

1. **'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.**

'Kultur und Umwelt', 'Écocritique', 'Climate Crisis'...whatever language it is said in, there is one unanimous acknowledgement: the interdisciplinary overlap between literature, language and nature is imperative in today's uphill and urgent struggle to drastically reform the relationship between people and the environment. The current geological epoch, the *Anthropocene*, has created a world subjected to human dominion over the environment in which it has always been the role of writers to remind an ego-centric species that we do hold responsibility for our planet. This paradigm is echoed in the writings of Dr Robert Macfarlane, who identifies that "*Literature is just one of the cultural forms that shape our place-consciousness, and that carries out particular kinds of thinking about how we fit within the biosphere.*" In other words, literature (and as I will come later to discuss, foreign languages) allow readers to shift their mentality around the environment from one which states that logically we must protect the planet in order to survive, to one of moral responsibility where we have an emotional connection to the world which we live in to the extent that we endeavour to care for it not because we need to, but because we want to. Throughout the following essay, I hope to explore how specific aspects of literature (ecocriticism, the romantic movement, philosophical arguments) as well as literary works in other languages have contributed to the reshaping of societal attitudes towards the planet, and crucially why the study of literature is so excruciatingly necessary in order to ameliorate the current human/nature standoff.

The term ecocriticism identifies the intrinsic relationship between human culture and the natural world and has largely become synonymous with the appearance of environmental themes in literature. Explained simply, ecocriticism allows readers to look at literary works through the lens of an environmentalist and this simple medium has allowed the transformation of countless work into mandates calling for the protection of the environment. By way of illustration, through the application of ecocriticism, Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' becomes a disguised critique of scientific advancement and the industrial revolution which has been *'pursu[ing] nature to her hiding places'* and in doing so, corrupting the natural world. Similarly, the recurrent images of specimen capture in the novels of Virginia Woolf (Jacob Flanders' collection of moths and crabs as well as the butterfly catchers in *The Waves*) might well represent her criticism of human abuse of vulnerable organisms for no reason other than self-satisfaction. Notably, ecocriticism may just as easily be applied to foreign texts and Pauline Goul strongly advocates that the

French philosopher and essayist ‘*Montaigne, develops a strangely modern care for the environment*’. In his first book of the *Essais*, Montaigne prides himself on ‘*se sentir preserve de la contagion d’un siècle si gasté*’ [feeling unspoiled by the contagion of such a wasted century], and he goes on to criticise ‘*la dépense*’ [the waste] of money, resources and nature (focally in the New World) which can be read a revolutionary identification of the negligence of humanity in its treatment of the planet. Ultimately, ecocritical interpretations of literature allow for a profound understanding of the simultaneously harmonious and discordant dynamic between man and the natural world. Through the eyes of countless authors, poets and essayists, an (albeit) bleak view of the world is presented which is often necessary to spur the readership into action or at least prompt a moral deliberation in terms of their attitude towards the environment. In the words of Montaigne himself “*we need to interpret interpretations more than we interpret things*”: it is hard to identify problems (be they social, economic or environmental) when they play out in our every day, however if we are able to see these problems through another medium, through the interpretation of literature for example, we are able to take a step back and realise that our actions are synonymous with environmental damage, that our wastefulness is synonymous with climate change and that drastic and urgent change is required.

Similarly, it is necessary to identify the influence of the Romantic movement in literature as one of the pioneering elements in the appreciation of nature and the vitality of its preservation. Romanticism was both an artistic and literary movement that revolved around the concept of ‘*big emotion...surrounded by nature’s overarching majesty*’ [Shelley Dewees]. The foci of Romanticism (the ‘sublime’ and the futility of ephemeral human power and life) are best explored by the eponymous Romantic poets Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Shelley. Their poetry redefined 18th century attitudes towards nature and human ownership of the world which, in the hugely religious society, stemmed partly from the Biblical belief in human dominion. This was about to undergo a sudden metamorphosis under the heavy influence of the nature-venerating Romantic poetry and novels. One poem that embraces this in a particularly wholistic sense, would be Coleridge’s ‘*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’ in which an Ancient Mariner transgresses and is doomed to eternal punishment for having mercilessly and cruelly shot an albatross, and must wander the earth constantly warning others against exploitation of the natural world. The moral of Coleridge’s poem may (arguably) be read as *undue crimes against nature will not go unpunished by the universe*. Similarly, German romantics in the epoch of the ‘*Frühromantik*’ were beginning to write on the topic of nature’s power and beauty, particularly faced with the impurity of the rapidly industrialising human landscape. An example of such a writer is Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) who is well known for his conviction that ‘*Like a great poet, Nature knows how to produce the greatest effects with the most limited means.*’ His identification of nature’s subtle, yet immense force-

which is both beautiful and dangerous- allows a reader to recognise that nature is precious (and in some regards vulnerable also) and he consequently promotes a sense of tenderness towards her. Preestablished conceptions of nature as a tool to be used and abused are thus rendered obsolete by the simple identification of her strength, versatility and transcendence by the Romantics. Literature becomes a simple yet effective medium of painting a sympathetic portrait of nature (the literal example of this would be Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*), and the cruciality of texts written in other times is made apparent; they provide new interpretations of the world in which the promise of an improved relationship between humans and the environment can be found.

Having discussed in depth the significance of literature and texts written in other times, it is also important to point out the crucial role played by languages (especially texts written in foreign languages) in the struggle in today's climate emergency. Undeniably, no one country alone is capable of stopping global warming in its tracks, nor is one country alone is equipped to handle the Australian bushfires. I am personally convinced that reading texts (namely literature) in other languages is a key strategy in gaining an understanding of other cultures. This is itself, is a door into other countries which allows enhanced communication, as an advanced grasp of language and similarly a multilateral comprehension of what the issues such as climate change may mean to different countries (linguistically, socially and politically). This consequently allows effective international collaboration- which is vital in today's current climate crisis.

I am a strong advocate of the importance of language learning through reading foreign texts as, it is interesting to consider how (from a semantic perspective) languages can come to mean such different things. The word 'Apocalypse' has today come to be synonymous with the final destruction of the world (often zombie related) but is arguably also applicable to the fate of the planet given current trends in global warming and climate change. What is fascinating, however, is that the word 'apocalypse' comes from the Greek '*apokalypsis*' meaning 'to uncover' or 'to reveal'. As a result, 'Apocalypse' might be better translated as 'revelation' and this is exactly what languages allow in the context of environmental change. Our relationship with the earth, 'la terre', 'die Welt' is not necessarily doomed, instead we are presented with the revelation that there must alter our ways in order to preserve and protect the world we inhabit. What is most fascinating is the versatility of this word in different languages; words are polysemic, have different meanings in different cultures and circumstances, can be translated backwards and forwards and emerge completely different to how they began. This must also mean that for each language the term 'climate change' must mean a minutely different thing. '*Klimawandel*' (the German for climate change) may

be translated either as ‘climate change’ or ‘*shift in climate*’ and notably, the loaded verb ‘shift’ in the latter seems to be far more indicative of a sudden, immediate action, rather than the gradual process that the verb change alludes to. These subtle variations in language across the globe mean that everyone’s perception differs slightly and I believe that understanding these differences is crucial for successful communication on an international stage to allow global interaction to cumulatively find a solution to the pressing climate change dilemma.

Literature and texts, as a method of understanding the language, culture and idiosyncrasies of another country are, as a result, a lens into the cultural, social, political, philosophical, geographical, historical and (even) environmental orientation of a country. According to Ali Mustofa, ‘*During the process [of reading the literature of a country], several types of interaction happen: interaction between experience and the text; interaction between author and reader; and interaction of the reader with other readers, by which these two processes interacted with each other as readers made connections between what they believe the author said and their own experiences*’. The richness of culture is, arguably, only accessible through literature.

A religious example of this might be the reading of the Qur’an which, to many Muslims, should only be read in the original Arabic (although many translated copies are still in use) as many believe that languages are, in many ways, untranslatable (“*traduttore, traditore*”) and that thus the meaning of the original text (and the direct word of Allah in the eyes of Muslim) is lost if not read in the original language. Does the same not apply to the understanding of other cultural settings? Can we really presume to understand in full, the suffering of those during the Spanish Civil War if we are unable to read the texts produced in response to it? Can we really understand the devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki if we cannot understand the Japanese books, poetry and essays on the topic? Yes, perhaps translations give us an understanding on a superficial level, however is *superficial* really enough in the uphill struggle to protect our world? There is the need for the fundamental and urgent change in the relationship between people and nature and this can only be reached through detailed, profound and considered measures stemming from developed linguistic awareness.

It must also be added that the reading of foreign texts is not just important for reforming relationships between countries and thus making the fight for the climate more successful. Foreign literary works are also themselves enlightening and the study thereof is key to enriching the human/environment relationship and making it applicable to all nations. Take for example the Quranic verse from Surat Al-An’am “*And there is no animal that walks upon the Earth nor a bird that flies with its two wings but they are like yourselves; We have not neglected anything in the book, and then to their Lord shall they be gathered.*” [6:38]. The Qur’an is such a major influence in Islamic countries, but also across the world on a whole and, we see clearly articulated in

one of its surahs, the identification that we must treat nature as equal. Is this not what environmentalists have been saying for decades? The study of foreign texts presents us with means to successfully achieve the shift in the relationship between humans and environment; ways to remind the people of the world that 'no man is an island' and that we must collaboratively work for change in order to achieve effective results.

In conclusion, the study of literature (be it in English or another language) is an essential bridge between humanity and nature. As C.P. Snow emphasised in his 1959 essay *'The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution'*, *'the humanities and science can have a very constructive influence over each other'*. In general, literature of the past (focally the literature of the romantic era) and literature which is viewed through an ecocritical lens, is key to reforming human views towards nature. Literature often has the ability to stimulate an emotional response, which the rationality of science often cannot. In addition to this, the study of texts written in foreign languages is a fundamental method of promoting global understanding, thus creating a means by which effective methods to tackle the climate crisis can be implemented across the world. Literature has the power to inspire, languages have the power to unite. Is it not inspiration and unity that the world needs in order to address the elephant in the room which climate change has become? There is no denying that a fundamental change in the relationship humans have with nature is overdue and necessary, and there no denying that this change will not be easy. The study of literature, with its power to shape opinion and amass support should be utilised to enable this change- it makes an uphill struggle, that little bit less daunting.

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