

Margaret Atwood's "Plasticene Suite": An ecocritical analysis for the addressing of Sustainable Development Goals

("Plasticene Suite," de Margaret Atwood: Un análisis ecocrítico para el abordaje de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible)

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Abstract: This article analyses the sequence of poems "Plasticene Suite," written by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood, using the critical approach of ecocriticism. The main objective is to show how, through literature in general and poetry in particular, the Sustainable Development Goals can be addressed, as they encourage the reader to stay informed about environmental issues and to critically reflect on their own ideas through a close reading and detailed analysis of literary texts.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood. Ecocriticism. Environment. Sustainable Development Goals.

Resumen: En este artículo se analiza la secuencia de poemas "Plasticene Suite", obra de la autora canadiense Margaret Atwood, desde las premisas de la ecocrítica. El principal objetivo que se persigue con ello es mostrar cómo, a través de la literatura en general y más concretamente a través de la poesía, se pueden abordar los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, pues invitan al lector a mantenerse informado sobre temas medioambientales y reflexionar de forma crítica en torno a sus propias ideas a través de la lectura atenta y el análisis pormenorizado de textos literarios.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood. Ecocrítica. Medioambiente. Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible.

1. Introduction

Given the current situation of our planet, and in the light of the alarming deterioration of ecosystems and the living beings inhabiting them, attributable in part to a rapidly increasing world population and overexploitation of natural resources, the countries that make up the United Nations Organization reached a consensus in September 2015 that a radical change was essential to eradicate these harmful practices for our planet.

From this consensus arise the so-called Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek equitable societies, sustainable human development for our habitats and other living beings, and global cooperation with a view to achieving these objectives. In this study, the focus will be on SDGs 13, “Climate Action: take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts,” and 15, “Life on Land: protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss.” (United Nations)

One of the most powerful tools and means to foster these and other goals is to stay informed in order to promote them, not only on an individual basis, but also in the educational context, as outlined in the fourth SDG. It is of paramount importance to provide students with quality education, since it “empowers people everywhere to live more healthy and sustainable lives.” (United Nations 2020).

This article focuses on the connection between ecocritical literature and the Sustainable Development Goals proposed for the Agenda 2030. In this case, poetry would play an *activist* role in getting a message across to readers, in this case from an ecocritical standpoint, through the prolific Canadian author Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) and her sequence of poems titled “Plasticene Suite.” In this context, ‘activism’ can be interpreted as being “the cultivation of a certain invisibility” (Zecchini), for this poetry genre draws attention to the environment, criticises the human lifestyle prevalent in Western societies and questions our relationship with nature.

2. Aim and methodology

The main aim of this paper is to analyse Atwood’s sequence “Plasticene Suite,” from the poetry book *Dearly* (2020), through the critical lens of ecocriticism. Attention is paid to the message conveyed by the collection of poems to cultivate the aforementioned SDGs. For this purpose, firstly, a careful exploration of secondary sources for delimiting the theoretical framework has been carried out, focusing on exploring the term ‘ecocriticism’ and providing a thorough definition of the concept. This endeavour relies on the contributions

of scholars such as Rueckert (1978), Nuri (2020), Barry (2020) and Mishra (2016), as well as on Buell's landmark study *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), which traces the roots and successive waves of ecocriticism in recent decades. At the same time, Alaimo's article "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature" (2008) explains the fourth wave of this critical approach and its connection with "the more-than-human world" (Abram 24; Slovic 4), a term originally coined by ecophilosopher David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996).

In the third section, Canada's approach to ecocriticism has been addressed, drawing a distinction between this stand and that of hegemonic ones, since cultural and contextual features also influenced the emergence of ecocriticism according to Soper and Bradley (2013), Bandyopadhyay (2021) and Atwood (1972), who, in turn, reflects on some of her own life experiences. In fact, Atwood has a profound sense of care and connection with nature as a large part of her life has been spent surrounded by it due to her father's job as a biologist. Thus, her constant exposure to nature led to her concern, raised as she had been to appreciate and cherish natural ecosystems and its nonhuman dwellers.

3. Ecocriticism: Tenets and waves

The literary term 'ecocriticism' was first mentioned in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), in which he applied ecological studies to the analysis of literature due to its importance nowadays. At the same time, this essay was a driving force for other scholars and ordinary people to realise the importance of ecology during the 1960s and 1970s in the USA (Nuri 4), whilst hearkening back to the American Transcendentalism of the 1840s (Barry 241). On the other hand, according to Barry (2020), in the UK, "ecocriticism" (also called "green studies") was initially interested in investigating the major works of British Romanticism dating back to the 1790s. The founder was Jonathan Bate with his book-length essay *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), although the development of the concept is more noticeable in America (Barry 241).

The etymology of the word 'ecocriticism' can be traced back to Greek: "eco" comes from *oikos*, which means "household or earth," and "logy," from the root *logos*, which means "logical discourse" (Mishra 168). Mishra also points out that "ecology" together with "criticism" refers to "criticism of the house – the environment represented in literature" (168). In order to establish a solid definition of the term, Barry mentions Cheryll Glotfelty's theory at first, in which "simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (239). It is worth mentioning that Glotfelty is

considered to be the founder of the ecocritical studies in the USA, and co-editor together with Harold Fromm of a key collection of essays titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). She was also the founder of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in 1992, so, at the time, ecocriticism started to be seen as an emerging theoretical framework forming its distinct foundations (239).

Furthermore, Buell develops the meaning of 'ecocriticism' further and defines it as the "study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (430). To this definition, Mishra adds that this concept does not only involve the study of nature. As previously noted, there is an ethical objective and duty regarding the natural environment and its interconnection with human activity (168). Following Mishra, Buell distinguishes two types: shallow vs. deep ecology. The former is "essentially anthropocentric," which means that nature's only function is to meet human needs since human beings are considered the owners of nature (168). At the same time, this current also advocates the use of natural resources to achieve sustainability, whereas deep ecology is aimed at preserving nature, which "has its own right to survive" (168), thus avoiding the impact of anthropogenic action. Ecocriticism would, therefore, be in harmony with this second type of ecology and concur with the following statement: "The present environmental crisis is a by-product of human culture. It is not caused by how the ecosystem functions; but how our ethical system functions; how we behave with mother nature, etc. Ecocriticism builds this awareness among man." (Mishra 168)

Addressing the different waves of ecocriticism, following Buell's book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Nuri classifies them into three types: first, second and third wave. The main difference between the first and second wave is that the former deals with "nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction" (Nuri 7; Buell 138), whereas the latter attends to justice regarding environmental issues, "a 'social ecocriticism' that takes urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as 'natural' landscapes." (Nuri 7; Buell 22). The scholars working under the umbrella of the second wave also focus on ecocriticism at a global scale and include postcolonial and minorities literary studies as well as ecofeminism in their writings, as happens to be the case with Laurence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader* (2000) and Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace's *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2001), among others (Nuri 7). Finally, the third wave "aims at a more comparative, trans-cultural approach to ecocritical studies and often likes to explore the ethnicity through the study of environmental literature." (Nuri 11). Hence, the intention of this subcurrent is not only to raise awareness of the

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environmental issues our planet is facing nowadays, but also to understand our role concerning them while creating "literary bridges across the cultures." (Nuri 12)

Moreover, according to Slovic, theorists are currently immersed in a fourth wave of ecocriticism whose origins date back to 2008, and this is due to the new topics and materials that are included in ecocritical studies:

I see a proliferation of studies and courses emphasizing the fundamental materiality (the physicality, the consequentiality) of environmental things, places, processes, forces, and experiences. Ranging from studies of climate change literature to examinations of the substance of ecopoetic language, there is a growing pragmatism in ecocritical practice. One might even propose that "academic ecocriticism" is now spawning a new mode of "applied ecocriticism," with applications encompassing basic human behaviors and lifestyle choices, such as eating and locomotion and clothing and dwelling. (4)

This new wave was believed to have been born with Alaimo's article "Transcorporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature" (2008), underlining humans' corporeality as *trans-corporeality* because of its continuity and correlation with the environment or, in other words, "with the more-than-human world" (Abram 24; Slovic 4), which sets a new direction for the study of ecocriticism. The summary of the main points that this fourth wave would encompass are: multicultural experiences and individuals voicing them, environmentalism in developing countries, "material ecocriticism and its various spinoffs (material ecofeminism, nonhuman/nonanimate agency, public health narratives,)" studies involving perception, apprehension and literary narratives, and "applied ecocriticism," including humans' lifestyle, sustainability, cultural aspects, etc. (Slovic 6).

Considering all the above ideas in relation to ecocriticism and how this critical approach is evolving, it can be recognized that literature and ecocriticism seek to catalyse an awakening among human beings, so that nature and our cultural ways of living and behaving are understood as a whole. The aim is therefore to rethink our lifestyle and our treatment of the environment in ways that are respectful of the more-than-human world.

3.1. *Ecocriticism in Canada: Atwood's approach*

According to Soper and Bradley, “in Canadian literature and literary criticism, theoretical reflection upon the natural world and upon the role of language and literature in describing, imagining, and constituting nature has a lengthy past” (17). From the pastoral to the times of ecocriticism, this country has paid special attention to nature and interconnected issues from a critical perspective (Soper and Bradley 19). However, the Canadian approach to ecocriticism might be considered an independent movement from the North American and British variants (22). This is also supported by Bandyopadhyay, as evidenced by the following statement, in which he also mentions Atwood's contribution to the topic of nature:

Canada, as distinct from the erstwhile imperial Britain and the dominant neocolonial neighbour USA, has produced a literature of its own. And Margaret Atwood, as a foremost Canadian literary figure, has analysed the contours of her country's postcolonial and neocolonial life in order to explain the integral relation between Canada's abiding perception of the nation as a colony in some way still, and its nature. (81)

As the emerging movement at the time, Atwood also considered it important to emphasise the postcolonial situation of the country, merging both historical and geographical matters to proclaim the country's cultural identity (Atwood 7). In the 18th century, at the peak moment of industrialization, she claims in *Survival* (1972) that English settlers coming to Canada felt overwhelmed when they were surrounded by these vast natural landscapes, and so they felt “a feeling of hopeless imprisonment” (Atwood 62), contrary to what was expected according to Burke's and Wordsworth's ideas about the importance and beauty of nature (60). For that reason, Canadian writers emphasise their identity by linking “the cultural dimensions of diasporic experiences to ecological dimensions, as Canadian locations are imagined in relation to homelands, places of exile, and other sites of memory, identity, presence, and absence” (Soper and Bradley 26). In this regard, Atwood has focused on this interconnection between nature and human beings in many of her works by adding her witty approach, mixing “irony, symbolism and self-conscious narration” (Ashish 194), for she is acutely aware of the harmful relationship between nature and human beings, who exercise a relationship of power with respect to it.

4. "Plasticene Suite": An ecocritical analysis

4.1. "Rock-like Object on Beach"

The first poem in Atwood's sequence, "Rock-like Object on Beach," is part of section IV in *Dearly*, called "Plasticene Suite," which, according to Tassara, consists of "a collection of vignettes observing the ways plastic has infiltrated every nook and cranny of our planet." This section includes nine poems, all of which address current issues regarding the environment, from climate change to the excess plastic and its presence in all ecosystems, including the animals that inhabit them.

In this poem, the lyrical subject uses a descriptive tone accompanied with their own thoughts and, since the issue of the overproduction of plastic concerns all human beings, Atwood uses the pronouns "we" or "us" so that the readers can also feel part of her criticism and depiction of reality, conveying in this way a feeling of discomfort and maybe preoccupation or remorse, which seems to be the common aim of this section of "Plasticene Suite." It is made up of six free-verse stanzas of three lines each.

In the first lines, Atwood refers to the succession of the divisions belonging to the Geologic timeline formation at a global scale, which, according to the Harvard Museums of Science & Culture, goes from the Paleocene, the Eocene, the Oligocene and the Miocene to the Pliocene. However, by using a witty neologism inspired by our current problem with the overuse of plastic, Atwood uses "Plasticene" (Atwood 83) in her poem, already anticipating the critical tone and her concern with this environmental issue caused by humans and, as Mishra points out, showing the ecocritical commitment of her literary creation, connecting the current state of nature with anthropogenic action (168).

In the second stanza of "Rock-like Object on Beach," Atwood describes natural elements, such as "a rock made of sand / and one of lime, and one of quartz," but the problem emerges with the unknown final element, "and what is it?" (Atwood 83). She uses an ironic tone in the poem to make clear the criticism she wishes to voice. Thus, she first describes this weird item which is "On the beach at any rate" and then, she realises that it is "part of a bucket maybe" (Atwood 83). The use of "maybe" in this line may suggest how common it has become to find out plastic in any natural environment, especially on the beach, as Chris Jordan already shows in his film *Albatross* (2017), or almost everywhere, according to David Attenborough's documentary series *Blue Planet II* (2017).

In the fifth stanza, Atwood tries to shift the perspective to an external viewpoint, to a fictional reality where aliens would come to the Earth: "When we're gone and the aliens come / to puzzle out our fossils: / will this be evidence?" (Atwood 83). Again, she uses her shrewdness between the lines to

decree that, long after humanity is extinct, plastic will remain as one of our main identity signs, and, she continues, “Of us: of our too-brief history, / our cleverness, our thoughtlessness, / our sudden death?” (Atwood 83). In these last lines, the repetition of “our” centres the responsibility for these actions on human beings. Furthermore, a paradox is evident in the second line to refer to how, at one point in history, the creation of something might be seen as a great achievement (hence “our cleverness”) and how this achievement can become the cause of a huge problem later on due to lack of morality and self-control (hence “our thoughtlessness”). In fact, she may also use “our cleverness” just as an ironic attribute of human nature, which is crystal clear in the last line.

All in all, Atwood is writing from an ecocritical perspective, not just showing her “commitment with environmentalist praxis” (Buell 430), but going a step further by writing about the “more-than-human world” (Abram 24; Slovic 4), by including the connection between human activity and the environment, by criticising and questioning current human lifestyle, showing empathy towards animals and natural spaces, especially regarding her Canadian roots, and also voicing her experience as a Canadian woman surrounded by those natural landscapes and their deterioration that they are suffering.

Furthermore, her environmental commitment is not circumscribed within her literary productions. Atwood is also one of the presidents of BirdLife International, an organization that actively works for the protection of birds, and she is also part of the organization Amnesty International, for she is concerned about social causes dealing with human rights too (Merino). Therefore, it could be concluded that the message conveyed by these poems is not just a way for our students to become conscious about the planet’s alarming deterioration. The writer also sets an example of responsibility for students, clearly stating why she wants to write about these issues as an invitation for humans to rethink how we relate to the nonhuman world.

4.2. “*Faint Hopes*”

The second poem, “Faint Hopes,” consists of six stanzas, the first three consisting of four lines, the fourth and fifth of three, and the last stanza of two. This poem addresses the problem of plastic overproduction and its ubiquitous presence, despite the fact that it is technically feasible to prevent it from ending up in the seas. In fact, she mentions some of the discoveries that have been made regarding the elimination of plastic:

There are microbes that eat it –
They’ve been discovered.

But the temperature has to be high:
No good in the north sea. (Atwood 84)

In these lines, Atwood criticises human activity and how nature and its deterioration is intertwined with our actions, highlighting again Slovic's theory (4). At the same time, it could be claimed that this criticism emphasises how our lifestyle is damaging to our ecosystems and, what is more, the fact that even though we are aware of the consequences of how plastic pollutes and destroys natural environments, uncertainty is omnipresent regarding the measures implemented, as suggested by these lines: "Maybe there will be a tax / or other laws" (Atwood 84). For these reasons, this poem may be better accounted for through the lens of the fourth wave of ecocriticism, as happens to be the case with "Rock-like Object on Beach."

Finally, the writer wonders what to do "with the overwhelming ongoing / never-ending outpouring?" (Atwood 84), which would convey the core message of the poem: as long as our main problem is that our current system fosters this never-ending production of items made of plastic, there is no measure that can be applied to solve this environmental issue. It is therefore of utmost importance to raise awareness, which is the first step to take action and use our critical thinking in the framework of a theoretical approach that enables us to understand a literary text clearly endowed with an ecocritical message, as pointed out by Mishra (168).

4.3. "Foliage"

The next poem, "Foliage," which consists of five three-line stanzas, further elaborates on the previous message about the omnipresence of plastic in our planet, when she asserts that the most common up-to-date foliage, i.e., plastic, "sprouts everywhere," but "Who plants it, this useless crop?" (Atwood 85), she asks herself and the reader. This metaphor where plastic is identified with foliage is lifted from Mark Cocker's work *Our Place* (2018), as evidenced by the quotation preceding Atwood's poem: "a scar of black plastic – the defining foliage of the oil age." (Atwood 85). In this case, the poem makes reference again to our current era as "the oil age," whereas in the first poem our era was wittily called "Plasticene" by Atwood. Both authors highlight the same problem in our contemporary societies but referring to different moments of the production of plastic.

Closely following the conventions of the ecocritical Canadian tradition, Atwood describes how nature normally works and develops, emphasising different landscapes and natural sites, using similes to explain that nowadays it is

plastic that is found everywhere instead of natural elements: it is found “up in the trees, like mistletoe,” “in the ponds like waterlilies” or “onto the beaches, neo-seaweed / of torn bags, cast wrappers, tangled rope” (Atwood 85), the last line being a more critical and ironic metaphor than the previous similes. Atwood’s is a powerful depiction of natural environments that emphasises the strange presence of plastic, underscoring not only the interconnection between human activity and the “more-than human world” (Abram 24; Slovic 4), but also the dramatic consequences resulting from our harmful human lifestyle. In fact, this is emphasised at the end of the poem, since the lyrical subject indirectly places the responsibility on people for the reader to feel identified with these indirect questions: “Who plants it, this useless crop? / Who harvests it? / Who can say Stop?” (Atwood 85).

4.4. “Midway Island Albatross”

In “Midway Island Albatross,” the fourth poem consisting of three stanzas of six, four and five lines consecutively, is believed to have been written in response to David Attenborough’s documentary about plastic usage (Darlington), although it is more probable that the poem is straightforwardly connected with the documentary *Midway: Message from the Gyre* (2012) and the film *Albatross* (2017), both by the director Chris Jordan, since Atwood’s writing offers a very descriptive and harsh image of what can be watched in this film recorded in the Pacific, on Midway Island:

Inside the barebones
ribs it’s all bright colour:
a tag a ribbon
a strip of silver foil
a spring wheel a coil. (Atwood 86)

Again, the hideous way in which humans live and “prosper” is criticised in eloquent lines, with Atwood writing again from the premises of the fourth wave of ecocriticism. In fact, her ecocritical intention is connected to different waves. In line with the fourth wave, on the one hand, she aims at harshly depicting the reality of the consequences resulting from the plastic excess and its presence in both ecosystems and living beings, in this case the bird species albatross. In contrast with what should be the natural course of their development, this description is given to show the toxic presence of plastic inside the birds’ bodies: “not this glittering mess, / this festering network” (Atwood 86). On the other hand, Atwood seeks to depict nature, as can be seen in the first half of the third

stanza: "it should have been the fuel / for wings, it should have been / upsoaring over a clean sea" (Atwood 86), which would be more related to the concerns of the second wave of ecocriticism.

4.5. "Editorial Notes"

In "Editorial Notes," a poem made of five stanzas of three lines each and a separate line at the end, Atwood simulates a conversation with a third person who might be considered her editor, as betrayed by the title of the poem. In this case, the lyrical subject wants to make clear the whole point of this collection: the writer does not want to mitigate the human-induced environmental crisis we are faced with nowadays. For that reason, in the first part of the poem the editor suggests that, instead of including a "note [...] / to pull back somewhat / from exhortation and despair" (Atwood 87), she holds the idea that including "an experiential under / understanding of human pact / human (she said) impact" (Atwood 87) would be a better option. In fact, the former lines add a very critical note through a play on words: it is implied that "human impact" has become "a human pact" given that the current system in which we live promotes damaging behaviours to nature that have been normalised. This is what the attainment of SDGs would change in order for humanity to move towards a sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyle.

At the same time, the writer and the editor agree on the fact that it is information and real-life experiences that would "let people come to their own / conclusions" (Atwood 87). In this way, it is human beings who decide if they are going to follow an "essentially anthropocentric" kind of ecology, as claimed by Buell (Mishra 168), or the shallow type, in which nature would be at humans' disposal and their necessities. That is why the editor closes the poem on a pessimistic note by saying: "There is some danger in this" (Atwood 87), which is precisely connected to the dichotomy between "human impact" and "human pact." Some people will realize this harmful human impact on the environment, while others will continue to perpetuate this damaging power relationship towards nature, which is part of this collective pact in which we are all participants.

Sustainable Development Goals invite readers to reflect on the facts and scientific evidence that confirm that human impact is the greatest risk factor for the environment, since we are the cause of most of the current catastrophic phenomena, such as climate change, rising temperatures, species extinction, etc.

4.6. “*Sorcerer’s Apprentice*”

The next poem, “Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” consists of six stanzas which do not follow a specific pattern of lines: the first and second have four lines, the third two, the fourth and sixth five, and the fifth three. The poem owes its title to the German writer Goethe’s folk tale. The three first stanzas explain a tale called “Why the Sea is Salt,” found in the collection *Norske Folkeeventyr*, by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe. Then, Hamilton Wright Mabie included this story in his work *Fairy Tales Every Child Should Know* (1905), edited by S. E. Schlosser. The idea depicted is that losing control on something that is essential to live and has great repercussion on our lives can have devastating consequences, “and that’s why the sea is salt,” Atwood would point out (88).

After this first story, she briefly explains the title’s tale emphasising the words “go,” “stop” and “wait” to convey how the process works, in this case to trace the origin of why the sea is salt, and to explain how nowadays we pollute the seas of our planet by throwing away anything considered waste:

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice –
it’s the same story: *Go* is easy,
Stop is the hard part
In the beginning no one thinks about it.
Then *Wait* is too late. (Atwood 88)

Therefore, in the two following stanzas we find the comparison between these stories and our contemporary situation and, metaphorically, there are some vehicles to refer to modern items and gadgets that help produce waste. For instance, “magic machine” can be identified with the machines found in factories that allow mass production, or “the sorcerer” can be identified with the people who invented or started these machines.

At the end, the lyrical subject relates, once again, human activity with the harmful results deriving from it (Slovic 4). In this poem it would be the dumping of waste and garbage into the seas, which causes pollution and damage to the species that inhabit them, as can be seen in the following poem, called “7. Whales:” “and we throw it all into the sea / as we have always done / and this will not end well” (Atwood 88).

The poem tries to make the reader reflect on the shallow ecology analysed earlier, since nature is put at the service of our needs, in this particular case to find spaces where we can get rid of our waste. Therefore, the author encourages us to reflect again on this dangerous practice and understand that our way of production is not sustainable.

4.7. "Whales"

"Whales" consists of seven stanzas, not with a fixed but rather variable pattern of lines. It is a poem that tells the story of a young whale who died due to plastic intoxication, something human beings watched through television on the news and can also be found in an article in the *New York Times* called "Grieving Orca Carries Dead Calf for More Than 3 Days: 'She's Just Not Letting Go'" by Zaveri in 2018:

a mother whale
carrying her child
for three days, mourning
its death from toxic plastic. (Atwood 89)

The writer describes this story as "so big and sad" and questions readers about our lifestyle, using the pronoun "we" to include herself as well and place the responsibility on human beings: "how did we do this by just living / in the normal way" (Atwood 89). She further develops this idea by mentioning ways of "manoeuvring our way through / package and wrapping" and asks at the end of the stanza: "and doesn't everyone?" (Atwood 89). As Mishra asserts, that is why ecocriticism is important, because it makes people aware of the great impact that our actions have on nature, given that its current state derives from "how our ethical system functions; how we behave with mother nature." (168)

In the next stanza, Atwood sarcastically lists some materials to refer to the ones we used to use more often without needing plastic:

What happened before?
How did we ever survive
with only paper and glass and tin
and hemp and leather and oilskin? (Atwood 89)

This stanza could be analysed following the fourth wave of ecocriticism, for Slovic notes that this wave also encompasses public health narratives (6). Providing that seas are spaces where we bathe or do sports, and in the case of omnivorous diet, we eat from, finding a piece of news like that does not only involve empathising with the suffering of this and other species, but we must also be aware that these toxins can end up in our bodies, as has already been demonstrated today by the presence of microplastics in blood and breast milk.

At the end of the poem, the writer communicates the immediate need to take action but, as demonstrated in the previous poem, first we need to overcome the "human pact" (Atwood 88) that consists in normalising and perpetuating this

lifestyle, without changing and questioning our assumptions about how we relate to the nonhuman. This can be inferred from the last lines: “something must be done. / It will be! Will it be? / Will we decide to, finally? (Atwood 90). It is also worth mentioning that the writer here is stressing that an immediate response is required from humankind to combat the environmental crisis, which is directly related to SDG 15, for “careful management of this essential global resource is a key feature of a sustainable future” (United Nations).

4.8. “*Little Robot*”

“*Little Robot*” consisting of six stanzas with a variable number of lines each, is a poem in which Atwood speculates about the evolution of robots, whether they might replace us, kill us or, if they break, where they would be thrown away. Since the fourth wave also addresses the way humans evolve in terms of technology, this poem could also be addressed from the premises of this ecocritical wave. This is mainly due to the fact that, once again, there is a continuity between nature, the use of natural resources, and our evolution, our lifestyle (Slovic 4). Moreover, the problem of the overuse of plastic is mentioned in the first stanza, implying that it is the predominant material for everything we create nowadays: “This is the little robot / they have just invented / with its cute dollface of soft plastic.” (Atwood 91)

There is another point made by the writer to warn about the ethical limits of technology, for this new robot “is designed to learn like a child,” and so it “fingers” objects, “explores, / it bites and questions” (Atwood 91), among other actions. When the robot gets bored, the lyrical subject points out that “there might be breakage, / maybe even whimpering,” and she wonders: “Does it care? / Have we really gone that far?” (Atwood 91). Again, Atwood questions our lifestyle, the way we have developed to make our lives easier, but without asking ourselves about the consequences, not only for us, but also for our environment and other living beings. In fact, the poet poses the following questions related to these dilemmas:

Little dollface robot,
What would you make of yourself
in this world we are making?
What will you make of us?
Where will you bestow yourself
When you are obsolete?
On what cosmic trashheap?
Or will you live forever? (Atwood 91-92)

At the same time, she addresses the topic of what to do with our waste, since the amount of rubbish we produce is greater than what can be assimilated by our planet. As a result, much of our waste ends up in the seas, natural places, and even inside living beings, as shown in the poems "Midway Island Albatross" and "Whales." In the last lines, the writer speculates about the possibility of humans taking a backseat and robots becoming the centre of existence. She deploys an ironic tone, since we will become those objects that they drop on the floor when they feel bored:

Will we become your ancestors,
Rapacious and tedious?
Or will you erase us?
Will you drop us on the floor?
Would that be better? (Atwood 92)

In conclusion, this poem can be interpreted and understood more clearly through the lens of ecocriticism, as it deals with current issues such as the use of technology and its limits, waste management or the questioning of our lifestyle. Therefore, it would be very productive to make use of this poem to critically address the SDGs discussed in the introduction.

4.9. "The Bright Side"

In the last poem, "The Bright Side," made of eight three-line stanzas, Atwood ironically praises some innovations, although always ending with a tone of nonconformity and disdain, as shown in what follows. Firstly, it is important to mention that "bright" conveys a double sense in the poem. On the one hand, it can be understood from the point of view of the expression to "look on the bright side" (Atwood 93), as the writer mentions in the first line, which has to do with all the environmental issues she has already addressed in the previous poems. On the other hand, "bright" also refers to the descriptive quality of the plastic, which shines or is bright, as shown by the writer's description of plastic flowers in the second stanza: "Has there ever been a flower as bright / that has lasted as long as this?" (Atwood 93).

Another invention she mentions in the fourth stanza is the plastic bucket: "Has there ever been a bucket / as light as this, to carry water / into the villages?" (Atwood 93). In these lines, the lyrical subject highlights how this invention has improved our lives, since the material allows it to carry water easily. However, ironically, emphasising that there were already other inventions to carry water, she mentions in the next stanza some recipients which are not as useful, such as

canoes, which are nevertheless suitable to transport things. That is, readers should ask themselves: was the mass production of this invention worth it?

This idea continues in the seventh stanza, when, after dealing with the invention of the mobile phone, which she really praises, she adds: “Don’t tell me this is not beautiful / as beautiful as the day! / Or some days” (Atwood 93). Once again, the author does not forget all the environmental problems that we face due to the presence of plastic and other materials that are not organic and are difficult to degrade, given their massive and very polluting production. In addition, it is also important to note that the fourth wave of ecocriticism also answers the questions of this poem and the message behind its lines, since, once again, our capitalist and consumerist lifestyle that justifies everything else is called into question.

Conclusions

Margaret Atwood invites us to reflect on our way of life and our current system through her poetry. She also asks us to question whether we maintain a healthy relationship with our environment and other living beings through experiential facts and stories that help us understand the alarming environmental situation we face as a species nowadays. In addition, ecocriticism turns out to be a very productive theoretical approach to analyse these poems and help the reader to better understand literary texts marked by density of meaning and complexity. In addition, all her poems can be read through the lens of the fourth wave of ecocriticism, since this wave is an evolution of the others and entails a sort of “applied ecocriticism” (Slovic 4) as well, concerned with such topics as human lifestyle, human relationship with nature and other beings, and sustainability, all of which are present in all the poems analysed.

Besides, it has been shown that several Sustainable Development Goals are addressed in our process of reading and understanding of Atwood’s poetry, in addition to which we could also include number 12, that is, “Responsible Consumption and Production: ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” (United Nations), since the author considers some human inventions and their mass production as something that can lead to catastrophe if not properly regulated and controlled.

It should also be acknowledged that, in order to fully achieve a proper understanding of these poems, readers can document themselves by reading other articles, documentaries, interviews, news, etc. that reflect the environmental problems that humans are causing on the planet. This will result in an enhanced awareness of the current situation of our environment, other living beings and our own health.

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