

The Power of Pathos

How Nature Poetry Spurs Engagement in Climate Change Activism

HAYDEN MICKELBERRY

WR 122

Introduction

Pathos has always been a key component of connecting an audience to writing, especially in poetry. As described by *The Poetry Archive*, “Pathos is a key skill for any writer, and a highly effective feature of many poems. . . .

Poetry has a special reputation for being able to move us” (“Pathos”).

Writers over the years have used pathos to their advantage in order to gain their audience’s attention. Without pathos readers may not be encouraged to find out what happens next. There would be no emotional connection to the writing and, thus, no real commitment to the reading. *LitCharts* goes into more depth by stating that pathos is a form of argument that can appeal to an audience’s emotions. They then go on to say that “when a speaker tells a personal story, presents an audience with a powerful visual

image, or appeals to an audience's sense of duty or purpose in order to influence listeners' emotions in favor of adopting the speaker's point of view, he or she is using pathos" ("Pathos Definition"). Meshing poetry and pathos has proved an effective way to expand the readers' understanding of the ideas being discussed.

Research has shown that including poetry in science-based topics in education settings allows students to grasp previously confusing concepts. In a journal article titled, "Poetry as a Creative Practice to Enhance Engagement and Learning in Conservation Science," Stephanie R. Januchowski-Hartley et al. write on the results of an experiment where they integrated poetry into the science classroom. They discovered that, "In both examples, when poetry was integrated with core content, students were more engaged rather than being passive recipients of knowledge or information." The *International Journal of Scientific and Engineering Research* also did literature and participant observation on the topic of poetry as a learning tool for science. In the *Covenant Journal of Entrepreneurship*, Benjamin Anabaraonye et al. write:

There is no doubt, therefore, that poetry can be used as a valuable and viable tool to convey the message of climate

change in schools, universities and institutions around the world in a very profound way . . . Poetry has a unique way of communicating to the listeners and readers the message of hope, beauty and love that enables them to seek creatively ways to preserve our planet from global warming (84).

Anabaraonye et al. go on to state, “Climate change poetry also helps to bring about the promotion of peace, love, unity, beauty and other attitudes like green entrepreneurship needed to safeguard our environment from global warming and pollution in order to ensure global sustainability.” Each one of these sources goes to show that pathos in poetry plays a powerful part in promoting an understanding and appreciation for the natural world around us.

It is shown that there are a lot of ideas on pathos used in poetry. The two have been connected and analyzed ever since Aristotle's first description of pathos. To go even more specific, pathos being used in eco-poetry, poetry about anything related to nature, is also shown to have a great impact on its audience. Overall, it is mostly widely understood that pathos is a valuable tool in all forms of poetry. With all this evidence to show these impactful connections, it is hard to dispute that fact. But, there

is little to no research done on how much effect, and power, pathos in poetry might have when put into public action. For the purposes of this paper we'll be focusing on environmental movements.

Hypothetically, if eco-poetry is shown to be a valuable tool in learning spaces, it might also create the same form of engagement when used in campaigns and acts for climate change. By observing two different poetry series on climate change, as well as a poem that was released with a climate change campaign, my paper will answer the following questions. Is pathos in nature poetry effective at moving the listener? If so, will nature poetry within climate change activism increase engagement from the audience? And lastly, is it possible for eco-poetry to be a new catalyst in educating both the old and young on environmental issues?

Methodology

To begin to answer the questions posed above I looked into speeches, poetry slams and series, and nature poems themselves. This is how I could not only understand how pathos in eco-poetry works, but also analyze audience reactions. The University of Arizona held a series of speakers

from 2016-2017 on climate change and poetry. The website states that the aim of this series was to think of questions like, “What role does poetry have in envisioning, articulating, or challenging our ecological present? What role does poetry have in anticipating, shaping—or even creating—our future?” (“Climate Change + Poetry”). My other source of analysis was a poetry slam on climate change held at Harlem's Apollo Theater in July of 2019. This aimed to bring students and young people together to protest climate inaction. Lastly, I looked at a poem that was released with a climate change campaign from *The Guardian*.

Watching the series done at the university provided insight into how people react to eco-poetry. At the end of each speaker's poem recital, a Q&A was held. Evaluating not only the questions asked, but the responses from the poets as well, I was able to gather evidence about the conversations that arise from these types of poems. They could either offer criticism about the poem, praise, or even ask questions about the poet's inspiration and feelings on related topics.

There were multiple speakers at the slam held in Harlem, but I decided to focus on three specific poets. Eliza Schiff, Jade Lozada, and Jenny Gomez each used a great deal of pathos in their poems. Each

touched on different emotions that come from understanding climate change—hope, hate, and sorrow. Interpreting how they decided to use pathos helped me understand how poetry allows people to share their feelings of nature and the world around us.

When *The Guardian* released a poem alongside their campaign, they allowed people to comment on the page for a short period of time. By categorizing the 55 comments left by readers as positive, negative, the sharing of personal poems or talking about climate change, and miscellaneous, I found examples of how people react when poetry is used in these campaigns. The results show that people enjoy and feel impacted by eco-poetry, or on the other hand, dislike the use of a poem in campaigns that are normally more scientifically oriented.

Results

Dissection of the poems by the three speakers at the Apollo Theater show that there is a wide range of emotion evoked and presented in eco-poetry. The majority of the commenters describes feelings of sadness, pain, and anguish. One woman relates climate change to the sinking of the Titanic in

her poem “Off Beat.” She says, “A band played along as the *Titanic* went down, a sad and mournful tune as hope ran aground. Now our ship is sinking, our world is burning, our cities languish as they gasp for air. But who is dancing to this melody?” (Schiff, 2019, 1:14-1:33, video available at Lindwall). Another example is from Jade Lozada. In her poem titled, “Baby Girls,” Lozada writes, “Who left baby girl across the world to die? Who is the one letting her lips run dry so she can’t call them out nor they hear her cry. Who is letting baby girls block blaze til it’s put out by the waterline when it meets her gaze. Who?” (Lozada, 2019, 2:34-2:49, video available at Lindwall). The first quote is a powerful metaphor that shows the confusion people might feel when thinking about climate change. The second is full of anger towards the harmful effects climate change has on our environment. However, some acknowledge these negative feelings, but also hold hope. In the poem, “Earth’s Downfall,” Jenny Gomez compares her cells and body to humans living on the Earth. She writes, “I told them that even though my cells have produced enormous amounts of carbon emission, waste, and lit my lungs on fire, I still believe they will one day redeem themselves and realize that my body is their home and through their actions have shown they have come to understand that” (Gomez, 2019,

2:14-2:31, video available at Lindwall). Each one of these short excerpts from the poems prove that pathos has become an integral part of poetry performed or included in climate change activism.

Although it's understandable that pathos is used in this sense, how effective it is for the audience is still up for question. Observation of a poetry series at the University of Arizona allows me to analyze not only the poems but also the audience's reactions. At the end of each speaker's session they opened the podium to a Q&A. A majority of the time people praised the writer for how moving the piece was and how their poetry helped them. However, the responses from the writers to the audience's questions allow me to understand if eco-poetry truly educates and brings further awareness. When asked where she was able to get inspiration for writing from a different point of view Alison Deming stated, "Well, we always feel this separation, I think, from other people's experiences. So-- or other creatures' experiences. It's so hard to have any sense of what it's really like in someone else's head. But poetry gives us that opportunity to make the attempt and try" (Deming, 2017, 0:23-0:40, link available through "Climate Change + Poetry"). She later urges the audience to look further into their own capitalist behavior by saying, "I'm critiquing what am I doing in this

habitat. I mean, our position, our postcolonial position, our climate change position is always to understand that our presence has an impact, and it's not utterly benign" (Deming, 2017, 6:30-6:45, link available through "Climate Change + Poetry"). By pointing both of these key points out, it allows the audience to open up and think closely about the possible damages on the planet of their actions. Another speaker, Joy Harjo, persuades the viewers to take a moment and remember the many tragic stories that have come out of climate change. She says;

Do we remember that we are part of the water, and the water lives in us, and that we take care of the water, and that we say no to this ongoing greed? Because that's what it's about, the black snake, the pipe, the oil. And we have oil stories. My tribe, the Creek Nation, we have oil stories. There's oil stories in the Amazon. It's all over the world . . . Ken Saro-Wiwa was killed because of the oil companies. They killed him in West Africa, the poet. And it has to stop. It has to stop somewhere . . . It's a very powerful and potent time. (Harjo, 2016, 1:22- 2:05, link available through "Climate Change + Poetry")

Through captivating poems, and the many questions raised from them, audiences are able to get more from the experience than simply feeling inspired. There is the opportunity to educate and spread further awareness on climate change. People can listen to so much more than personal or cultural experiences and shared feelings, but at the same time, learn about possible solutions and effects of climate change.

For more quantitative information I analyzed the 55 comments left by people under the poem, “Parliament” by Carol Ann Duffy. I categorized the comments as either positive, negative, sharing their own poems or having a conversation about climate change, and lastly the miscellaneous comments that had been deleted or weren’t related to the topic. After my analysis I found that 29% of the comments were positive and then 21% were negative towards the poem. Some said things like, “Beautiful” (TaymazValley, 2015), “I like your poem it is very good” (Hydroponic, 2015), and “If you don't get emotional about fossil-fuelled climate change and the accelerated rate of species extinction you haven't yet understood its implications” (194jerry, 2015) On the other hand, there were also comments like, “Really silly and pointless. Something like the divestment campaign” (CanadaChuck, 2015) and “What a load of emotional and

irrational cobblers. Clearly written by someone with no understanding of how the World needs to work” (caringcapatalist, 2015). The other 50% was divided evenly between the last two categories. 25% to the sharing of poems and talking about climate change. The last 25% went to the miscellaneous or deleted comments. These numbers show that people would be more positively than negatively engaged in a poem when released with an actual climate change campaign. It also shows that there is opportunity for further speculation and conversations about the topic between people.

Discussion

Given the evidence from the first analysis of the young speakers at the Apollo Theater, it can be seen that pathos in nature poetry is effective. It is successful in incorporating elements of pathos that apply to many different ranges of emotion. Emotions like sorrow, anger, confusion, and hope. Doing this is shown to increase interest and engagement from the audience.

With that in mind, along with the results from the examination of the talk at the University of Arizona, it can be concluded that nature poetry is

successful in engaging an audience of climate change activists. There were many questions asked in regards to the relations between the poems and topics about climate change. This shows that people truly do understand and pay attention to the poems and their meanings.

Examining feedback from a situation of a poem released with a climate change campaign gives us an idea of how the general public reacts to this form of activism. With the results from the compiling of the comments left, we can see that there is more of a positive reaction to the inclusion of a poem than negative. It also shows that there is an opening for further communication on climate change. Since one-quarter of the comments were the sharing of personal nature poems and other conversations about climate change, I feel this statement is proven to be true.

In order to take a broader perspective, we must examine how these results can be connected to our current climate change campaigning strategies. It can be speculated that these campaigns are suffering from an overuse of logos and reliance on scientific perspectives. Given the fact that this has been the standard for communication on climate change, engagement has seemed to level out. People are subjected to big picture

statistics and ideas that are often hard to conceptualize or seem unreachable. However, the inclusion of pathos and nature poetry can bring a human element that is well known and understood by all. Even though many of the emotions expressed are sorrow and despair, it's a form of sadness that draws people in and does not push them away.

Looking back at the questions introduced at the beginning of the paper we can see how they've been answered and applied to real world examples. Pathos in nature poetry is effective. It can increase engagement from the audience, and it has the ability to be a catalyst for educating people from all age groups and backgrounds on environmental issues. Climate change is a growing and urgent issue that still needs addressed. Finding new and inclusive opportunities for further engagement is crucial to making it relevant and still at the forefront of people's minds. However, more quantitative research should be done on this topic. The examination of audience feedback on poems released with climate change campaigns will give more data on the subjects raised throughout the paper. Doing this would increase the confidence and understanding that we have in the findings from this paper. It could also lead to a new shift in mindsets on connecting emotions to scientific campaigns.

Works Cited

194jerry. (2015, Mar. 30). "If you don't get emotional about fossil-fuelled climate change and the accelerated rate of species extinction you haven't yet" [Comment on blog post, Keep it in the ground: a poem by Carol Ann Duffy], <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/27/keep-it-in-the-ground-a-poem-by-carol-ann-duffy>

Anabaraonye, Benjamin, Beatrice O Ewa, et al. "The Psychological Benefits Of Poetry And Its Innovative Use in Green Entrepreneurship in Nigeria." *Covenant Journal of Entrepreneurship*. vol. 5, no. 1, June 2021, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.47231/lstq1452>.

Anabaraonye, Benjamin, et al. "Poetry As a Valuable Tool for Climate Change Education for Global Sustainability." *International Journal of Scientific and Engineering Research*, vol. 9, no. 9, 25 Sept. 2018, pp. 81–85, <https://doi.org/10.14299/ijser.2018.09>.

CanadaChuck. (2015, Mar. 27). "Really silly and pointless. Something like the divestment campaign." [Comment on blog post, Keep it in the ground: a poem by Carol Ann Duffy], <https://www.theguardian.com/>

environment/2015/mar/27/keep-it-in-the-ground-a-poem-by-carol-ann-duffy

caringcapatalist. (2015, Mar. 27). "What a load of emotional and irrational cobblers. Clearly written by someone with no understanding of how the World needs." [Comment on blog post, Keep it in the ground: a poem by Carol Ann Duffy], <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/27/keep-it-in-the-ground-a-poem-by-carol-ann-duffy>

"Climate Change + Poetry." *Voca*, 6 Oct. 2016, voca.arizona.edu/reading-series/climate-change-poetry.

Duffy, Carol. "Keep It in the Ground: A Poem by Carol Ann Duffy." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 27 Mar. 2015, www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/27/keep-it-in-the-ground-a-poem-by-carol-ann-duffy.

Hydroponic. (2015, Mar. 30). "I like your poem it is very good." [Comment on blog post, Keep it in the ground: a poem by Carol Ann Duffy], <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/27/keep-it-in-the-ground-a-poem-by-carol-ann-duffy>.

Januchowski-Hartley, Stephanie R, et al. "Poetry as a Creative Practice to Enhance Engagement and Learning in Conservation Science."

Academic.Oup.Com, BioScience, 4 Oct. 2018, academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/68/11/905/5103314#124826497.

Lindwall, Courtney. "Watch These Young Spoken-Word Poets Take on Climate Change." *Be a Force for the Future*, 17 July 2019, www.nrdc.org/stories/watch-these-young-spoken-word-poets-take-climate-change.

"Pathos." *The Poetry Archive*. 2024. <https://poetryarchive.org/glossary/pathos/>

"Pathos Definition." *LitCharts*. 2024. <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/pathos>.

TaymazValley. (2015, Mar. 27). Beautiful. [Comment on blog post, Keep it in the ground: a poem by Carol Ann Duffy], <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/27/keep-it-in-the-ground-a-poem-by-carol-ann-duffy>