# *Changing the (Cultural) Climate*
## *TOPICS*

### ENGLISH LITERATURE, II YEAR MA, 2019-2020

Could a literary genre save the planet? We will explore ecological thought from literary and interdisciplinary perspectives. We will focus on climate fiction as a genre, assessing how it can shape individual and collective behaviours. Close reading will be dedicated to *The Ice People* (1998) by Maggie Gee, *Mara and Dann. An Adventure* (1999) by Doris Lessing. The course will involve students in workshops, discussions and presentations.

**I. EVOLUTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM** is essential to understanding how critical interpretations of literary texts has changed throughout the decades and how the ways in which the changes have occurred depend on the historical and political background and on the cultural episteme. The episteme is how knowledge is understood and represented in a certain period: knowledge in the Anthropocene has been understood as developing through human intervention on nature. ecocriticism is the critical theory that responds to that very episteme.

Philology
New Criticism
Structuralism
Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction
New Historicism
Women's Studies, Post-Colonialism, Gay and Lesbian and Queer Studies
Ecocriticism
**Movement from an internal to an external view of the literary text, from philology to hermeneutics.**
**With Ecocriticism we study literary texts as the outcome of complex, multiple relationships between humans and their environments**

**II. THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CRISIS**
What does the transition from climate change to climate crisis involve?
Natural and anthropogenic catastrophes
Transition from description of the problem(s) to agency and action
No agency and action can solve but only reduce/ mitigate the problem(s)
Importance of contextualizing and localizing. Europe as different from South East Asia
Lack of information, inadequacy or manipulation of communication
Climate crisis seen as a fake by those who do not want to acknowledge the problem
Top down vs bottom up actions > critical mass
Generational aspects / the young and the elderly
Motivation depends on the mind-sets: Intrinsic motivations touch upon the personal sphere (the future of our grandchildren), Extrinsic motivations depend on external factors (fines, enforcement of rules)
Bottom up actions vary from country to country depending on social and economic factors
Global and local issue of migrants and refugees
Post-disaster reconstruction
Cultural memory
Preparedness and adaptation
Risk society
Subjective and collective responses

### III. THE META SUPERPOWER OF HUMANISTS
**Meta-discoursive and Self-reflexive attitude:** people in the humanities have the ability to look at themselves from the outside, to discuss and question why they do what they do, instead of only doing it. In all other sectors and disciplines people learn what they have to do and they do it. In the humanities people learn what they have to do and simultaneously discuss what they have to do, why and how.
Ecological footprint
Environmental humanities, Ecological humanities, Literature and the Environment studies, Ecocriticism
Nature and culture not as separate but intertwined
Agendas of ecocriticism: what we can do with it, dealing with Lawrence Buell's 6 problems
Ecoliterature is not inclined towards offering solutions but voicing problems and opening up avenues for discussion. Self-questioning, meta-discoursive attitude of literature seen as complementing a more self-assertive and self-validating attitude of the sciences.
**Eco-criticism and eco-historicism**

### IV. CLIMATE FICTION

Post/apocalyptic novels share some TROPES as a genre, for example the excess of technology. The point is to see if and how the author is able to use these tropes in an original, innovative way
Intertextuality. Utopia/dystopia as a genre and cli-fi as a sub-genre are characterised by a high level of intertextuality, which means that the authors are well acquainted with previous novels and authors in the same genre and they choose to display their knowledge, prompting readers to identify connections with themes and tropes tackled by previous authors.

Paradox: modern novels from the 19th century backwards seem to engage the reader more than contemporary texts that are openly and directly tackling climate crisis and environmental issues. William Wordsworth as a poet and William Morris as a poet and a novelist are more thought-provoking and aesthetically appealing than contemporary authors (such as Robert Edric and Sarah Hall) who are directly engaged with ecocriticism. Idea of hope in the ability of humankind to overcome crisis as opposed to hybris. How does the presence or lack of hope shape a text and its reception?

**What are the characteristics of creative and critical texts on the environment from the '90? This needs to be evaluated by reading Maggie Gee, Doris Lessing.**

Contrast between estrangement and defamiliarization caused by the apocalyptic setting on the one hand and empathy and identification we feel for the characters on the other hand.

Description of the apocalyptic scenario is a crescendo.

While climate fiction is characterised by specific and recurrent structural and thematic features, it is also a metaphysical meditation on life and death and being human. It would be restrictive to assess climate fiction only on the basis of the disaster scenario, because that scenario provides the backdrop for a deeper ontological questioning.

Anything that we take for granted in our societies – food, drinks, shelter, procreation, love – becomes arduous through the apocalypse. Reflection on what humanity and humankind are like through the apocalypse.
The apocalypse invites a reconsideration of all human passions, conventions and taboos.

Apocalyptic novels raise the issue of how human identity changes, is disrupted and can be reconstituted through disaster, migration, reconstruction.

"No, I don't. They don't accept those born here who then spend time outside. Like me (*Mara and Dann*, p. 387)

Issue of discrimination: who you want to associate yourself with, where and when.

Climate fiction is about historical and cultural memory and amnesia: how you can lose and retrieve your past, above all when it is traumatic.

In apocalyptic novels the timeline is blurred. Past, present, and future and tightly interconnected. Humans in apocalyptic scenarios can never really overcome their past and the only way is to embrace it and acknowledge that it is what they are. It has become structural, deeply embedded/incorporated in their identity process.

## V. MAGGIE GEE, *THE ICE PEOPLE*

Author's use of paratext characterised by non-fiction books on climate crisis at the beginning

Evolution and degeneration of a couple in a climate changed scenario

Problem of infertility, a topos of the genre

Relapse into barbarism and cannibalism

Extremities in the narration, domestic to apocalyptic, micro to macro, constant swing between normal and abnormal, ordinary and extraordinary

Ice age, deforestation, scarcity of resources (food and water), climate migration, racism: already presented in the first few pages.

Neatness and poignancy of the style

Multiple crush: the society is crumbling; their relationship is crumbling Attilia Caberletti

Neo-Darwinian fight for the survival of the fittest, pp. 159-160 Giulia Bertaglia

Climate crisis is everywhere and nowhere, it affects every single aspect of our life and still we do not see it or we see it only partially and intermittently Giulia Bertaglia

Climate migrants described in ways that have become frequent reality nowadays p. 120 Elisa Fattore

Ice People: Who are the Ice People? It is the migrants and it is the Europeans. Friezing is climatic as much as it is emotional. p. 103 Elisa Fattore

Fear that technology can take over humanity, enhanced by the fact that the Doves look like pets and arouse our sense of endearment, humans treating machines like humans p. 147 Erika Finessi

Infertility due to an excess of technology as opposed to fertility associated with previous, more natural and 'primitive' lifestyles p. 19 Marco Morosi

Technology as a surrogate and compensation for the lack of rewarding relationships pp. 56-59 Rossella Tancredi

Funeral and spreading of ashes: evidence that the apocalypse causes the erasure of family memories and cultural memory as opposed to a previous stage of civilization in which the sense of belonging and the attachments to the family were much more deeply felt and expressed p. 54 Anh Cao

Fear as a strong factor to be exploited in order to control public opinion. Trope that comes straight from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Ilenia Casmiri

Apocalypse as complete lack of empathy and ethics, spreading of selfishness and violence, the ability to kill becomes another item on the list p. 129 Giang Dang

Ending is not without hope. The children have reverted to barbarism and have become cannibals. Yet Saul dies like a noble warrior in the hope that a better world will come. Anh Cao

Human in/ability to express empathy and care is tested to its limits by the apocalypse Monica Zaninello

Discuss whether the apocalypse is more effective and satisfying for the audience where there is an indication, however slight it may be, that a palingenesis, a complete new beginning, may arrive.

## VI. DORIS LESSING, *MARA AND DANN*

Post/apocalyptic novels test the ways in which certain basic, structural human questions sound in extreme-case scenarios. Dann asking Mara "Can we go home now?"; Mara not being able to listen because of her extreme basic need, drinking out of thirst and dehydration, sleep deprivation. How these questions are or are not reshaped, how they do and do not acquire new meaning in those apocalyptic scenarios. They draw our attention to how we take things for granted and this may end soon.

'What do you see?' is an expression of Lessing's genius. It is a game thanks to which we understand how we humans filter nature and make sense of the world. In this novel 'What do you see?' becomes key to understanding the environment. Useful as a tool for the preservation of cultural memory. 'What do you see?' is a refrain that keeps their mental health, because it helps children grow familiar with their environment. Acquiring your points of reference, the process of familiarization with a place, an environment, a house: all is key to being human. And it contrasts with the process of de-familiarization that we as readers experience while presented with the apocalyptic environment.

The way in which the passing of time is described is genre specific. Climate change novelists are interested in exploring the evolution of post/disaster and showing human perception changes according to how it is affected by the environment.

Lessing explores ways of keeping track of the passing of time in a habitat severely affected by climate crisis by retracing signs of cultural memory: "what Mara had slowly understood—and it had been slow, years—was that this was not just, as Daima had told her, a ruined city thousands of years old, or hundreds, or what the villagers saw it as—a place to get stones for building—but layers of habitations, peoples, time." (p. 57) Layers of civilization.
A little girl, overwhelmed by time, the weight of it, thoughts that crammed her brain and made it want to burst, she had climbed up on Daima and shivered and clung. "They've just gone, gone, gone, Daima, and they were here for so long…And we don't know their names or anything." (p. 58)

What Mara has seen is a narrative of SURREALISM, that is a reality exacerbated to such a point that it becomes distorted. Very thorough, meticulous descriptions juxtaposed with a very vague setting.
The fantasy component is in the suspended atmosphere. Mara and Dann are taken away from their world.

Limited point of view: narrative technique that focuses on a narrator whose view of the world is limited, partial, or unreliable, owing to a variety of reasons: mental illness, age, background, setting, cultural barriers.

The past is shrouded in mysterious events.

Lack of direction in the plot, sense of provisionality, precariousness, and indeterminacy.

The novel insists on the antithesis between self-consciousness and civilization on the one hand and natural behaviour in a primitive habitat on the other.

Clash of culture between South and North.
Chelops: description of a dystopian environment

Sharp contrast between the big scale of the phenomena and the small scale of individual lives that however are all that counts.

## VII. POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS

Post/apocalyptic novels are first and foremost thorough enquiries into humankind and humanity, that is the ability to be and stay human while facing the apocalypse. Humanity in the climax of the Anthropocene shows excesses, limits, expectations, sensitivity, resilience, in/ability to express empathy and care.