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Eco Novels

Society expresses itself through literature. Contemporary authors are not mere entertainers; they can reveal the shortcomings of a society, highlight problem areas, and engage with or provoke controversies. Even if an author's opinions only reflect those of society in some aspects, one can still use the text to draw conclusions about the values of the author's society and the way in which it perceives itself and the world at large. This also applies to the way the environment and nature are understood. What role does the environment play in society, and how does society relate to it? Is it presented as a valuable possession, and protected accordingly, or is it seen as a resource to be utilized? Are pollution and other harmful effects on the environment portrayed more as disasters, or as collateral damage? Do these factors influence literature's portrayal of society?

Literature with an ecological focus, covering themes such as pollution, environmental disasters, or the consequences of human interactions with nature, is a product of the twentieth century and the result of the increasing societal perception of the environment as a priceless possession. This is particularly true of western societies. In the previous century, however, the novels of realists and naturalists also contained detailed descriptions of contemporary environmental issues such as (industrial) pollution of the air, waterways, and urban dwellings, and also attempts to bring nature under human control.

My dissertation will examine to what extent nineteenth-century literary descriptions are a global phenomenon. Do they merely serve to provide a realistic way to portray social problems, or do they also show an increasing awareness of the social consequences of pollution amongst critical contemporaries? Do these images occur in different societies at similar stages of industrialization? What is the situation like in other, less industrialized countries? Did authors have to deal with similar reactions to their work? Did readers reject these descriptions, or did allow themselves to be influenced by them? Aside from addressing these questions, my project aims to establish the nineteenth-century novel as a source for environmental history research.

In order to answer these questions, I will examine a range of contemporaneous novels from different regions of the world, whose authors have engaged critically with pressing social concerns. Novels I will consider include Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, Émile Zola's *Germinal*, Wilhelm Raabe's *Pfisters's Mill*, and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. I will also examine the authors' correspondence to whether it indicates an underlying awareness of environmental problems. Finally, by studying the reception of these novels, I hope to determine whether or how these novels served to influence society.