

# ‘Between the Lines’

## An English Literature Masterclass

An open book with a heart shape cut out of the center of the pages. The heart is formed by two symmetrical, teardrop-like shapes that meet at the spine of the book. The pages are a warm, yellowish-brown color, suggesting age. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

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Standlee

# Alice Oswald, 'Fox': a close reading



# Close reading:

## Form

- Poetic form / stanza
- Rhyme and meter

## Text

- Punctuation
- Sound
- Dynamics
- Word choice
  - Diction
  - Ambiguity
  - Etymology
- Imagery



# First impressions

I heard a cough  
as if a thief was there  
outside my sleep  
a sharp intake of air

a fox in her fox-fur  
stepping across  
the grass in her black gloves  
barked at my house

just so abrupt and odd  
the way she went  
hungrily asking  
in the heart's thick accent

in such serious sleepless  
trespass she came  
a woman with a man's voice  
but no name

as if to say: it's midnight  
and my life  
is laid beneath my children  
like gold leaf

# Rhyme and meter

I heard a cough  
as if a thief was there  
outside my sleep  
a sharp intake of air

a fox in her fox-fur  
stepping across  
the grass in her black gloves  
barked at my house

just so abrupt and odd  
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in such serious sleepless  
trespass she came  
a woman with a man's voice  
but no name

as if to say: it's midnight  
and my life  
is laid beneath my children  
like gold leaf

# Sound and dynamics

I heard a cough  
as if a **thief** was **there**  
outside my **sleep**  
a **sharp** intake of air

a **fox** in her **fox-fur**  
stepping across  
the **grass** in her **black gloves**  
**barked** at my house

just so abrupt and odd  
the way she went  
**hungrily** asking  
in the **heart's** thick accent

in **such serious sleepless**  
trespass she came  
a woman with a man's voice  
but no name

as if to say: it's midnight  
and my life  
is **laid** beneath my children  
**like** gold **leaf**

# Words and images

I heard a cough  
as if a thief was there  
outside my sleep  
a sharp intake of air

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stepping across  
the grass in her black gloves  
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Contextualising Alice Oswald's  
'Fox':  
Women's Nature Writing



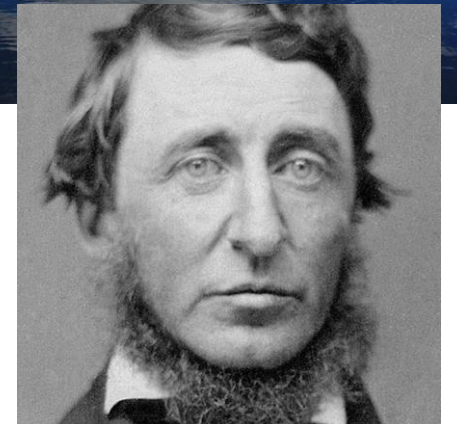
# Looking through the lens of history

- Nature Writing = Writing about the natural environment
- Often involves both an outward appreciation of the physical environment and mental (inward) responses to it
- Often also = a sense of awe and wonder at the more-than-human world
- Evolved in response to the industrial revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century
- Typically a first-person, nonfiction account of the non-human environment



# Key figures

- Ralph Waldo Emerson – in *Nature* (1836), reality can be understood by studying nature; associates the natural world with God and the divine
- Henry David Thoreau – answered Emerson's call 'for finding an original relationship with the universe in order to establish a closer connection with God' (Scheese 2002, p. 42)
- Built a cabin on Walden Pond (Massachusetts, USA) and lived there for more than two years
- Result = *Walden* (1854) – Reflections on Thoreau's immersion in nature during his two years living on Walden Pond
- *Walden* often viewed as the founding text of nature writing



# KEY FIGURES – The Women

- Susan Fenimore Cooper – diary published anonymously as *Rural Hours* (1850)
- Marked by attention to detail of the natural environment + personal observations and connection with nature
- Human life as bound up with the cycles of nature and renewed by connection with it:



# From Cooper's *Rural Hours*:

A thunder-shower last night, by way of keeping the equinox; and this morning, to the joy of the whole community, the arrival of the robins is proclaimed. It is one of the great events of the year, for us, the return of the robins. [...] No sooner is one of these first-comers seen by some member of a family, than the fact is proclaimed through the house; children run in to tell their parents, "The robins have come!" Grandfathers and grandmothers put on their spectacles and step to the windows to look at the robins; and you hear neighbors gravely inquiring of each other: "Have you seen the robins?"—"Have you heard the robins?" There is no other bird whose return is so generally noticed, and for several days their movements are watched with no little interest, as they run about the ground, or perch on the leafless trees. It was last night, just as the shutters were closed, that they were heard about the doors, and we ran out to listen to their first greeting, but it was too dark to see them. This morning, however, they were found in their native apple-trees, and a hearty welcome we gave the honest creatures.





## Other women nature writers



- Dorothy Wordsworth – *Alfoxden Journal* (1798) *The Grasmere Journals* (1800-1803) – anthropomorphised flowers; connection to/immersion in nature; experience of the natural world as vital to wellbeing:

*Some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness & the rest tossed & reeled & danced & seemed if they verily laughed with the wind*

- Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) – Essays on the Owens River Valley of California before it was drained of water for the city of Los Angeles:

*The desert floras shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations. Their whole duty is to flower and fruit, and they do it hardly, or with tropical luxuriance, as the rain admits.*



# OTHER Women Nature Writers

- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962) – exposed the toxic nature of chemical pesticides such as DDT:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to be in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards, where white clouds of bloom drifted above the green land. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the mornings. [...]

Then, one spring, a strange blight crept over the area, and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community; mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens, and the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was the shadow of death.

## **Fox**

By Alice Oswald

I heard a cough  
as if a thief was there  
outside my sleep  
a sharp intake of air

a fox in her fox-fur  
stepping across  
the grass in her black gloves  
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just so abrupt and odd  
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a woman with a man's voice  
but no name

as if to say: it's midnight  
and my life  
is laid beneath my children  
like gold leaf

## **The Thought-Fox (1957)**

By Ted Hughes

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:  
Something else is alive  
Beside the clock's loneliness  
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:  
Something more near  
Though deeper within darkness  
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow  
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;  
Two eyes serve a movement, that now  
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow  
Between trees, and warily a lame  
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow  
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,  
A widening deepening greenness,  
Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox  
It enters the dark hole of the head.  
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.

A dark, moody photograph of a forest. In the foreground, a large, moss-covered fallen tree trunk lies horizontally across the frame. The background shows a body of water reflecting the sky, surrounded by bare, thin trees. The overall atmosphere is somber and naturalistic.

# Reading with Theory: Ecocriticism



# Reading with Theory

Ecocriticism

Postcolonial Criticism

Queer Theory

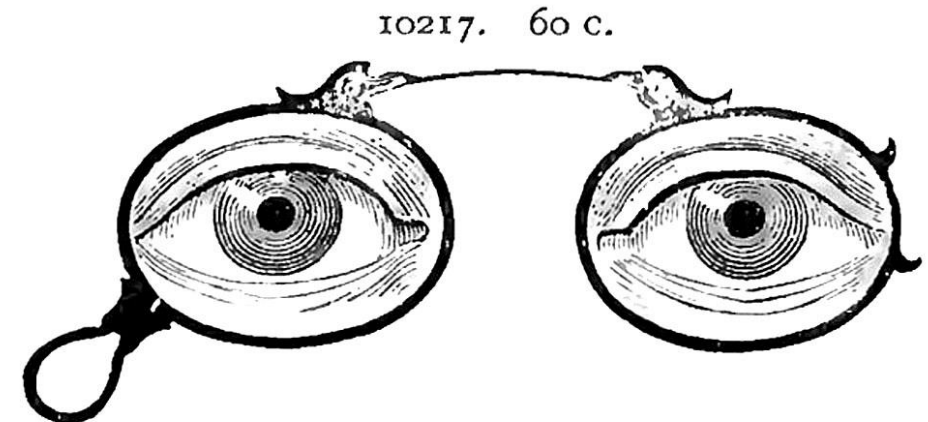
New Historicism

Gender Theory

Psychoanalytic Criticism

Feminist Criticism

Critical Disability Studies





What is Ecocriticism?

## An Ecocritical Reading of Alice Oswald's 'Fox'

'Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'

- Cheryll Glotfelty



# Ecocritical Intersections

- Eco-Marxism
- Postcolonial Ecocriticism
- Eco-Feminism

‘the dual oppression of women and nature and emphasizes the power of language to affect changes. Based on the shared experience, women [...] must speak up for nature because nature cannot speak for itself or at least is generally not “heard” when it does. [...] Women, she proposes, rather than speak in place of nature, will act as its “interpreters” (Plumwood 1997: 351).’

- Douglas Vakoch





# Animal Studies

‘The great insight of animal studies, in its productive encounter with the biological sciences, is not that there are no differences between humans and other animals, but that differences are everywhere: not only are individual humans and animals different to each other, but all species are different to each other as well. Uniqueness is not unique.’

- Greg Gerrard



# Why Ecocriticism?

‘Just so abrupt and odd/the way she went’



# JUST SO STORIES

FOR LITTLE CHILDREN



RUDYARD KIPLING



## THE THOUGHT-FOX

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Beside the clock's loneliness  
And this blank page where my fingers move.

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# Vulpine Intertexts



Anthropomorphisation

‘a fox in her fox fur’

‘my life is laid beneath my children/like gold  
leaf’

bark/stepping/hungrily asking

# Voice, Aurality and Breath: How does the animal speak?

‘heard’

‘cough’

‘sharp intake of air’

‘barked’

‘asking’

‘thick accents’

‘a man’s voice’

outside my sleep  
a sharp intake of air  
a fox in her fox-fur  
stepping across







## Eco-Poetics: Ecocriticism and Form

I heard a cough  
as if a thief was **there**  
outside my sleep  
a sharp intake of **air**

a fox in her fox-fur  
stepping **across**  
the grass in her black gloves  
barked at my **house**

just so abrupt and odd  
the way she **went**  
hungrily asking  
in the heart's thick **accent**

in such serious sleepless  
trespass she **came**  
a woman with a man's voice  
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as if to say: it's midnight  
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Questions?