

Writing about climate change – Green Shoots

Liam Cleary



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Zunehmend spiegelt sich die dramatische Dringlichkeit der Klimakrise in der Literatur und Medienberichterstattung wider. Diese Unterrichtseinheit behandelt die Bedeutung des Klimawandels, der globalen Erwärmung und des nachhaltigen Lebens als ein zentrales gesellschaftliches Thema im 21. Jahrhundert. Einflussreiche Autoren und Autorinnen wie Rachel Carson, Eric Reece, David Attenborough und Gillian Clarke haben in ihren Texten Bedeutsames zum Thema Klimawandel beigetragen. *Climate change* ist ein relevantes und höchst motivierendes Thema für Schülerinnen und Schüler, die sich um das Wohl des Planeten und ihre Zukunft sorgen.

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Facts	1
Notes on the material	2
Topic 1: Environmental issues – An introduction	5
Topic 2: Pesticides and the natural world	10
Topic 3: Strip mining in Appalachia	17
Topic 4: Climate change – David Attenborough at COP26	23
Topic 5: Global warming	29
Topic 6: Consequences of climate change	34
Exam: Listening comprehension and text analysis	38

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Competences and skills:

This unit on climate change is designed to assist senior students develop skills in fields such as **listening and reading comprehension, analysis of texts** as well as **video analysis**. Newspaper articles, poems, prose extracts, a speech, podcasts and videos have been carefully selected for these purposes. **Research** and **discussion** tasks also form part of the worksheets so as to give students the opportunity to go beyond the class work after lessons have been done.



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Facts

Writing about the climate and the threat which man himself poses to our world has become a major societal theme since the turn of this century. Writers such as Bill Gates, Greta Thunberg, Al Gore, Barack Obama, Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben and Eric Reece have all produced important essays or accounts on this theme. In doing so, they all follow example set by one of America's greatest nature writers, the naturalist, essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau. In 1854, he produced his influential work *Walden* which became a bible for generations of people interested in living a simple life at one with nature and having a positive and caring relationship with the world around them. In his book, Henry Thoreau set out a simple philosophy which has become increasingly important for all those drawn towards nature: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."¹

The book, which was written after he built a hut in which he lived alone for two years, related his central belief that people were crushed by work and lived lives of, as he put it, quiet desperation. *Walden* was a book ahead of its time. It is also a good example of how a writer can influence generations of activists, writers, politicians and young people long afterwards. The famous writer John Updike has said of the book that "A century and a half after its initial publication, *Walden* has become such a totem of the back-to-nature, preservationist, anti-business, civil-disobedience mind-set, and Thoreau so vivid a protester, so perfect a crank and hermit saint, that the book itself risks being as revered and unread as the Bible."²

However, Thoreau is also important for his essay *Civil Disobedience*, which he wrote after a tax dispute, and which begins with the statement, "I heartily accept the motto that government is best which governs least; and I should like to see it acted up to

¹ Thoreau, Henry David: *Walden*. 1854. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm> [last access: 29/07/2023]

² Thoreau, Henry David: The introduction to *Walden*. 150th Anniversary edition. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004.

Topic 1: Environmental issues – An introduction

Worksheet – Climate change in pictures: Ways of activism and protest

M1

Awareness activities

1. Work in groups.
 - a) Compile a list of the various problems you feel come under the general heading of environmental issues in daily life.
 - b) What approaches are possible for anyone interested in tackling climate change? How can improvement be brought about? Make a list of the many possibilities which exist if we are to change people's minds and behaviour.
2. Present your answers to the class.



Working with the photos

3. Give a brief description of each photo.
4. Explain as best you can the title and message of the photos.
5. In picture C, what approach to tackling climate problems is this group taking? Of the three approaches you see in each picture, which one would you favour and want to be part of?
6. What differences do you see between picture B and the other two photos?
7. In picture B, describe the kind of person the owner of the electric car might be.



Further activity

8. Do one of the following tasks:
 - a) Compile a timeline of technical and scientific milestones in the discovery of and fight against climate change. Present your findings to your classmates.or
 - b) Research the most famous songs about climate change. Choose a list of the ten you like best and play some for your class. Explain your choices.





Picture A: Máthair – The mother of recycling

Photo: Liam Cleary



Picture B: Charging back

Photo: Liam Cleary



Picture C: In denial

Photo: Liam Cleary

Topic 2: Pesticides and the natural world

M2 Pesticides – Extract from *Silent Spring* (1962)



The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings. To a large extent, the physical form and the habits of the earth's vegetation and its animal life have been molded by the environment. Considering the whole span of earthly time, the opposite effect, in which life actually modifies its surroundings, has been relatively slight. Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species – man – acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world.

During the past quarter century this power has not only increased to one of disturbing magnitude but it has changed in character. The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world – the very nature of its life. Strontium 90¹, released through nuclear explosions into the air, comes to earth in rain or drifts down as fallout, lodges in soil, enters the grass or corn or wheat grown there, and in time takes up its abode in the bones of a human being, there to remain until his death. Similarly, chemicals sprayed on croplands or forests or garden lie long in soil, entering into living organisms, passing from one to another in a chain of poisoning and death. Or they pass mysteriously by underground streams until they emerge and through the alchemy of air and sunlight, combine into new forms that kill vegetation, sicken cattle, and work unknown harm on those who drink from once pure wells. As Albert Schweitzer² has said, "Man can hardly even recognize the devils of his own creation." It took hundreds of millions of years to produce the life that now inhabits the earth – eons of time in which that developing and evolving and diversifying life reached a state of adjustment and balance with its

Worksheet – Pesticides – Extract from *Silent Spring*

M3

Pre-reading activity

1. Research the life and times of Rachel Carson. Find out as much as you can about her background and education. Why was *Silent Spring* so influential? What other work, if any, did she produce? Present your findings to your classmates in a talk entitled, *Our debt to Rachel Carson*. The following links will help you begin your research:



https://raabe.click/CarsonI		https://raabe.click/CarsonII	
https://raabe.click/CarsonIII			

[last accesses: 29/08/2023]

Language

2. Provide synonyms for the underlined words.
 - a) molded by the environment.
 - b) ... has not only increased to one of disturbing magnitude but it has changed in character.
 - c) they are the synthetic creations of man's inventive mind, brewed in his laboratories...
3. The sentence, "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea ..." contains two literary devices the author uses to reinforce her point. Identify them.
4. Analyse the author's tone in this piece.



Working with the text

5. Outline the terrible developments of the past 25 years as Carson portrays them.
6. Why does Carson refer to Darwin in her piece?
7. Analyse the importance of time in the extract. Why is Carson concerned with time?



Further discussion

8. When Carson published her book *Silent Spring*, it met with opposition from many industrial powers and lobbyists. In that sense, it is seen as a book which spoke "truth to power". Discuss her work in that context and find other examples of individuals or writings that "spoke truth to power". Why is that important in our modern era?



Worksheet – An extract from *Lost Mountain* by Eric Reece

M5

Pre-reading activities

- Use whatever research sources necessary to know the answers to these questions:
 - Where is Appalachia? What U.S. states are in Appalachia? What is it known for?
 - What is meant by strip mining? Why are companies interested in it in Appalachia?
- Explain the significance of strip mining in the context of the climate change crisis.

Language

- Provide synonyms for the following:

a) dense (l. 3)	b) permitted (l. 9)	c) abruptly (l. 14)	d) inevitable (l. 24)	e) mounds (l. 30)
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- Analyse the use of language to illustrate the horrors witnessed on Lost Mountain.

Working with the text

- True (T) or false (F)? Give a reason for your answer.

Statements	T	F
a) The author first visited the area very recently.		
b) There is a lot of work going on today, 26 September.		
c) He is struck by the contrast between forest and mined land.		
d) The weather is very good on this particular day.		
e) He's positive about the plans to reclaim the man-made desert as pasture.		

- Explain why the author first came to Lost Mountain.
- Describe and assess his emotional reaction to the condition the mountain is now in.

Composition

- Watch the first 80 minutes of *The Last Mountain*: <https://raabe.click/Mountain> [last access: 29/08/2023]
 - Explain why you would (not) join activists in their campaign to stop the mining.
 - You are the wife of one of the men working for the mine company on this mountain. For years, your husband has earned a good living. Environmentalists do all they can to stop mining in the area. Write out the reasons explaining the benefits employment in mining has given your family.



middle of a wasteland” (ll. 35/36). In addition, he refers to how the place was a year ago “rolling ridgetops painted orange and yellow by autumn coolness” (l. 4). This contrast shows a skillful use of language. Likewise, the adjectives he turns to when describing the ravished mountain top are all depressing but accurate: “thin, lifeless, awful black, gray, desperate, poisoned” and present the reader with a picture of death, the death of a mountain. Finally, he quotes other writers and activists to show that he is not the only one who believes we should treat nature better.

Working with the text

5. *True or false? Give a reason for your answer.*

Statements	True	False	Reason
<i>The author first visited the area very recently.</i>		X	It was a full year ago.
<i>There is a lot of work going on today, 26 September.</i>		X	It is a Sunday and there are no crews working.
<i>He is struck by the contrast between forest and mined land.</i>	X		Because there is a “sharp contrast between these two landscapes”.
<i>The weather is very good on this particular day.</i>		X	It is raining.
<i>He is positive about the plans to reclaim the man-made desert as pasture.</i>		X	It saddens him that Lost Mountain will be nothing more than a point on a map.

6. *Explain why the author first came to Lost Mountain.*

He came for a number of reasons. The first was to see this mountain and the effect of strip mining on it. In particular, he wanted to see what cannot be seen from below: “the systematic destruction” of the plant and animal life. However, he had another reason which was to gain an ecological schooling that would inform him better as to how man was treating the natural world. The fact that he wrote accounts of his experiences probably means he envisaged publishing his findings in book or magazine form at some stage and give people an idea of what was happening on the Lost Mountain.

7. *Describe and assess his emotional reaction to the condition the mountain is now in.*

The author’s reaction is sorrow and heartache. In addition, he is horrified by what