



# “and now we’re here: the Plasticene”: Ecological Awareness in Margaret Atwood’s Recent Poetry Collection, *Dearly*

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**ABSTRACT**

*Dearly*, first published in 2020, is the latest poetry collection of the acclaimed writer, Margaret Atwood. In *Dearly*, Atwood revisits some of her favourite themes and subjects such as love, loss, time, ageing, sexuality, gender, nature, and environment. The book is divided into five sections, and the poems grouped in the same section revolve around a common theme. In section IV, the poems grouped under the title of “Plasticene Suite” discuss the increasing amount of plastic waste as the distinctive anthropogenic marker of our age. Accordingly, each poem focuses on a different aspect and consequence of this environmental problem. The primary objective of this study is to analyse *Plasticene Suite* poems, namely “Rock-Like Object on Beach”, “Faint Hopes”, “Foliage”, “Midway Island Albatross”, “Editorial Notes”, “Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, “Whales”, “Little Robot”, and “The Bright Side” from *Dearly* through the lens of eco-poetry to reveal Atwood’s criticism of the anthropogenic factors contributing to the current ecological crisis, particularly the ever-increasing generation of plastic waste, and to comment on contemporary poetry’s awareness of and power to address the pressing environmental issues. The study also contends that eco-poetic readings of *Plasticene Suite* poems can help raise awareness about the rise in plastic waste during and after the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. In that sense, the eco-poetic readings of *Plasticene Suite* poems can urge us to reconsider our dependence on plastic and encourage us to adopt sustainable practices and habits by promoting consciousness about this pressing environmental problem.

**Keywords:** Eco-poetry, Margaret Atwood, *Dearly*, Plasticene Suite, Plastic Waste



## 1. Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that our good-old planet is grappling with ever-growing environmental problems and that a wide range of anthropogenic activities such as air and water pollution, depletion of natural resources, deforestation and habitat destruction, generation of large amounts of waste and improper waste disposal, the use of harmful chemicals, pollutants emitted by industrial facilities and vehicles have negative impacts on human health as well as the health of other living organisms, eventually contributing to global warming, and thus, to a climate change. There is a growing sense of urgency to comprehend, appreciate, and protect our environment as we are confronted with the consequences of environmental degradation and climate change. As our planet faces escalating challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, it has become evident that the study of literature can offer valuable insights and contribute meaningfully to the discourse surrounding these issues. In this context, ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field, emerges as an influential and critical framework that can be used to analyse literary texts to explore the complex relationship between human beings and nature.

This study aims to analyse *Plasticene Suite* poems, namely "Rock-Like Object on Beach", "Faint Hopes", "Foliage", "Midway Island Albatross", "Editorial Notes", "Sorcerer's Apprentice", "Whales", "Little Robot", and "The Bright Side", from Margaret Atwood's latest poetry collection, *Dearly*, through the lens of ecopoetry. Atwood's first collection in over a decade, *Dearly*, was first published in 2020. The book is divided into five sections, and each section is entitled with Roman numerals. The poems grouped in the same section revolve around a common theme. In her foreword to the collection, Atwood argues that "[p]oetry deals with the core of human existence: life, death, renewal, change; as well as fairness and unfairness, injustice and sometimes justice. The world in all its variety. The weather. Time. Sadness. Joy" (Atwood, 2020, para. 5). As befitting this statement, each section of the collection centres around a different theme. This study, however, will specifically focus on the poems that are sub-grouped under the title of "Plasticene Suite" in section IV. *Plasticene Suite* poems discuss the ever-increasing amount of plastic waste as the distinctive anthropogenic marker of our age. Accordingly, each poem focuses on a different aspect and consequence of this environmental problem. An ecopoetic reading of *Plasticene Suite* poems will reveal Atwood's criticism of the anthropocentric aspects of the current ecological crisis and contemporary poetry's awareness of and power to address environmental issues. It is

concluded that the *Plasticene Suite* poems not only discuss the detrimental impact of unregulated plastic waste on the environment, oceans, plants, and animals but also scrutinise our failure to recycle this material effectively. Resonating with such terms and concepts as the Anthropocene, the Plasticene, the Capitalocene, the Plastisphere, empirical ecocriticism, blue ecocriticism, post-human ecocriticism, and material ecocriticism, the poems offer a multifaceted exploration of a major environmental issue, thereby contributing to the contemporary discourse on the intersection of environment, literature, and ecological consciousness.

This study also contends that the eco-poetic reading of the *Plasticene Suite* can help raise awareness about the rise in plastic waste during and after the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to recent studies, the use of disposable items like masks, gloves, and food and other product packaging has led to a rise in plastic waste throughout the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the pandemic has specially produced a substantial amount of medical waste, including protective types of equipment, medical gloves, and other single-use medical items. As a result of the lockdowns and layoffs, the pandemic also had a negative impact on trash management and recycling procedures, which has led to a rise in plastic garbage around the world. Additionally, there has been a rise in the amount of packaging material utilised for home delivery as more individuals purchase online while staying home. Though not specifically written to address the increase in plastic waste during the recent pandemic, Atwood's *Plasticene Suite* poems explore the environmental ramifications of our plastic consumption which is increasing daily. Therefore, eco-poetic readings of these poems can urge us to reconsider our dependence on plastic and adopt sustainable practices and habits by promoting consciousness about this pressing environmental problem.

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1 On COVID-19 pandemic-associated plastic waste see: Benson, N. U., Basse, D. E., & Palanisami, T. (2021). COVID pollution: impact of COVID-19 pandemic on global plastic waste footprint. *Heliyon*, 7(2), e06343. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06343>; Peng, Y., Wu, P., Scharup, A. T., & Zhang, Y. (2021). Plastic waste release caused by COVID-19 and its fate in the global ocean. *PNAS*, 118(47), e2111530118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2111530118>; Rizan, C., Reed, M. & Bhutta, M. F. (2021). Environmental impact of personal protective equipment distributed for use by health and social care services in England in the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 114(5), 250-263. DOI: 10.1177/01410768211001583

## 2. "understanding of human / human (she said) impact"<sup>2</sup> on Environment Through Ecocriticism and Ecopoetry

The word "ecology" is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning house, household, or dwelling (Howarth, 1996, p. 69; Buell, 2005, p. 13; Hass, 2013, p. xlvi), and refers to the study of the relationships between organisms and their environment. William Rueckert is reputed to have coined the term "ecocriticism" in 1978 (Glotfelty, 1996, pp. xv-xxxvii; Love, 2003, p. 4; Buell, 2005, p. 13). Rueckert (1996, p. 107) attempts to "[...] generate a critical position out of a concept of relevance [...]" and defines ecocriticism as "[...] the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature [...]". He combines ecology "as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision" (Rueckert, 1996, p. 107) and literature to examine how literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the natural world and human-nature interactions.

It is argued that "[...] any literary criticism which purports to deal with social and physical reality will encompass ecological considerations" (Love, 2003, p. 1), and ecocriticism can be used as an umbrella term "by which literary-environmental studies is best known" (Buell, 2005, p. viii). Cheryll Glotfelty (1996, p. xvii), a prominent figure in the field of ecocriticism, defines it as "[...] the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Glotfelty's definition highlights the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism as it foregrounds the notions of literature and literary analysis that incorporate ecological, geographical, and environmental perspectives. By expanding on Rueckert's relevance, William Howarth (1996, p. 69) defines an ecocritic as "a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action". Howarth's definition suggests the idea that an ecocritic is someone who assesses literary pieces that depict the influence of culture on nature, and the purpose of an ecocritic, as per Howarth, is to appreciate nature, condemn those who cause harm to it and endeavour to inspire political action to restore and protect the environment.

Ecocriticism explores how literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the natural world, human-nature interactions, and the moral and ethical dimensions of

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2 Atwood, M. (2020b). Editorial Notes. In *Dearly* (p. 87). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus.

these connections. Ecocriticism can be argued to have a “[...] capacity to speak to new readers in their own terms on issues which, nowadays, are unavoidably ecological” (Love, 2003, pp. 11-12). Considering the urgent environmental problems that the world is currently facing, such as climate change, habitat destruction, and depletion of natural resources, it is becoming increasingly important to include environmental considerations in literature. This will help raise awareness about the significance of the natural world and the impact of human actions on the environment. According to Glen A. Love (1990, p. 213), “[t]he most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world”. Love contends that literature can play a significant role in addressing environmental challenges as well as influencing cultural attitudes and values in that regard. Participating in the continuing environmental debate and inspiring readers to reexamine their relationship with nature should be among the goals of contemporary literature. This can lead to a greater understanding of the environment and a sense of responsibility for preserving it.

In his introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), a significant collection that played a crucial role in establishing ecocriticism as a legitimate field of study, Glotfelty (1996, p. xv) notes that in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of literary studies were preoccupied with issues of race, class, and gender but they neglected “[...] the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis”. Since then, ecocriticism has gained significant recognition and prominence in literary and cultural studies and has evolved and diversified in its theoretical approaches and interdisciplinary intersections such as ecopoetry, ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, deep ecology, and material ecocriticism. This study argues that, among these intersections, ecopoetry holds profound significance as it can evoke powerful emotions and connect readers deeply with the natural world. In his seminal work *The Song of the Earth* (2000), Jonathan Bate (2001, p. 283) argues that “[i]f mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth”. Bate suggests that poetry is a powerful medium through which individuals can understand and relate to their existence and environment, and therefore, through poetry, individuals can foster deeper connections with their environment, thereby contributing to the preservation of the earth.

It is imperative to distinguish between nature poetry or what is called “ecophenomenological poetry” which concentrates on “descriptions and appreciation

of non-human nature with roots in Romantic and deep ecology traditions" (Lidström and Garrard, 1996, p. 27) and the kind of poetry that engages with complex environmental issues and human-environment relations. There are several terms used interchangeably with ecopoetry such as green poetry, environmental poetry, and post-pastoral. Terry Gifford (1996, p. 27), for instance, propounds the notion of "green poetry" to define "[...] those recent nature poems that engage directly with environmental issues". In a similar vein, Neil Astley (2017, p. 15) argues that "[e]copoetry goes beyond traditional nature poetry to take on distinctly contemporary issues, recognizing the interdependence of all life on earth, [...]". In his influential book *The West Side of Any Mountain* (2005), J. Scott Bryson (2005, p. 2) defines ecopoetry as "[...] a mode that, while adhering to certain conventions of traditional nature poetry, advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues, [...]". Considering these arguments, it can be contended that ecopoetry is a literary genre that merges the notion of conventional nature poetry with contemporary environmental concerns. Though it still incorporates the elements of traditional nature poetry, ecopoetry has differentiated itself from nature poetry by expanding its scope and addressing the present-day environmental challenges. Thus, it serves as a means of expressing ecological awareness and advocating for the importance of nature and sustainability in the modern world.

Although poetry cannot literally save the earth, it can raise awareness, effectively call for sustainable practices, and help build a deeper bond between humans and nature by engaging in discussions about environmental issues. "The idea is that poetry – perhaps because of its rhythmic and mnemonic intensity – is an especially efficient system for recycling the richest thoughts and feelings of a community" (Bate, 2001, p. 247). Poetry has long been acknowledged as a kind of artistic expression that has the innate capability to arouse strong feelings, provoke introspection, and persuasively communicate complicated concepts. Poets can explore the effects of human actions on the environment while simultaneously capturing the beauty and fragility of the natural world using vivid imagery, metaphors, and symbolism. "Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination" (Rueckert, 1996, p. 108). By provoking readers' emotions and imagination, poetry provides a sense of empathy and urgency, which, in return, can motivate individuals to take action to protect the environment.

### 3. *Dearly Beloved World Wrapped in Plastic*

Margaret Atwood is known for her thought-provoking oeuvre in which she explores a range of issues including gender, identity, religion, myth, and power politics. Many of her most famous and well-known themes are brought to life by her latest poetry collection, *Dearly*. Though Atwood has always seamlessly incorporated environmentalist stances within her narratives, thereby highlighting the complex relationship between humanity and the natural world, *Dearly* explicitly focuses on the destruction of the environment by humans. Particularly, part IV and “[...] the poem cycle- The Plasticene Suite reflects the intrusion of plastics everywhere in the natural world, from the branches of trees to the stomachs of dead baby whales” (McMillan, 2020, para. 3). These poems explore the unsettling fact and one of the most pressing environmental concerns of our age that plastics have invaded ecosystems on a global scale, appearing in a variety of forms and locations.

Atwood argues that “[...] poetry does not propose solutions. It creates, instead, evocations” (qtd. in Andrew, 2020, para. 4). The purpose of poetry is not to provide a step-by-step guide for solving ecological problems but rather to evoke emotions, provoke thought, and encourage readers to reflect on the issues at hand. Poetry can convey ecological issues through vivid imagery, metaphors, and symbolism, allowing readers to engage with these issues on a profound level. Likewise, the poems in the *Plasticene Suite* bring forth striking images of plastics entwined around the branches of trees, washing into the seas, sprouting up everywhere, appearing in such unexpected places as inside the barebones of birds and the belly of a dead baby whale. Although we come across these images daily and quite frequently, they remain unrecognised as we often fail to contemplate them adequately. Therefore, we remain oblivious to these images because we have already internalised them. Such poems as the ones in the *Plasticene Suite* cycle, written with ecological awareness and consciousness, serve as influential instruments to make us recognise, comprehend, and, in this regard, question our “contributions” to the pervasive yet still unperceived environmental issues and concerns, and urge us to strive for more sustainable practices to protect the environment.

## I. Rock-Like Object on Beach

"The Paleocene the Eocene / the Miocene the Pleistocene / and now we're here: the Plasticene" (1-3)<sup>3</sup> reads the first stanza of the first poem of the *Plasticene Suite* cycle. In the first two lines, the speaker refers to the different epochs, each of which is characterised by different climatic, biological, and geological conditions and represents different periods in the Cenozoic Era, the most recent era in Earth's geological history. In 2002, Paul Crutzen, an atmospheric scientist, and Eugene Stoermer, a biologist, proposed a new term, the Anthropocene, as a new interval of geologic time (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). The Anthropocene refers to the period where the collective activities of humans significantly altered the ecosystems on Earth. In the context of the Anthropocene, the first stanza sets the tone for the entire cycle by highlighting human impact on the environment.

Plastic is argued to be one of the most distinctive anthropogenic markers of our age, and it is claimed that "[p]lastics are a clear indicator of the Anthropocene and can be considered the marker of the upper subdivision of this stage: the Plasticene" (Rangel-Buitrago et al., 2022, Abstract section, para. 1). Likewise, the third line of the poem aligns with this argument, and it suggests that we are living in the Plasticene, the Age of Plastics. It is argued that "[p]lastics are relatively easily recognizable, without the need for sophisticated analytical equipment, as is the case for the detection of radionuclides. They may, therefore, be widely effective stratigraphic markers for Anthropocene strata" (Zalasiewicz, 2016, p. 5). Developed in 1907 and patented in 1909 by Leo Baekeland (Davis, 2015, p. 348), Bakelite is the first synthetic polymer. In response to the emergence of anti-colonial resistance that made consumer goods like ivory and silk increasingly expensive and difficult to get, Bakelite was created to meet the growing demand for these commodities. Accordingly, in the immediate aftermath of WWII, plastics proved to be an affordable substitute and the perfect material for the emerging consumer culture (Davis, 2015, p. 348). This leads us to the notion of the Capitalocene, proposed by Andreas Malm, and later, taken up by Jason W. Moore, and popularised by Donna Haraway. According to Moore, "[...] The Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature – as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (Moore, 2016, p. 6). The notion of the Capitalocene is designed to draw attention to the role of capitalism in environmental issues, including climate change, deforestation,

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3 Atwood, M. (2020a). Rock-Like Object on Beach. In *Dearly* (p. 83). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All the subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).



and pollution. In this context, it can be argued that “Rock-Like Object on Beach” exemplifies the notion of the Capitalocene, as it discusses the fact that plastic waste, the production and consumption of which mostly serve capitalist purposes, has begun to damage nature to an irreversible extent.

The geologic time scale is determined through the changes observed in sedimentary rocks. According to the poem, along with the rocks made of sand, lime, and quartz, one may come across a strange rock that defies the conventional classifications. It is “[...] black and striped, and slippery” (7), and it looks like “petrified oil” (11). Embedded within this peculiar rock, one may also observe “[...] a vein of scarlet,” (11) which is reminiscent of a bucket fragment. According to the speaker, future alien visitors who seek to decipher the remnants of our civilisation might be intrigued by such an unusual formation. Yet, this “petrified oil” will not only be the evidence of the presence of humans here on earth but also, be the evidence “Of us: of our too-brief history, / our cleverness, our thoughtlessness, / our sudden death?” (16-18). It is an acknowledged scientific fact that “[p]lastic pollution can alter habitats and natural processes, reducing ecosystems’ ability to adapt to climate change, directly affecting millions of people’s livelihoods, food production capabilities and social well-being” (Andersen, n.d., para. 3), and accordingly, the last stanza of the poem envisions a catastrophic event related to the natural environment that would be the end of the world and the cause of human extinction. The opening poem of the *Plasticene Suite* cycle, therefore, identifies the current geological epoch as “The Plasticene” to refer to such a critical stage in human history in which mankind must adopt sustainable practices to face global environmental challenges and preserve our planet for future generations.

## 2. Faint Hopes

“Faint Hopes” is about the ineffective strategies that have been adopted to recycle plastic waste, including turning plastic waste into oil by cooking it (1-4)<sup>4</sup>, banning the use of plastics and drinking straws in some supermarkets (5-8), the discovery of the microbes that eat plastic (9-12), pressing it into fake lumber and building blocks (13-15), and scooping the material out of rivers before it reaches out to the sea (16-17). Nevertheless, all these methods have been proven to have significant drawbacks. The poem suggests that cooking the plastic waste to turn it into oil releases an unfavourable

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4 Atwood, M. (2020c). Faint Hopes. In *Dearly* (p. 84). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All the subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).

odour into the surrounding air (1-4). Likewise, for the microbes to be able to consume the material the temperature must be very high, and this is known to harm the North Sea (9-12). Pressing plastic waste into fake lumber and building blocks is also ineffective since only some kinds of plastic can be used for this process (13-15). The poem, thus, creates a compelling depiction of the difficulties we encounter in dealing with waste generation and management.

According to the UN Environment Programme, 7 billion tonnes of plastic waste have been generated globally so far, and less than 10 per cent has been recycled (UN Environment Programme, n.d., Single-use plastic section, para. 2). We are producing about a million tonnes of plastic waste every year, and by 2050, it is predicted that the global plastic output will have reached 1,100 million tonnes, provided that historical growth rates persist (UN Environment Programme, n.d., Our planet section, para. 1). By musing on this pressing environmental problem, the poem foregrounds the intricacies and predicaments involved in addressing such a great environmental crisis. It is because there is not a single effective method at our hands to recycle plastic, and as the poem claims, plastic waste is an "overwhelming", "ongoing", and "never-ending" (19-20) problem. The poem appears to suggest that we are incapable of addressing plastic waste-related problems, and it encourages readers to muse on the complex nature of waste management and environmental sustainability. In that sense, while the first poem sets the theme of plastic use, an anthropogenic and capitalist marker of our age, as the main subject of the whole cycle, "Faint Hopes" emphasises that our inability to control how we produce, consume, and dispose of the plastic we use is the main cause of plastic-related environmental disasters. The damage caused by plastic waste to nature will later be exemplified in later poems, namely "Foliage", "Midway Island Albatross", "Sorcerer's Apprentice", and "Whales".

### 3. Foliage

"Foliage", the third poem of the cycle, begins with a quotation, "a scrap of black plastic – the defining foliage of the oil age" (qtd. in Atwood, 2020d, p. 85), from Marck Cocker, an author and environmental activist. The epigram underlines the main argument of the *Plasticene Suite* poems: Plastic is emblematic of our age, the Plasticene. Accordingly, the poem posits that the true foliage of the natural world has been replaced by human-made black foliage, plastic. The poem portrays the presence of plastic waste in natural areas such as trees, marshes, ponds, and beaches through simple yet emotive imagery. This foliage is

“rootless” (10)<sup>5</sup>, and “sprouts everywhere” (1), “up in the trees, like mistletoe, / or caught in the marshes” (2-3). It is blooming “[...] in the ponds like waterlilies” (4). One can see “[...] torn bags, cast wrappers, tangled rope” (8) washing onto the beaches. Unlike a traditional romantic poem in which the speaking persona looks around him and celebrates the natural beauties of his environment such as the trees, clouds, lakes, rivers, and flowers, as in the case of Wordsworth’s famous poem, “I wandered lonely as a cloud”, the speaker in this poem reflects an uneasiness regarding the human-nature relationship. It is not a mistletoe or a waterlily, or a beautiful flower, or a green plant that is “sprouting”, “blooming”, “rippling”, being “caught in the marshes” or being “washed onto the beach”, it is just a black plastic. In that sense, Atwood’s word choices are striking and thought-provoking. The proliferation of black plastic is described with verbs that can easily be associated with vegetation growth, thereby highlighting the fact that humans influence the earth’s natural processes.

The poem recalls the idea of the Plastisphere, first termed by Eric Zettler et al. in 2013. The Plastisphere refers to a new marine microbial habitat formed by plastics and microplastics (Zettler et al., 2013). The concept of the Plastisphere is significant as it shows the extent of human potential to modify ecosystems. In that sense, the poem compares plastic to foliage, mistletoe, and waterlilies, foregrounding the striking contrast between the life-giving natural world and the intrusive synthetic material. Contrary to natural foliage which supports life by contributing to the ecosystem, this “rootless” (10) plastic foliage which “[...] gives nothing back / not even one empty calorie” (11-12) has no ecological and life-sustaining value. The last stanza of the poem consists of three rhetorical questions, “Who plants it, this useless crop? / Who harvest it? / Who can say Stop?” (13-15). These short and direct questions urge readers to think about their role in addressing this environmental issue by emphasising the lack of accountability for the widespread use of plastic and man’s failure to do anything to stop it. The concluding stanza, therefore, emphasises the pressing need to take accountability and collaborate to reduce the adverse effects of human actions on the environment through an image of the pervasive and intrusive presence of plastic waste in nature.

#### 4. Midway Island Albatross

Like the previous poem, “Midway Island Albatross” deals with the impact of unregulated plastic consumption and waste on the environment, particularly on wildlife.

5 Atwood, M. (2020d). Foliage. In *Dearly* (p. 85). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All the subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).

The poem begins with a description of the things found "inside the barebones" (1)<sup>6</sup> of something. There are such colourful materials as tags, ribbons, balloons, silver foils, springs, wheels, and coils (3-6). In the second stanza, it is acknowledged that these materials are found "inside the dead bird child" (10). Then, the poem asks a very moving question: "What should have been there" (7) inside the dead body of this Midway Island albatross? The answer is that it should have been the necessary things that could have helped the bird grow, the bird should have had strong wings to be able to fly over a clean sea (11-13).

In one of her interviews, Atwood argues that "[i]f you follow birds, it allows you to get a pretty global view of what's happening to the planet" (qtd. in Leber, 2019, para. 3). In this statement, Atwood refers to the idea that the numbers and/or behaviours of animals like birds can serve as indicators of environmental health. Accordingly, the poem portrays an image of a bird killed by plastic pollution. The poem also gives us a picture of what should have been, a healthy and beautiful bird soaring over the sky, and what is at present, "[...] glittering mess, / this festering nestwork" (14-15). The concept of "nestwork" is important because it describes how plastic waste has become intertwined with nature, much like a bird's nest made of various materials. However, in this case, it is a harmful and toxic "festering nestwork", which implies that this interconnectedness, instead of providing protection and care, is detrimental to the environment. The image of a healthy bird flying across the skies contrasts sharply with the reality that is figuratively represented as a "glittering mess" and a "festering nestwork", which alludes to the current status of the ecosystem, because of the overabundance of plastic garbage.

## 5. Editorial Notes

"Editorial Notes" depicts an imaginary conversation between the speaking persona in the poem and "she" (1)<sup>7</sup>, the editor. The editor advises the speaker to refrain "from exhortation and despair" (3). It means that the editor wants the speaker to refrain from urging people to act on environmental issues and being oppressive in that matter. The editor wants the speaker to end "exhortation" (3), forced persuasion, and "despair" (3), overwhelming negativity while contemplating the human-nature relations and the

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6 Atwood, M. (2020f). Midway Island Albatross. In *Dearly* (p. 86). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All subsequent references to the poem are cited from the same source and in brackets by line number(s).

7 Atwood, M. (2020b). Editorial Notes. In *Dearly* (p. 87). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All the subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).

human impact on the earth. Instead, the editor recommends that the speaker adopt a kind of approach that provides a profound and experiential understanding of how human behaviour affects the rest of the planet. More importantly, the editor suggests that the speaker should allow people to come to their own conclusions (12-13) regarding environmental matters. The speaker, however, contends that “[t]here is some danger in this” (16). Although the poem does not explicitly state the potential dangers involved in the approach proposed by the editor, it is apparent that the poem pictures two differing views and discourses surrounding how environmental problems should be approached.

Scholars and critics have begun to incorporate such cognitive tendencies as “psychic numbing”, “pseudoefficacy”, “the prominence effect”, and “the asymmetry of trust” (Slovic & Slovic, 2015b, p. 170) used by social scientists in ecocritical studies to refer to the social and psychological impediments against cultivating compassion in the face of catastrophic events and humanitarian challenges, namely genocide, climate change, extinction of species, and feminine. The aim is to generate new communication skills to mitigate these cognitive tendencies. It is argued that “[...] when faced with the need to empathize with numerous beings worthy of our concern, the human ability to feel compassion tends to diminish” (Slovic & Slovic, 2015a, p. 9). “Editorial Notes” appears to address the complexities inherent in communicating and understanding environmental concerns and advocating for change. The poem, therefore, underlines the importance of environmental narratives as well as the scientific arguments, statistical facts and numbers. This is one of the arguments of empirical ecocriticism which aims to study the impact of environmental narratives “[...] to expand our understanding of the psychological, social, and political work of environmental narratives through synergy by integrating the environmental humanities and environmental social sciences” (Scheider-Mayerson et. al., 2023, p. 8). In that sense, the conversation between the speaker and the editor in “Editorial Notes” serves as a compelling example of the fact that assessing the impact of environmental narratives is an equally important but often overlooked issue.

## 6. Sorcerer’s Apprentice

“Sorcerer’s Apprentice” explores the effects of unregulated human acts and the consequent challenges of preventing and reversing the process by drawing on the motif of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice tale. The first half of the poem tells the story of “a

machine made by the Devil" (2).<sup>8</sup> As a Devil's machine, it can grant any wishes, "and some idiot wishes for salt" (5). The machine fulfils his wish, but because he is unable to turn it off, too much salt is produced. To stop it, the Devil's machine is thrown into the sea, "and that's why the sea is salt" (10).

The Devil's machine in the poem can be defined as "[...] an emblem of the artificial, of the unfeeling utilitarian spirit, and of the fragmented, industrial style of life that allegedly follows from the premises of the empirical philosophy" (Marx, 2000, p. 18). In that sense, the image of a magic machine serves as a symbolic representation of a powerful and artificial force. The lack of ethical considerations and the sense of responsibility leads to a destructive outcome, emphasizing the potential dangers of utilitarian approaches divorced from ethical considerations. The machine, thus, can be associated with an industrial lifestyle resulting from "the premises of the empirical philosophy", to use Marx's phrase. The machine, according to the poem produces a "mountain of whatnot" (20), and "[...] we throw it all into the sea / as we have always done" (21-22), emphasising the environmental consequences of unchecked technological progress and the lack of control and responsibility in that regard. Even if we are aware of the detrimental consequences of our actions, we persist in discarding the consequences, much like tossing objects into the sea, without even addressing the initial problem. The poem also criticises man's tendency to dump industrial waste into the sea. For instance, the Japanese government's controversial decision to release Fukushima's so-called diluted nuclear wastewater into the ocean is one of the latest examples of such a tendency.<sup>9</sup>

The poem argues that "it's the same story: *Go* is easy, / *Stop* is the hard part" (12-13, emphasis in original), implying that people frequently begin processes without fully understanding the long-term repercussions and that as time passes, reversing or halting those processes becomes progressively more challenging. When read as a kind of commentary on the previous poem, it can be concluded that the poem prophecies

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8 Atwood, M. (2020g). *Sorcerer's Apprentice*. In *Dearly* (p. 88). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).

9 On the Japanese government's controversial decision to release Fukushima's so-called diluted nuclear wastewater into the ocean. See: Yamaguchi, M. (2023, August 24). Fukushima's radioactive wastewater is being released in the Pacific. Here's what you need to know. In *Associated Press News*. Retrieved from: <https://apnews.com/article/japan-fukushima-nuclear-radioactive-wastewater-release-fdaed86a7366f68c70eca0397b71b221>; Murakami, S. (2023, August 24). Fukushima wastewater released into the ocean; China bans all Japanese seafood. In *Reuters*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-set-release-fukushima-water-amid-criticism-seafood-import-bans-2023-08-23/>

that “[...] this will not end well” (24), serving as a cautionary reflection on the results of uncontrolled human activity and the necessity of taking the long-term ramifications of our decisions into account.

## 7. Whales

The seventh poem of the *Plasticene Suite* cycle, “Whales”, deals with the dumping of plastic wastes into the sea as in the cases of the previous poems, namely “Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, “Faint Hopes”, and “Foliage”, from a different perspective through concentrating on the detrimental effect of this action on marine life. Indeed, there are multiple references to land-based plastic leakage entering waterways not only in these three poems but also throughout the entire cycle to change “[...] the conversation from land-based imaginaries, discourses that root the human in soil and earth/Earth toward the oceanic” (DeLoughrey, 2019, p. 135). The poem portrays an image of a mourning mother whale carrying her deceased child who died of plastic pollution (1-6).<sup>10</sup> Then, it explores the pain and remorse that one has after watching such a horrible event on television. By asking “how did we do this by just living / in the normal way” (10-11), the poem urges readers to consider their involvement in this issue by engaging in “routine” behaviours like using plastic packages and wrapping. Accordingly, the poem underlines the fact that “[...] the plastic crisis stands at the forefront of oceanic environmental concerns and, thus, as predominant site of potential for blue ecocriticism” (Dobrin, 2021, p. 162). The poem’s discourse foregrounding the “oceanic environmental discourse”, to use Dobrin’s phrase, is significant as it is one of the gravest yet neglected problems of our age. It is because, “[d]espite current efforts, it is estimated that 75 to 199 million tonnes of plastic is currently found in our oceans” (UN Environment Programme, n.d., Rivers and lakes section, para. 1). The poem, therefore, questions why mankind stopped using more sustainable materials like “[...] paper and glass and tin / and hemp and leather and oilskin” (20-21) and has begun to use plastic instead. The final lines of the poem ask a very crucial question: “It will be! Will it be? / Will we decide to, finally?” (26-27). This question emphasises how urgent the issue is and prompts readers to think about their accountability in the context of the ecological disaster.

The main idea of this poem recalls Harold Fromm’s arguments that “[...] modern Western man’s comfortable life amidst the conveniences of technology has caused

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10 Atwood, M. (2020i). Whales. In *Dearly* (pp. 89-90). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All the subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).

him to suffer a spiritual death, to feel alienated, empty, without purpose and direction" (Fromm, 1996, p. 32) and "[...] he is mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology" (33). Fromm suggests that technology has completely changed the way we live by providing a plethora of conveniences and improvements that have increased our level of comfort, yet the convenience and comfort offered by technology make it easier for individuals to forget the importance of the natural environment and the impact it has on their overall well-being. The poem, therefore, can be argued to highlight the discrepancy between the modern way of living, which is based on technological conveniences like plastics, and the impact of such a lifestyle on spirituality and morality. It illustrates the audience's response to witnessing dead whales on television, exposing their ignorance towards the detrimental effects of technology on the environment. In that sense, the poem questions whether modern man can truly sympathise with the demise of the other living beings on the planet and begin to feel responsible, or whether our anthropogenic worldview and lifestyle prevent us from recognising our "contribution" to environmental issues.

## 8. Little Robot

The subject of "Little Robot" is quite different from the other poems examined in this cycle. In this poem, the high technology level that humanity has reached and the intricate relationship between technology and humanity are discussed through the image of an artificial intelligence robot "[...] designed to learn like a child" (6).<sup>11</sup> Recently, the notion of the Anthropocene has begun to be criticised as it ignores the relationship between humans, non-humans, and technological agents alike. It is because, with technology evolving rapidly, the relationship between humans and technological agents has become intricate and uncertain.

As Ursula K. Heise argues "[s]cience, in one form or another, has formed a central part of ecological debates to date, [...]" (1997, p. 4). The image of a hi-tech robot in the poem, emulating humans, blurs the boundaries between human and non-human. In that sense, the poem recalls the relationship between posthumanism and ecocritical studies. Accordingly, "[...] posthuman ecocriticism becomes a way of reading the biosphere and technosphere transversally in the variations of matter, and interpreting

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11 Atwood, M. (2020e). Little Robot. In *Dearly* (pp. 91-92). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All the subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).



ecologically the ethical and social implications of existence beneath the carbon-based life embedded in agential intra-actions with the biotic forms" (Oppermann, 2016, p. 283). Transcending anthropocentrism, such an approach focuses on how human and non-human entities coexist and influence each other within the context of ecological relationships.

This can be regarded as a mirror of the larger discussion about the effects of unregulated technological advancements on the environment. It is becoming more important to think about how human advancement and reliance on cutting-edge technology could affect the environment, including in terms of energy use, pollution, and habitat destruction. As Atwood (2014, para. 23) claims "[e]very technology we've ever made has also altered the way we live", implying that if we reshape the world to supply the demands of robots such as cheap energy, when "[...] the energy disappears, so will the robots. And, to a large degree, so will we, since the lifestyle we have built and come to depend on floats on a sea of electricity". Accordingly, the poem asks crucial questions: "what will you make of yourself / in this world we are making?" (22-23) and "What will you make of us?" (24). Atwood reminds us that non-human matters also have creative agencies, and thus, we should be "[...] ecologically aware of the crisscrossing strands of their stories" (Oppermann, 2016, p. 288). These questions, therefore, delve into the complex and unpredictable relationship between technology and humanity's future, urging the reader to contemplate further issues regarding technological advancement, existential and moral considerations, and the ecological impact of human actions.

## 9. The Bright Side

"The Bright Side", the last poem of the *Plasticene Suite* cycle, incorporates irony and sarcasm to provide a concluding commentary on the root cause of plastic waste generation. The poem highlights the fact that plastics are so durable and long-lasting materials that they have become an integral part of our culture of convenience, and, in pursuit of convenience, mankind turns a blind eye to the disastrous effects of plastics on nature. The poem juxtaposes the perceived advantages of plastic with its potential drawbacks. The speaker questions whether the benefits of plastic truly outweigh its negative impact by using sarcasm to highlight the absurdity of such claims.

The opening line of the poem, "But look on the bright side," (1)<sup>12</sup>, is a sarcastic beginning indicating an effort to draw attention to the ostensible advantages of plastic in our lives. Yet, from the second line onwards, "you say" (2), the speaker explicitly foregrounds a difference of opinion. The second line implies that someone else, referred to as "you" has a positive view of plastics being a crucial part of our convenience culture. This line also distinguishes the speaker's perspective from that of "you". It means that the speaker simply quotes what "you" is saying or arguing, and therefore, the speaker sets the tone for irony and critique simply by quoting "you".

A set of rhetorical questions that represents the arguments of "you" in the poem, "Has there ever been such brightness?" (3), "Has there ever been a flower as bright" (4), "Has there ever been red as red, / a blue as blue?" (7-8), and "Has there ever been a bucket / as light as this to carry water" (10-11), "Why should we use the heavy one / so easily broken?" (13-14), brings attention to the artificial vibrancy of plastic products through emphasising their visual appeal while subtly highlighting their inauthenticity. The arguments in favour of using plastics often revolve around their durability, attractiveness, affordability, and lightweight properties, which make them an attractive option compared to heavier and more fragile alternatives. However, this perspective fails to consider the fleeting and deceptive nature of convenience in a consumer-driven culture that values immediate satisfaction over long-term sustainability.

The poem also invokes images of simple everyday objects, and the objects of leisure and adventure such as plastic flowers, a plastic bucket, and a plastic ice-cube tray. One can argue that the poem highlights the frivolous and frequently unnecessary use of plastic in situations where other materials could be more appropriate to expose a culture that is dependent on the convenience of plastic solutions. For instance, the final stanza of the poem, "(And the beloved twistable / pea-green always dependable / ice-cube tray . . .)" (22-24), represents how people are driven to items (beloved ice-cube tray) that claim to make their lives simpler (twistable ice-cube tray), often at the sacrifice of sustainability, and the appeal of convenience (always dependable). Items such as plastic flowers, plastic bottles, and plastic ice-cube trays are trivial and disposable household items that contribute greatly to plastic waste. Through irony and rhetorical inquiry, the poem muses on the influence of plastic on our convenience-driven world. It encourages readers to ponder the apparent benefits of plastic against the long-term

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12 Atwood, M. (2020h). The Bright Side. In *Dearly* (pp. 93-94). United Kingdom: Chatto & Windus. All the subsequent references to the poem are cited from this source and in parentheses by line number(s).

environmental consequences, thereby promoting a rethinking of social values and objectives.

This last poem of the *Plasticene Suite* cycle along with the preceding poems alludes to the “power of matter to build dynamics of meaning in and across bodies” (Iovino, 2012, p. 136). Relocating human life and culture in a wider web of connection, *Plasticene Suite* poems align with the premise of material ecocriticism that “[a]ll matter, [...], is a ‘storied matter’. It is a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, pp. 1-2). Through highlighting various ways in which plastic is prevalent in the environment, from plastic continuing its existence in the oceans and on the soil to plastic contaminating animals, other living beings, and thus, human life, Atwood accentuates its material cycle. In *Plasticene Suite* poems, plastic as a durable and affordable material has an impact on other ecosystems, bodies, and cultures as well.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Plasticene Suite* poems not only discuss the detrimental impact of unregulated plastic waste on the environment, oceans, plants, and animals but also scrutinise our failure to recycle this material effectively. Resonating with such terms and concepts as the Anthropocene, the Plasticene, the Capitalocene, the Plasticsphere, empirical ecocriticism, blue ecocriticism, post-human ecocriticism, and material ecocriticism, the poems in the cycle offer a multifaceted exploration of a major environmental issue and contribute to the contemporary discourse on the intersection of environment, literature, and ecological consciousness. These frameworks provide unique perspectives on understanding the relationship between humans and the environment, as well as the ways in which literature reflects and engages with environmental issues.

The eco-poetic reading of *Plasticene Suite* poems, therefore, highlights the significant effects of human actions and convenience-driven lifestyles on the environment by foregrounding “the role of our cultural activities in the ways we produce, reproduce and consume this embodied text we call the world” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 460). In that sense, *Plasticene Suite* poems foreground the fact that contemplating our consumption patterns and understanding our responsibility to preserve the environment

is crucial. The recent pandemic, for instance, has led to a heightened dependence on single-use plastic materials, resulting in plastic waste emerging as a major environmental concern. The ecocritical reading of the poems, therefore, urges readers to reflect on the impact of their choices and emphasise the significance of sustainability in our everyday lives. Accordingly, it can also be contended that these poems explore the intricate relationship between time and the environment in the sense that they impel readers to consider the transitory nature of human life itself in the face of the long-term consequences of our actions on the planet. Thus, by analysing Atwood's poems through an eco-poetic lens, we can gain a deeper understanding of the growing problem of plastic consumption in our world, and at the same time, appreciate the effectiveness of contemporary poetry in addressing this pressing environmental issue.

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