

The Portrayal of Land: The Effects of Climate Change in Poetry

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The focus of this article is to demonstrate how the theme of Land is portrayed in poetry written about the effects of climate change. This article will focus on Land and the idea of Land as ‘home’ despite the endured abuse overtime. Looking at the effects of climate change, the poems this article will analyse are that of Sylvia Stults, Matthew Olzmann and Joshua Isham.

The poems ‘Warned’¹ and ‘Awareness About Our Environment’² by Sylvia Stults place a major focus on the idea that we, as a society, have been told about how climate change is affecting our land, yet we act selfishly and continue to abuse our environment. This can also be said for the poem ‘Our Mother Nature’³ by Joshua Isham, which looks at the close relationship humans have with the earth and nature and how we take it for granted, therefore making the land inhabitable for future generations.

¹ Sylvia Stults ‘Warned’, By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/warned-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

² Sylvia Stults ‘Awareness About Our Environment’, By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/awareness-about-our-environment-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

³ Joshua Isham ‘Our Mother Earth’, Family Friends Poems (2008). Available at: < <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/our-mother-earth> > [Last Accessed 25 November 2022]

‘Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now’⁴ by Matthew Olzmann further highlights how the future generations will not live as rich as a life as we have, as much of the nature that we have experienced won’t be there anymore due to our carelessness and irreversible damage. This raises the point that if we can’t take responsibility, we will lose the greatness of our world forever. This article will look at the relationship between the land and humans, the pollution that is occurring, and the effect it will have on future generations.

The climate crisis in the world is only getting worse, despite how many times change is called for regarding global warming – many people are trying to provoke change through written word (especially poetry). Looking at poetry of the 20th and 21st century, we can analyse how nothing has changed regarding the environment as we still abuse the world we live in for our own use, without thinking about future generations. The poetry that this article will analyse is that of Sylvia Stults, Joshua Isham and Matthew Olzmann.

All of the poems that this article will analyse focus on the abuse that our environment

withstands despite the fact that our environment and land has provided us with a home. This theme of the ‘land as home’ is portrayed in a melancholic light as the author aims to deflect blame on us humans for what we have done to the environment and to show how this damage is irreversible. In both ‘Awareness About Our Environment’ by Sylvia Stults and ‘Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now’ by Matthew Olzmann, both authors utilise the idea of their poem as a stream of consciousness. Olzmann utilises enjambment, in the phrase “we sought to leave you nothing/but benzene, mercury the stomachs of seagulls rippled with jet fuel and

⁴ Matthew Olzmann ‘Letter to Someone Fifty Years from Now’, Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now by Matthew Olzmann – Poems | Academy of American Poets (2017). Available at: < <https://poets.org/poem/letter-someone-living-fifty-years-now> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

plastic”,⁵ whilst Stults uses the structure of a free verse poem, to evoke the true thoughts that they both have surrounding this subject – it is personal and intimate which creates a relationship between the author and the reader thus, evoking sympathy from the reader. By using enjambment and a free verse poem, both Stults and Olzmann are being brutal by expressing the reality of climate change and how much of a concern it is for the world – the sadness portrayed by both Stults and Olzmann shows genuine concern by allowing the reader into their train of thought and personal feelings. Stults also creates this sense of concern in ‘Warned’, by utilising rhyming couplets and an AABB rhyme scheme to demonstrate a sense of sharpness, highlighting that she is being brutal and is trying to make the reader feel responsible.

All poems by Stults, Olzmann and Isham use the collective nouns “us” and “we” to reinforce the idea that we are all responsible for what is happening – it is not just one group of people who are responsible for climate change however it is a

⁵ Matthew Olzmann ‘Letter to Someone Fifty Years from Now’, Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now by Matthew Olzmann – Poems | Academy of American Poets (2017). Available at: <<https://poets.org/poem/letter-someone-living-fifty-years-now>> [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

⁶ Terry Gifford, *Green voices: Understanding contemporary nature poetry*. (Manchester University Press, 1995).

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collective thing that we all must combat together.

By using these nouns, the authors want the reader to reflect and think about how they can help this issue and how they can try and combat the deep-rooted effects of climate change. Gifford 1995 argues that ‘green poetry’ is “part of a wider social concern with the future of our planetary environment that has demanded a re-examination of our relationship with the natural world”⁶ – this is evident in the poetry of Stults, Olzmann and Isham as they are all trying to evoke change in society by showing the realities of climate change. This is also evident in ‘Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now’ by Olzmann where direct address is utilised, through the pronouns “you”⁷, which addresses the reader directly demonstrating the detrimental effect that climate change and global warming will have even on future generations as they will miss out on so much of nature. In each of these poems, the poet is addressing the poem to the present generation and future generations to portray the brutalities of

⁷ Matthew Olzmann ‘Letter to Someone Fifty Years from Now’, Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now by Matthew Olzmann – Poems | Academy of American Poets (2017). Available at: <<https://poets.org/poem/letter-someone-living-fifty-years-now>> [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

what we are doing to the environment and how it is still impacting the future. The fact that these collective nouns are used is effective as it keeps the reader nameless, emphasises that we can't just blame one person for the effects of climate change but that it is collective and applies to everyone – it is important that we all work as a team to combat this struggle.

Furthermore, imagery is used throughout all of the poems to highlight the disastrous effect that we as a society don't pay much notice to. Stults, especially, used the imagery of discolouration, as evident in the phrase "yellow fumes"⁸ in 'Awareness About Our Environment' and the phrase "Stars were bright...Now dimmed, obscured, pollutions haze"⁹ in 'Warned'. Stults is emphasising how things that were once beautiful and natural have now become tainted through our abuse of the environment. These natural objects that are becoming tainted are helpless in this

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 situation as they have been there before us humans tainted them through our selfishness. This imagery is also evident in 'Our Mother Earth' by Joshua Isham when Isham described how the seas have been "choked with waste",¹⁰ which is used metaphorically to show a sense of suffocation and the fact that the world cannot come back from the changes that have happened over time – our abuse of the world is too deeply engrained in society to turn back now. Olzmann also shows the brutality of climate change on the land and on animals especially by using imagery to demonstrate how "whales have been harpooned or hacked into extinction"¹¹ and how seagulls have been "rippled with jet fuel and plastic"¹². The poets have used these effects to evoke sympathy for the reader as we are going to get to a stage where all animals are extinct, and we won't be able to get any of them back if we don't help them now. The animals are helpless, yet we can choose to be

⁸ Sylvia Stults 'Awareness About Our Environment', By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/awareness-about-our-environment-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

⁹ Sylvia Stults 'Warned', By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/warned-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

¹⁰ Joshua Isham 'Our Mother Earth', Family Friends Poems (2008). Available at: < <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/our-mother-earth> > [Last Accessed 25 November 2022]

¹¹ Matthew Olzmann 'Letter to Someone Fifty Years from Now', Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now by Matthew Olzmann – Poems | Academy of American Poets (2017). Available at: < <https://poets.org/poem/letter-someone-living-fifty-years-now> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

¹² Matthew Olzmann 'Letter to Someone Fifty Years from Now', Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now by Matthew Olzmann – Poems | Academy of American Poets (2017). Available at: < <https://poets.org/poem/letter-someone-living-fifty-years-now> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

helpful by re-evaluating our usage of the environment.

The negative affect of climate change is clear through Isham's poem when he describes how the "soil once pure"¹³ is now "barren sand".¹⁴ Isham is using an extended metaphor, here, by portraying how we can't grow anything good out of a situation so dire and upsetting. There are no positive effects of climate change, and especially the finality of it – which is also linked to 'Warned' and 'Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now'. Olzmann uses a simple sentence at the end of the poem "and then the bees were dead"¹⁵ to show the finality of climate change.

Bees are known as the biggest pollinator and play a huge role for the environment – however if we lose these then the world won't be able to stay functional and everything else will eventually die out. There is clearly a multiplier effect regarding the environment and even future generations which is show as Olzmann is writing to someone

¹³ Joshua Isham 'Our Mother Earth', Family Friends Poems (2008). Available at: < <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/our-mother-earth> > [Last Accessed 25 November 2022]

¹⁴ Joshua Isham 'Our Mother Earth', Family Friends Poems (2008). Available at: < <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/our-mother-earth> > [Last Accessed 25 November 2022]

¹⁵ Matthew Olzmann 'Letter to Someone Fifty Years from Now', Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now by

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from a future generation – climate change doesn't just affect people who are living in the present, but it also affects future generations. Irony is also utilised to question the reader and even society's morals as we all emphasise the importance of protecting our environment, however, not enough has still been done as we are still losing species and are continuing to cause irreversible damages to the world, despite it being our home and being home to the animals and other generations. This irony is also evident in Stults' 'Awareness About Our Environment' when Stults uses a mocking tone to highlight the fact that "there has to be something someone can do"¹⁶. This is ironic as society speaks about changing the world for the better however, it seems like it is all talk as not enough is being done as species are still dying and the world is warming.

In 'Awareness About Our Environment', Stults also investigates the effects of war and military action on the land and the environment around us.

Matthew Olzmann – Poems | Academy of American Poets (2017). Available at: < <https://poets.org/poem/letter-someone-living-fifty-years-now> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

¹⁶ Sylvia Stults 'Awareness About Our Environment', By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/awareness-about-our-environment-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

Stults writes about how “weapons of destruction”¹⁷ are “tested on desolate sites”¹⁸ which creates the impression that these weapons are used in practice and are not actually used for a purpose. It is implied that more damage is being caused through practice of these weapons of destruction however, they aren’t being used advantageously. By describing how these weapons are being “tested on desolate sites”¹⁹ they are being used on empty sites and are only causing more pollution despite the critical state of the environment. Stults is

trying to present all of the ways in which we as humans and inhabitants of the earth are being destructive and selfish – she is also showing us that we aren’t seeing the full picture as these are events that as a society would be forgotten about (they aren’t in the mainstream ideology of climate change and global warming). This is reinforced as each verse focuses on a different aspect of pollution in ‘Awareness About Our Environment’

¹⁷ Sylvia Stults ‘Awareness About Our Environment’, By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/awareness-about-our-environment-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

¹⁸ Sylvia Stults ‘Awareness About Our Environment’, By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/awareness-about-our-environment-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

Land in Literature, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023 as if Stults is almost listing everything that is contributing to the crisis we are facing. Stults is trying to make the reader think about how embedded our abuse of the land and environment is – it’s been so normalised that we don’t realise the full extent. Munden (2008) emphasises the “pivotal role” that poetry can play in “provoking activism” and “creating...a movement for real change”²⁰; this is evident from Stults as she is educating us, as is Olzmann and Isham, and is making us reflect on our personal choices and the general choices of society.

Overall, it is evident that the land is under threat from humankind. Although we are talking about it more, Stults, Olzmann and Isham are using their poetry to continue to evoke social change from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom of the hierarchy. Their poetry is melancholic and is being used to emphasise the power dynamic between humans and the land around

[environment-by-sylvia-stults/](https://pickmeuppoetry.org/awareness-about-our-environment-by-sylvia-stults/) > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

¹⁹ Sylvia Stults ‘Awareness About Our Environment’, By Sylvia Stults – Pick Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: < <https://pickmeuppoetry.org/awareness-about-our-environment-by-sylvia-stults/> > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

²⁰ Paul Munden (Ed.). *Feeling the pressure: Poetry and science of climate change*. (British Council, 2008).

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Me Up Poetry (2022). Available at: <
[https://pickmeuppoetry.org/warned-by-sylvia-
stults/](https://pickmeuppoetry.org/warned-by-sylvia-stults/) > [Last Accessed: 25 November 2022]

us – we have all the power, yet choose not to do
the best that we can to protect the land, which is
helpless.

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