

**'The study of texts written in other times and/or in other languages shows how the arts and humanities have a vital role to play in the context of today's climate crisis where there must be a fundamental and urgent change in the relationship between people and nature.' Discuss.**

In the Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, there is an inscription on the floor which reads: "Unde origo inde salus" - "from the past salvation comes."<sup>1</sup> By definition, salvation means "the preservation of deliverance from harm, ruin or loss."<sup>2</sup> Philip Pullman is one of many authors who purports literature as a vital ingredient in forging a moral compass stating that literature is "the great school of morals"<sup>3</sup> which can supply us with enlightenment and guidance as well as providing pertinent lessons on morality. There is much we can learn from past and present literature to provoke "urgent change in the relationship between people and nature". Literature addresses explicitly or inadvertently the problems and struggles that human beings face. Climate change is an issue which is frequently discussed during news broadcasts of the ongoing protests and climate change conferences taking place. Notably, the Paris Climate Conference of 2015, which classed the crisis as "*un sujet de préoccupation pour l'humanité tout entière*."<sup>4</sup> Due to human nature, writers have a tendency to depict their own emotions or experiences in their work and so it is inevitable that literature will reflect the anxiety and fear that overwhelms society today regarding climate change. It is clear that the climate change crisis is becoming a problem of increasing importance which is why many would consider that literature has a "vital role" to play. Because of the severity of the situation, society demands a form of literary expression which enables readers to view the crisis through a human lens rather than the academic and intellectual one.

There are a vast array of texts that punctuate the world's historical and geographical tapestry that critique human nature. At the foundation of the climate change crisis, there is the issue of humanity's selfishness and there are myriad texts which allow readers to explore questions surrounding greed and the obsession with material wealth. The text, 'La Parure'<sup>5</sup> by Maupassant captures the selfishness we possess in a personal context, though the themes are also applicable to our selfish use of fossil fuels. Madame Loisel has a myopic view of the world as she is blinded by the obsession of her own material possessions. Maupassant writes "*Elle n'avait pas de toilettes, pas de bijoux, rien. Et elle n'aimait que cela; elle se sentait faite pour cela.*" Here, it is made clear that her entire ambition in life is to acquire endless material possessions such as "gowns" and "jewels". This relates closely to humanity's obsession with possessing new clothing and why the issue of "fast fashion"<sup>6</sup> has become so severe. It was recorded in 2019, that "the apparel and footwear industries together account for more than 8% of global climate impact, greater than all international airline flights and maritime shipping trips

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<sup>1</sup> Ghosh, A. (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Dictionary Definition.

<sup>3</sup> Pullman, P. (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Paris Agreement (in French) (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Maupassant, G. (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Cerullo, M. (2019).

combined.” Thus, whilst not explicitly addressing climate change, it is clear that this text plays a “vital role” in understanding the impact of a materialistic mindset.

Maupassant’s writing has a didactic quality as he illustrates Madame Loisel’s downfall after having lost the borrowed necklace which she had so much craved. She is forced to live a life of hardship and before long “*Mme Loisel semblait vieille[...] mal peignée, avec les jupes de travers et les mains rouges.*” When the moral message of this story is taken out of its literary and historical context and applied to the climate crisis, it communicates to the reader that selfish behaviour will ultimately lead to disastrous consequences for humanity.

Like Maupassant, Jules Verne offers salient criticism of the avarice of people in the novel ‘Sans Dessus Dessous’ (1889)<sup>7</sup> albeit through the use of satire. Startlingly ahead of his time, his work is arguably prophetic as he depicts the active plan to melt the Polar ice caps for the retrieval of resources, thus allowing economic gain for those at the zenith of the capitalist food chain. Although we are not actively choosing to destroy the ice caps, like the characters in Verne’s story, it is an inevitable byproduct of our thriving capitalist globe. Indeed, according to the NASA global climate change website, “Arctic sea ice is now declining at a rate of 12.85 per cent per decade.”<sup>8</sup> While it is satirical in nature, his work has a didactic quality as he condemns the selfish and myopic behaviour of the characters despite “*la fin du monde approchant, et sa ruine étant imminente.*” Verne’s end to the novel leaves the reader with the message that humankind is unable to alter the conditions of the world. He writes that “*il semble donc que les habitants du globe peuvent dormir en paix. Modifier les conditions dans lesquelles se meut la Terre, cela est au-dessus des efforts permis à l’humanité.*” However, the reader must understand that he could not possibly have known that industries would have progressed so drastically and that the inexorable increase in carbon emissions could have such a significant impact on the climate of the planet.

More than a century later and with the significant advances in scientific understanding, many individuals still choose to deny our responsibility towards the preservation and wellbeing of the climate. With the shocking rhetoric Donald Trump spouts, it seems that many human beings’ first response is to deny the problem’s existence or to give excuses for reasons why we are unable to rectify it. Donald Trump stated, in January 2020, that “we must reject the perennial prophets of doom and their predictions of the apocalypse”; he later told an audience, including Thunberg, that instead of preoccupying ourselves with the potential Earth’s destruction, we should instead focus on the overwhelming success of the U.S. economy, stating “this is a time for optimism.”<sup>9</sup> Humanity’s propensity to live in denial is not something new; clearly, Virgil is aware of this tendency as he describes the story of Aeneas and Dido<sup>10</sup> during the periods between 29 and 19BC. Despite Aeneas’ obligation to Dido as her husband, “*per inceptos*

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<sup>7</sup> Verne, J. (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Nasa Global Change Website. (2019).

<sup>9</sup> BBC Video of Greta Thunberg and Donald Trump World at the Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Virgil. (2019).

*hymenaeos*”, he lists various reasons why he cannot fulfil this role. These involve the inability to ignore “*tanto monitu imperioque deorum*”, his duty to his son, Ascanius “*quem regno Hesperiae fraudo et fatalibus arvis*” to ensure that he can found the Roman race and his duty to his troops “*Mnesthea Sergestumque... fortemque Serestum.*” Aeneas’ incapability of accepting his role in Carthage, as Dido’s husband, mirrors humanity’s neglect of our duty to protect our planet from harm. Although it could be argued that the link to climate change is tenuous, it is certainly true that Virgil informs the reader of the dangers of an irresponsible mindset.

Similarly, Albert Camus explores humanity’s propensity to reject responsibility when they are often held accountable for an action. In ‘L’*étranger*<sup>11</sup>, Mersault, the protagonist, fatally shoots an Arab and, during his interrogation, he blames the climate for his actions. He describes that “*la chaleur était telle qu’il m’était pénible aussi de rester immobile sous la pluie aveuglante qui tombait du ciel*” and “*c’était à cause du soleil*” that “*la gâchette a cédé.*” This, in the context of the climate crisis, seems somewhat ironic as it is because of our species that the climate has reached heightening extremities. Rather than using it to excuse examples of our dreadful behaviour, we should accept that the maintenance of a safe and stable climate of our planet is our responsibility and Camus illuminates how powerful the environment can be, thus serving as a warning.

While many writers highlight the failings of humankind, others alert us to the threat of nature and thus encourage us to take control of the climate crisis before it makes nature so uncontrollable than it poses a threat to our society. In the poem ‘Precioso y el Aire’, which is part of the ‘Romancero Gitano’ collection<sup>12</sup>, Federico García Lorca presents the wind as a predatory force upon an innocent young girl. “*Llena de miedo*”, the girl runs from “*el viento-hombrón [que] la persigue con una espada caliente*”, to escape “*el viento, que nunca duerme.*” Lorca uses the phallic image of the “*espada caliente*” to depict the wind as it attempts to rape the young girl; it is a disturbing image of nature as a threat to society. Through Lorca’s writing, published in 1928, the reader is alerted to the potential threat the climate has on our society. As modern-day readers, it may encourage us to mitigate the climate crisis and advocate for “fundamental and urgent change” to avoid the predatory force he describes.

Whilst some authors highlight the threat of nature, others merely encourage an appreciation of the planet via their writing. In the poem ‘Soneto IV de amor’, Pablo Neruda<sup>13</sup> seeks to advocate for the beauty of the planet through his elegant description of nature. He depicts “*los aromas papitantes [que] treparon*” and “*barro de oro*” which carries an ambiguous message: it underscores nature’s intrinsic worth while simultaneously denoting the idea that humanity can use the world’s resources for its own financial gain. Furthermore, he directly addresses the reader as he writes “*recordarás los dones de la tierra.*” Through the description of the world’s resources as “gifts” and the personification of the Earth as the gift giver, he indicates that these should be treated with care and appreciation rather than be exploited. Rhetorically speaking,

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<sup>11</sup> Camus, A. (1942).

<sup>12</sup> Lorca, F.G. (1991).

<sup>13</sup> Neruda, P. (1959).

there is a certain amount of desperation from the poet through the use of the 'tú' form, which is almost accusatory in its construction. Rupi Kaur<sup>14</sup>, the Indian-Canadian 'Instagram' poet, also utilises personification in her poem 'green and blue', when the earth "crie[s]" to the moon that it has been "turned into one entire bruise". Rather than eliciting admiration for the Earth, the use of personification here highlights its vulnerability and thus is a direct criticism of humanity's neglect of the Earth. Kaur, therefore, encourages us to contemplate the "relationship between people and nature."

Like Rupi Kaur, many authors have responded directly rather than indirectly (as in the aforementioned texts) to the climate crisis via their work. When reading climate fiction pieces, it is evident that they play a more direct role in alerting us to the threatening realities which a world struck by global warming might provoke, encouraging us therefore to mitigate the crisis. Amitav Ghosh<sup>15</sup> states that "the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense", suggesting that climate fiction cannot be a catalyst for proactive prevention in relation to climate change. However, it is evident that he may underestimate the capability of an individual's imagination to blend fiction and reality. One of the most famous writers, who upholds the value of myth and fantasy realms in literature, is C.S. Lewis who posits stories that help us to "steal past watchful dragons"<sup>16</sup> allowing us to perceive reality from a new perspective. He notes that "the value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by "the veil of familiarity." This veil alludes to one's preconceptions and prejudices which have been moulded by one's upbringing in society. Ballard is one writer who draws the reader's attention to climate change, in his novel 'The Drowned World'<sup>17</sup>, prior to many other novelists, by "tak[ing] a climatological approach to apocalyptic dystopia"<sup>18</sup> which has been significantly affected by the heightened extremity of the climate. Even before climate scientists had identified climate change, it is clear that Ballard had been acutely aware of the imminent threat that the world, as they knew it, faced. In his novel, he describes how the protagonist is "trapped by the surrounding buildings" as "a viscous miniature tornado lashed across the 60-foot-high plants, toppling them like matchsticks." The simile provides a contrast between the "tornado" and the "matchsticks" which underscores their complete vulnerability in the face of potential climatic devastation. When applying Ghosh's thinking to J.G. Ballard, he would argue that it is "too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein" and so, therefore, cannot play a "vital role" because it will fail to incite change by surpassing the realms of possibility. While this may have been true of Ballard's contemporary readers in 1962, modern readers can identify with his work to a greater extent because we are more aware of the impending threat of the crisis.

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<sup>14</sup> Kaur, R. (2017).

<sup>15</sup> Ghosh, A. (2016).

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, C.S. (1982).

<sup>17</sup> Ballard, J.G. (2014).

<sup>18</sup> Clark, J. (2013).

With the increasing extremity of climate change and heightened global interest, it seems that Ghosh may have come to realise that climate fiction does have a “vital role” to play in today’s society. This can be seen through the publication of his new climate fiction novel, ‘Gun Island’<sup>19</sup> in June 2019. In his novel, he depicts how “hamlets [were] obliterated by the storm surge [and] islands where every tree had been stripped of its leaves [leaving] corpses floating in the water.” Through the graphic and emotive description, he communicates clearly that the consequences of climate change are detrimental to a society. Alex Clark<sup>20</sup>, in a Guardian article, notes Ghosh’s shift in mindset concerning climate-fiction’s “role to play” in society. She communicates that he may have changed his opinion because, to some extent, “art has got a handle on how to talk about the impending disaster.” This is primarily for two reasons: because of our deeper comprehension of climate change and because we are beginning to experience the consequences of the alteration in our climate. Whilst it is inevitable that new fiction will emerge, this does not mean that literature from the past will cease to provide important lessons. As readers, we will be shaped by our ever-changing context and thus will find different resonances and draw different conclusions from texts that belong to different epochs.

It seems, in relation to climate change, that the famous expression “write what you know”, usually attributed to Mark Twain, should, in fact, be altered to “write what might happen” before the catastrophic consequences of climate change take hold and it becomes what people “know”. As the consequences of climate change begin to affect more people, it is inevitable that climate fiction will boom. A new generation of writers, all of whom will be more informed of the climate crisis and who will have to live through its effects, will begin to emerge, putting cli-fi firmly on the map. Through the use of climate fiction, “we do not retreat from reality; we rediscover it”<sup>21</sup>; it often allows us to experience a post-apocalyptic world torn apart by the effects of global warming before reaching it in reality, encouraging us to mitigate the crisis. That is not to say that historical writing should be discounted because many illuminating texts are thought-provoking concerning the “relationship between people and nature”, whether directly or indirectly. According to Emmanuel Macron, we need “*les actions concrètes [pour] gagner cette bataille.*” Therefore, we have an obligation to embrace all art forms, including literature from all times and all languages, to spread awareness of the severity of this crisis.

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<sup>19</sup> Ghosh, A. (2019).

<sup>20</sup> Clark, A. (2019).

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, C.S. (1982).

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