, “The Fading of the World: Tolkien’s Ecology and Loss in *The Lord of the Rings*,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18.3 (2007), 292.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹¹ Brawley, “The Fading of the World”, 294.

(*La Mort du Fer*) recounts a “fatal flaw” of chemistry found in iron which causes all built structures on earth to disintegrate, throwing human civilization into chaos and savagery from which emerges a new mystically-bound society respectful of nature. Waage establishes the significance of the novel as a work of ecological science fiction, and sees it as a generational successor to Emile Zola’s *Germinal*, in which nature itself rebels against its abuse by technology and industrialism. “‘No name, no business, no Precious, nothing. Only empty. Only hungry’; Gollum as Industrial Casualty” looks at Sméagol/Gollum as the representation of the tortured soul, torn between his natural self and the corruption of industry, symbolized by the One Ring, an entity that breeds a lust for power and an abandonment of nature. The paper analyzes the struggle of the individual as he is confronted by the external battle of the natural and the industrial, posing the question: Where and how do we see ourselves—as individuals, as a society—in Gollum?

The essays in the section titled “The Natural World and the Self” envision a time where individuals are forced to examine their identities in a world where environmental disasters, due in large part to human activity, have forced society into a new way of being and a new way of functioning. Annette Magid’s essay “Seeking Spaces: An Analysis of Environmental Solutions in Science Fiction and Utopian Literature” explores the interface of nineteenth century communal thoughts, environmental determinations and gender issues juxtaposed with twenty-first century concerns for community survival. She looks at gender roles in the utopian and communal ideals of writers and philosophers, such as Robert Owen and Gene Rodenberry. In “Nature, Community and the Self in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Nicola Griffith’s *Slow River*”, Susan Bernardo examines how nature and narrative come together in the novels *Slow River* and *Parable of the Sower* to illustrate the importance of a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. She analyzes how the novels illustrate ways that water and its availability shape and sustain both individuals and the societies they live in, while also laying the groundwork for a society that respects and harvests natural resources and helps people to flourish. With an analysis of the diverse backgrounds of each novel’s main protagonists, Bernardo connects the struggle for earth’s most valuable and sought after resource—water—and the enduring challenge to gain and regain and understanding of the self in the setting of an ecological crisis. Melanie Dawson’s paper, “Sugared Violets and Conscious Wands: Deep Ecology in the *Harry Potter* Series”, explores the presence of deep ecology in the *Harry Potter* series. She argues that J. K. Rowling’s works present the importance of comprehending

a deeply individuated set of coexisting consciousnesses, an importance set within its battle between good and evil. She analyzes the ecological importance of an important theme in the series: living in the wizarding world – successfully – requires a deep understanding of evolving strategies of coexistence, once one’s eyes are opened to the presence of an intertwined system of laws governing all forms of life.

“Materialism, Capitalism, and Environmentalism” contains contributions that look at the damaging effects of the capitalistic order on the environment and on those forced to reside within its economic and ideological systems. In this section, scholars investigate the effects of the machinery of capitalism on the social bodies and on humanity. In “The Literary and Literal Dangers of a Flawed Valuation System: Reading Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* through the Political Lens of Hannah Arendt”, Audrey Golden examines Yamashita’s novel alongside Arendt’s postwar political-theory texts *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Human Condition* (1953). The connection is made to illuminate the ways in which a misunderstanding of materiality and the capitalist valuation system can result in environmental destruction and, ultimately, near apocalypse. Positing that Yamashita’s novel can be read as an allegoristic warning to practitioners of materiality, Golden analyzes the literary treatment of superfluity and its connection with specific characters and objects throughout the text, which are all described through the language of commodification. In “The Pedagogical Potential of Margaret Atwood’s Speculative Fiction: Exploring Ecofeminism in the Classroom”, Sean Murray looks at how Atwood’s dystopian fiction—*Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*—offers a unique pedagogical opportunity to analyze the thematic unity of the three novels, while involving students in an investigation of the solutions to the environmental destruction and gender inequality found in the three works. Using an ecofeminist approach, Murray sees the novels as a critique of patriarchal power and feminine subordination; this abuse of women, Murray posits, goes hand in hand with environmental degradation.

“Dystopian Futures” offers three contributions concerning the consequence of environmental destruction. In “Destroying Imagination to Save Reality: Environmental Apocalypse in Science Fiction”, Keira Hambrick argues that environmental science fiction allows readers to explore the possible outcomes of current ecological crises. Her essay exposes and investigates how the novel’s environments reflect and engage with such contemporary concerns as climate change, overpopulation, and food production. Dawn A. Saliba proposes that Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, presents the collapse of both the natural

world as well as human culture and language brought on as a direct consequence of a nuclear-winter cataclysm. In her essay titled "Eco-Linguistic Disintegration in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", she discusses the concurrent disintegration of language and the ecological, and posits that *The Road* serves as warning, not just of an environmental decay, but of a moral one as well. Saliba analyzes how McCarthy creates a world that, though fictitious, reflects the non-illusory teleological, if not eschatological, folly and destructive nature of humanity. Christine Battista's essay "Ecofantasy and Animal Dystopia in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*", looks at the ecological implications of Adams' 1972 novel. She sees the novel's ecocritical value in its ability to shift its point-of-view from one that is anthropocentric to one that is more focused on—and more connected to—the nonhuman world. Told through the eyes of a family of rabbits, Battista argues that the novel allows us to embrace a shift in our ontological connection to nature.

The strength of this collection is the interdisciplinary approach that each essay takes in order to investigate and analyze the environmental issues threatening human existence. It is not limited to ecocriticism and environmentalism, but instead uses these two fields as the foundation for an in-depth look at many issues that society, both nationally and globally, faces today. Margaret Mead once stated, "We won't have a society if we destroy the environment." The works discussed bring to light the consequences of humanity's irresponsible destruction of the natural world, and, in turn, its own existence. They also yield a keen understanding of these consequences and the solutions needed to avoid them.

PART I

INDUSTRIAL DILEMMAS

CHAPTER ONE

THE SECRET LIFE OF *THE DEATH OF IRON*

FREDERICK WAAGE

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to discuss my search for Serge-Simon Held, the mysterious author of a 1931 French ecological science fiction novel, *La Mort du Fer* (*The Death of Iron*); to discuss the cultural context in which it was written, with a view to establishing its significance; and to introduce the reader to the novel itself. My particular emphasis will be on *La Mort du Fer* as a generational successor to Emile Zola's *Germinal*, in which nature itself rebels against its abuse by technology and industrialism.

I. The Quest

I first became acquainted with Serge-Simon Held's novel *La Mort du Fer* when preparing an environmental study of Ross Lockridge Jr.'s *Raintree County*. In his biography of his father, Larry Lockridge says that during his convalescence from scarlet fever, shortly after graduating from Indiana University in 1935, Ross Lockridge—who had spent his junior year in France—“read an obscure 1931 French novel, Serge Simon Held's *La Mort du fer*—“The Death of Iron”—that would bear strange fruit a few years later.”¹ This fruit would be his epic and never-to-be-published poem, *The Dream of the Death of Iron*, partly inspired by his own disease; its “main narrative source,” however, was Held's novel: “He initially thought of writing a poem as “a series of fragments” based on this novel in which French [and ultimately world] industry is mysteriously debilitated by a phosphorescent rot in all its iron and steel leading to apocalyptic social dislocation and collapse.”² Larry Lockridge believes that this disease of metal came to figure “materialism,” and that his father came to see “the growth of industry as spiritual illness and literal blight. The fiery iron mills

¹ Larry Lockridge, *Shade of the Raintree* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 159.

² Lockridge, *Shade*, 185.

[of Held's novel] were like diseased hearts and the contagion spread deep into the ground and into people's skin and bones. The antidote to all this was a renewed spiritual link to the body and the natural world. He had emerged from his sickbed a worshipper of nature."³ In later correspondence Larry Lockridge says "there is no underestimating the impression that it made on him," and it "was instrumental in seeding the environmental values of R[aintree] C[ounty]."⁴

I thought that to have such a strong environmentalist effect on (in my view) a great writer, Held's novel must, for all its current obscurity, have impressive powers, so as well as getting a copy to read (there are only five in U.S. libraries),⁵ I went questing for information on the work and its author. The fruitlessness of this quest, so far, has been astonishing.

From the Bibliothèque Nationale catalogue, one learns that *La Mort du Fer* was published by the preeminent entre-deux-guerres house of Arthème Fayard in 1931, and that it was "imprimé" (printed) by the press F. Paillart in Abbeville--a city on the English Channel in Northeast France, near the locale where the novel is set.

In the International Speculative Fiction Database (isfdb) I learned that the novel was published in the pioneering pulp sci-fi anthology *Wonder Story Annual*, 1952, in an English translation sci-fi novelist Robert Silverberg explains was originally made--by another notable writer in the genre, Fletcher Pratt--for the Otto Gernsback serial *Wonder Stories*, beginning in September, 1932.⁶

Held is not even present in Dreher and Rolli's exhaustive *Bibliographie de La Littérature Française, 1930-39*. Jacques Sadoul's *Histoire de la Science Fiction Moderne, 1911-71*, repeats, in a footnote, the information about Pratt's translation in Gernsback's *Wonder Stories*, and notes "a disquieting similarity in theme to *The Metal Doom* of [British novelist] Dr. David H. Keller, which was serialized starting in May, 1932. Sadoul asks "Did the good doctor perhaps know French, and did Gernsback [perhaps] want to "make reparation"?⁸⁷

³ Ibid., 185

⁴ Lockridge, Larry. Email to the Author. 3 Mar. 2011.

⁵ Lockridge, Larry. Email to the Author. 11 Mar. 2011.

⁶ Silverberg, David, "Reflections: The Death of Gallium," in *Asimov's Science Fiction*. Silverberg says he learned of the novel from Donald Tuck's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

⁷ Jacques Sadoul. *Histoire de la Science-Fiction Moderne (1911-1971)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1973), 82. David Szondy's blog "Tales of Future Past" refers to Held's work and reprints a cartoon of urban chaos possibly from Pratt's translation.