

# Waterscapes under threat: a comparative study on environmental concerns in the select poems of Mario Petrucci and Margaret Atwood

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## Introduction

In an era where rivers run toxic and oceans whisper warnings of ecological collapse, poetry emerges as a vital siren echoing the fragility of waterscapes under siege by human hubris and catastrophe. This comparative study delves into the aqueous anxieties of Mario Petrucci and Margaret Atwood, two visionary poets whose verses transform contaminated currents and drowning worlds into urgent calls for environmental reckoning. Mario Petrucci is an English poet with Italian heritage, and he is also a literary translator, broadcaster, educator, ecologist, and physicist. His writing, which includes poems, short stories, articles, and essays, explores deep themes that connect creativity, politics, science, and the environment. Petrucci has won significant literary awards, such as the National Poetry Competition, four times as a winner of the London Writers competition, the winner of Bridport and the New London Writers Award. One of his notable works is a long poem about Chernobyl titled *Heavy Water a poem for Chernobyl* which earned the Arvon Prize for poetry. This poem also served as the basis for a strong film produced by Seventh Art Productions. His other published books include *Flowers of Sulphur* (2007), *i tulips* (2010), and *The waltz in my blood* (2011). He also creates courses for the Poetry School, the Poetry Society's Poetry class initiative, and Arvon/Foyle Young Poets. His unique poetry soundscape, *Tales from the Bridge*, was a key part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad and was shortlisted for the 2012 Ted Hughes Award for New Poetry. Margaret Eleanor Atwood, born on November 18, 1939, is a Canadian novelist, poet, and literary critic. Her works often deal with themes such as gender and identity, religion and myths, the power of language, climate change, and political power. Many of her poems draw inspiration from myths and fairy tales, which fascinated her from a young age.

Complementing Petrucci's scientific precision is Margaret Atwood, the Canadian literary titan renowned for her dystopian foresight and unflinching environmental ethics. A prolific novelist, poet, and critic, Atwood's poetry confronts ecological crises with mythic intensity, portraying waterscapes as harbingers of planetary doom from melting ice caps to poisoned bays. Affectionately Known as the "queen of letters of Canada", Atwood has authored numerous poetry collections, starting with her first,

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*Double Persephone* (1961), and more recent ones like *Dearly* (2020) and *Paper Boat* (2024), which is a selection of poems from 1961 to 2023. Other notable collections include *The Circle Game* (1966), *Power Politics* (1971), and two volumes of selected poems. Atwood's environmental concerns are reflected in her novels and activism, focusing on ecological decline, the harmful interaction between humans and nature, and the necessity of sustainable living. Both Petrucci and Atwood address the severe impacts of climate change and pollution, stressing the connection between all living beings and the moral duty to safeguard the planet for future generations.

## Research objectives

This study seeks to analyze the depiction of waterscapes in select poems by Mario Petrucci and Margaret Atwood, while interpreting the profound mysteries these poets explore within their aquatic imagery. It further aims to discuss, identify, and compare the environmental issues they address, drawing substantiation from Petrucci's *Heavy Water a poem for Chernobyl* and *Flowers of Sulphur* alongside Atwood's works from *The Circle of Game* and *Morning in the Burned House*.

## Research method

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology, privileging close textual engagement to elucidate the observed phenomena within the selected poems. Analysis proceeds through sustained immersion in the texts beginning with meticulous reading to capture their resonant depths, followed by targeted scrutiny of lines and stanzas resonate to waterscape representations, nuanced interpretation of emergent meanings, contextualization within ecocritical paradigms, systematic explication of thematic and symbolic structures, and culminating synthesis of interpretive findings. This hermeneutic sequence integrates seamlessly with a comparative literary framework, which foregrounds thematic convergences, symbolic affinities, and trans cultural resonances across Petrucci's and Atwood's oeuvres. Such juxtaposition between poets equally responsive to anthropogenic environmental crises unveils homologous treatments of aquatic motifs, from oceanic expanses to fluvial and lacustrine forms, as multifaceted emblems of ecological precarity and regenerative potential.

## Nature and romanticism

### *Water, a symbol of poetic creativity*

High Priest of Nature, William Wordsworth depicts water in his poetry as a dynamic life force that embodies metamorphosis, spiritual profundity, and emotional rejuvenation. Romantic ideas of the vitality of nature are reflected in the way that water frequently connects the physical world and human mind. Wordsworth's depiction of harmonious movement of water as flowing, cascading and stillness is captured in the line "With waters running, falling, or asleep" (WORDSWORTH, 1850, line 97) from his poem "The Prelude". This autobiographical poem plays a vital role in his poetic career as it shapes the Poet's symbolic interconnectedness with nature and his own poetic creativity. From rain and torrents

to lakes and mists, water appears as a crucial cycle that shapes the Lake District, enlivening scenery and directing tourists. The lake mimics the observer in poems like “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”, signifying consciousness’s connection to and detachment from nature while encouraging emotional metamorphosis via memory. As in “There was a Boy”, where Windermere’s “watery vale” unites heaven, earth, and interior sensation, streams and brooks create variation in motion and sound, responding to weather to heighten sublimity and introspection.

### *Coleridge, a spokesperson of nature*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) is an ironic poem that portrays the mariner as a spokesperson of nature. Throughout the poem the sea is symbolized as an omnipresent waterscape. Though the mariner is surrounded with a vast sea he is not able to have a drop of water because of its salinity. This is one of the remarkable poems in the romantic era and the above lines are a classic example of blue studies that allows the readers to analyze the text in symbolic dimensions of waterscapes in literature

Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink  
(COLERIDGE, 1798, lines 119 -122).

Coleridge portrays water with supernatural dualism, signifying guilt, atonement, and reverence for the natural world. Water serves as a barrier between physical suffering and spiritual purgatory, reflecting moral conflicts and metaphysical domains. Coleridge’s water inspires Gothic dread and creative terror amid Lake District elements, in contrast to Wordsworth’s harmonious cycles. Coleridge’s mariner curse amplifies this into current times of apocalyptic warnings like rising seas, coral bleaching, and mega storms as retribution for carbon hubris thus urging the same ethical reverence to avert irreversible ruin.

### *Ecocritical implications*

Water evokes the interaction of the natural and supernatural are intertwined. Wordsworth’s ordinary emotional reactions contrast with Coleridge’s supernatural curses, yet both employ them for “poetic faith” and human-nature ties. Lakes evoke contemplation and the sublime, connecting rural environments to deep emotion. Similar to the water movement in Wordsworth’s “Rydal-Grasmere” poem, this portrays water as a moral, living being contemptuous of immobility, which is consistent with your ecocritical interests. Romantic Poets celebrate water as nature’s abundant gift. Lakes and seas as sources of sublime beauty, spiritual renewal, and life force but their writings also subtly show a “other side”. Waterscapes susceptible to encroachment, human foolishness, and supernatural curses, foreshadow ecocritical issues like degradation.

In “Composed upon Westminster Bridge”, where the Thames flows freely but with factories and slaughterhouses surrounding its banks, William Wordsworth alludes to the shadow of industrialization, suggesting impending pollution and loss of purity. The openness of nature is disturbed by urban growth, which threatens and blurs the boundary between the city and the natural world. These reflect contemporary Lake District issues like algal blooms and microplastics, evoking early concerns about agricultural runoff and habitat destruction. In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, where murdering the albatross curses the sea into a stagnant, poisoned expanse that puts the speaker to parched throat, Coleridge (1798) vividly depicts the vengeful turn of water, threatening dehydration and death. The consequences of contempt are highlighted by this proto-ecocritical warning that says nature withholds its gift, leaving seafarers in ecological purgatory.

Similar to ecocritical assessments of Petrucci and Atwood, the romantics dual portrayal of water as a gift of Nature turned threat via hubris or intrusion that aligns with blue humanities, emphasising the vulnerability of waterscapes under pollution and climate change. Coleridge’s fear is contrasted with Wordsworth’s melodic cycles, which exhort moral reverence to prevent disaster.

### **Petrucci and Atwood: prominent eco poets**

Petrucci and Atwood broaden ecological themes to address urgent ecological concerns, mirroring the contemporary realities of climate change and environmental degradation. The idea of waterscapes under assault is given fresh life by modern eco poets like Margaret Atwood and Mario Petrucci, who build on the rich literary, mythological, and historical traditions that depict waterscapes as strong, holy, and frequently dangerous locations. Their poems examine the fundamental and symbolic qualities of water as well as its susceptibility to human activity, emphasizing the close ties between humans and aquatic environment.

### **The vision of ecocriticism**

The anthropocentric attitude of human beings has made him a silent threat to nature in many ways. Nature’s bounty has been exploited and there has been no second thought in the destruction of environment in his actions. On sensing the endangered condition of nature and the need for awareness against decay, there has been a considerable surge in the rise of environmental movements. One such emerging literary movement is ecocriticism. In the words of the renowned founder of ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty, “Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). It is a critical approach which began in the USA in the late 1980s and the UK in 1990s. Michael P. Branch (2003) traces the word ‘ecocriticism’ back to William Rueckert’s 1978 essay “Literature and ecology: an experiment in criticism” (BARRY, 2002, p. 240). Other terms which are currently in circulation along with ecocriticism are ecopoetics, environmental literary criticism, and green cultural studies.

Cheryll Glotfelty adds that “Ecocriticism takes its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one

foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between human and the nonhuman” (xix). According to Peter Barry (2002), American’s ecological approach of ecocriticism is ‘celebratory’ in tone whereas British green studies is ‘minatory’ in tone warning us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces. Ecocriticism is resolutely an interdisciplinary approach and it has joined hands with humanities, Natural Science, Social Science and Environmental Study to eliminate the problem of environmental crisis.

### **Overview of Petrucci’s *Heavy Water a poem for Chernobyl***

Petrucci, an Italian born British poet, particularly in his poetry, has generous sprinklings of water as a figurative and metaphoric element. Waterscape is dominant in the poems of Mario Petrucci and Margaret Atwood. This research attempts to answer the question: How are humans interconnected with waterscape and how does the portrayal of water in the poems of Petrucci and Atwood help interpret the meaning and impacts of hazards caused by waterscapes? *Heavy Water a poem for Chernobyl* consists of 44 poems that recollect the bitter experiences of the victims of an unexpected catastrophe known as Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster. The poisonous radiation which still persist in the region of Ukraine, Kiev and Belarus causes environmental threat and health issues.

The title *Heavy Water a poem for Chernobyl*, can be interpreted from two different perspectives. Apart from Science, seeing Heavy water (D<sub>2</sub>O, as a water with heavier atoms) slow down the speed of neutrons, there is also a metaphoric meaning which can be interpreted as water that is impure and hence cannot be consumed. Petrucci captures the polluted waterscape and the consequences of the nuclear war between man and machine that directly affects human beings and nature. Hence, the title of the poem *Heavy Water a poem for Chernobyl* serves as a symbol of threat and the traumatic memories carried by the victims of Chernobyl disaster.

### **Decline of aquatic species**

The select poems analyzed in this research paper view water as a destructive phenomenon in the form of water pollution, decline in aquatic species and rise in the sea level. Pollution is a condition where chemical compounds enter the environment that cause harm to human health and damage the environment (KHAN; GHOURI, 2011, p. 276). Mario Petrucci, an eminent ecologist reflects the toxic waterscapes his wide range of poems that depicts toxic waterscapes. Let us examine the poem “Goluboy” in which the speaker in the poem sadly claims,

They blame the radiation-  
Dogs and cats are running  
together. Boys are netting fish  
Without fins. Newborns arrive  
With yellow blood  
(PETRUCCI, 2004, lines 6-10).

Readers of the poem lament over the infants born with jaundice and severe anemia because of harmful radiation. Since we are discussing waterscapes, the line ‘boys are netting fish without fins’ should be paid more attention as it abruptly hits on the polluted waterbodies where the variety of fish species are crippled due to the presence of heavy poisonous radioactive elements like cesium-137 and strontium-90. “Poor quality water destroys crop production and infects our food which is hazardous for aquatic life and human life” (KHAN; GHOURI, 2011, p. 280) declares its harmful aftermath.

Affectionately addressed as “Queen of Letters of Canada”, Atwood (1995, line 14-15) in her poem “Frogless” says ‘The people eat sick fish / because there are no others’. The lack of other food sources made the People consume sick fish near the coastal areas. Both Petrucci and Atwood image of as ‘sick fish’ and ‘fish without fins’ is a strong ecological warning about pollution in waterscapes. The grotesque deformities kindle horror and collide with emotional trauma experienced by human community. Marine life is affected by water pollution which increases day by day, disrupting the ecosystem of the river. This pollution affects aquatic life as dams are now being built on various rivers which act as water reservoirs, which is dangerous as all animals have a hard time keeping up. Not only aquatic life but also people are affected as people end up drinking that polluted water, using it for daily chores, and making themselves vulnerable to various diseases, for example, water-borne diseases such as typhus, jaundice, cholera, etc..., even threatening (BLOG. IPLEADERS, 2021).

### **Persistence of nature**

The threatened ecosystem is visualized in the poem “Pripyat” which is named after the popular river Pripyat. It became the place for dumping radioactive debris from the reactor. Petrucci calls it a ‘black sea’. As the river has turned “black” people surviving in the city have been completely evacuated and it is nicknamed as ‘ghost city’. The river is marked for its post catastrophic silence. Atwood’s “Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona” opens up with, ‘The river’s been here, violent, right where we’re standing’. The river is endangered by overuse and drought. The yellow weeds remain as a sign of dryness in flora. San Pedro River, has historically sculpted the landscape with force and power, as evidenced by the rubbish that has been trapped high in the trees due to its floods. This savagery alludes to the river’s historical floods and surges as well as the power of nature to upend and change its surroundings. The bean plant surviving in the contaminated zone of Pripyat and the Flycatcher bird near the San Pedro River are symbols of hope and fragile life within the landscape where waterscapes are injured. Both the images serve as the rebirth of life, persistence of nature in the mid of ecological crisis.

### **Lamenting for the loss**

The terrifying issue of an alarming rise in sea levels quickly leads to risk of marine species. The water species much more likely to go extinct by destroying their habitats, changing the circumstances of their ecosystems, and messing with their reproductive cycles and food supply. The vulnerability of Nature is also aptly captured in Petrucci’s and Atwood’s poems. The dolphin in Petrucci’s “Light” with all its charm hoops into water is later dead aside the sea is a serious warning on overfishing.

The fish- mammal is beached, flesh  
Desiccating in iridescent decay,  
Its shrill scrimshaws to the marrow.  
The children think it is smiling  
(PETRUCCI, 2018, lines 31-34).

Beauty and death are juxtaposed here. Industrial waste, toxic chemicals from oil spills suffocate the dolphins that wash them away them to the shore completely. “Scrimshaw” traditionally refers to the carved whalebone or ivory, decorated by sailors. Here, Petrucci uses the word metaphorically for the dolphin’s high-pitched cries that cut “to the marrow” a sound deeply piercing to the observer’s core. It could also suggest that death has etched suffering into the animal’s very body, like engravings carved into a bone.

Atwood mourns silently over the loss of the polar bear in her poem “Bear’s Lament” from her collection of poems titled *The Door*. Once the bulgy bear it is now drastically changed to a thin creature and even the ribs are incredibly visible. The unpredictable changes in the weather made the thick ice blocksmelt in the arctic region which results in the rise of sea levels. Canada’s fauna consists of 80,000 diverse species. The Arctic region of Canada is the home for a wide range of sea creatures like caribou, polar bears, seals, whales and musk ok. Due to change in climate and other environmental issues there are around 800 species which are at the risk of being lost.

Oh bear, what now?  
And will the ground  
still hold? And how  
much longer?  
(ATWOOD, 1995, lines 26-29)

The poet’s enquiries demonstrate a deep concern for nature’s existence, the stability of the world, and the endurance of life in the face of ecological disaster. Margaret Atwood uses these closing questions to express sorrow, uncertainty, and alarm about the survival of bears, the stability of our environment, and the looming challenge of climate change and ecological destruction. It is a lament for the bear, for nature, and for all of us. According to the study of The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Hawaiian Monk Seal, Southern bluefin tuna, dugongs, and Hawksbill turtle are at high risk of vanishing. Again, a recent survey in 2025, IUCN reported that the marine species like crab, crayfish, and shrimp are on the verge of extinction. These creatures have been mentioned on the red list.

### **Climate change: a major threat**

The sudden change in weather pattern is a frightening subject concerned with eco studies. Climate change is the universal threat to mankind. The very opening line in the poem “Spring in the Igloo”, ‘The sun is burning for a long time’ (ATWOOD, 1966, line 1), records the unnaturally scorching summer season that results in the melting of ice blocks in igloos leading to the tragic evacuation of the inhabitants of Arctic region. The disastrous climate change owing to human miscalculation results in

the shrinking of winter. “With ice the only thing / between us and disaster” (ATWOOD, 1966, line 22-23), deeply hits on the speaker who is petrified by the fact that he, along with his companion, frozen for long time in the glacier may find it impossible to swim to safety. When glaciers melt, darker exposed surfaces absorb and release heat, the rising temperature leading to global warming. Likewise Petrucci’s alert to climate change is manifested in the poem “India” as the image of ‘diminishing sun’ could be the sign of climate change and changing weather patterns. This fits well with Petrucci’s concerns about the environment and what scientists have seen in the present. The sun burning for a long time in Atwood’s “Spring in the Igloo” and “diminishing Sun” Petrucci’s poem “India” symbolizes human vulnerability within a larger environmental and climatic crisis.

### Research findings

The poems discussed in this paper sensitized the researcher to emotionally interconnect with Nature and waterbodies. Both the poets mourn the degradation of waterscapes and interconnected ecosystems. They address threats from pollution, radioactive contamination, climate change, overuse of natural resources, and habitat loss. They use powerful animal and imagery like sick fish, beached dolphins, thin polar bears, melting ice to make the crisis tangible. Margaret Atwood builds an emotional connection with a sense of vulnerability, while Petrucci reveals the scientific and global dimensions of environmental disasters. Together, they enable readers to both feel and comprehend the depth of ecological loss reminding us that saving the world’s waterscapes is critical to our own future.

### Conclusion

By bringing Petrucci and Atwood into comparative focus, this study examined how their select poems articulate the vulnerability of waterscapes under late modern pressures such as industrial pollution, nuclear disaster, and climate crisis. It investigates how poetry intersect with nature in the treatments of seas, rivers, and other water bodies, and how these poets reconfigure water as a dynamic site of memory, mourning, and possible renewal. In doing so, the research has contribute to ecocritical and blue humanities debates by showing how contemporary poetry can both diagnose environmental damage and gesture toward more ethically attuned modes of inhabiting a planet whose waters are increasingly imperilled. From the analysis of both the works of Petrucci and Atwood, the researcher concludes with the words of Bill McKibben (2022), a famous American environmentalist and the author of the much-acclaimed book *The End of Nature* (1989), who strongly argued that “a fundamental, philosophical transformation in how we view nature is necessary for the sustainability of the planet and is now more important than ever” (5). Together, their poems invite us to navigate the churning depths of environmental threat, revealing how waterscapes once cradles life now teeter on the brink.

### Scope for further research

The scope is further elongated with sick literature as both the poets Perucci and Atwood express a sense of sullen silence in their works. The poem in Atwood’s *Dearly* serves on meditation on mourning,

sickness and a painful reality of witnessing a loved one's illness. The physical and mental trauma of the citizens who were seriously affected by radiation sickness in Chernobyl disaster can be studied in detail with reference to concepts of sick literature.

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## **Abstract/Resumo**

### **Waterscapes under threat: a comparative study on environmental concerns in the select poems of Mario Petrucci and Margaret Atwood**

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Water, has been perennially celebrated by poets of all ages in Literature. Sir C.V. Raman has endearingly named it the “elixir of life”. However, in due course of time, Eco Studies has subjected water to an academic scrutiny. This paper revolves around the incredible destructive power of waterscapes during unexpected catastrophe. Waterscapes include all the sources of water bodies like sea, river, lake, wetland, ocean, and even ponds. The paper dives deep into water, marking it as a dynamic metaphor and explores the inevitable connection between human beings and water. Along with this the paper touches upon pollution, climate change, unpredictable weather patterns, rising of sea levels and extinction of species all in association with waterscapes. Mario Petrucci, an Italian born British poet and Margaret Atwood, a multi – faceted Canadian poet are greatly concerned more about the ecological welfare of the universe and hence the most striking poems of both the poets have been chosen for study. Petrucci’s poems “Goluboy”, “Light”, “India”, “Pripyat” and Atwood’s “Frogless”, “Spring in the Igloo”, “Bear’s Lament” and “Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona” explore the threats faced by the waterbodies across the countries.

**Keywords:** water, ecological crisis, images, interconnectedness.

### **Paisagens aquáticas sob ameaça: um estudo comparativo sobre preocupações ambientais em poemas selecionados de Mario Petrucci e Margaret Atwood**

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A água tem sido, ao longo do tempo, celebrada por poetas de todas as épocas na literatura. Sir C. V. Raman, de forma afetuosa, denominou-a o “elixir da vida”. No entanto, com o passar do tempo, os Estudos Ecológicos passaram a submeter a água a um escrutínio acadêmico. Este artigo centra-se no extraordinário poder destrutivo das paisagens aquáticas durante catástrofes inesperadas. O termo “paisagens aquáticas” abrange todas as fontes de corpos hídricos, como mares, rios, lagos, zonas úmidas, oceanos e até mesmo lagoas. O trabalho aprofunda-se na água, concebendo-a como uma metáfora dinâmica, e investiga a conexão inevitável entre os seres humanos e esse elemento. Além disso, aborda questões como poluição, mudanças climáticas, padrões climáticos imprevisíveis, elevação do nível do mar e extinção de espécies, todas associadas às paisagens aquáticas. Mario Petrucci, poeta britânico nascido na Itália, e Margaret Atwood, uma poeta canadense multifacetada, demonstram profunda preocupação com o bem-estar ecológico do planeta; por essa razão, foram selecionados para análise alguns de seus poemas mais representativos. Os poemas de Petrucci – “Goluboy”, “Light”, “India” e “Pripyat” – e os de

Atwood — “Frogless”, “Spring in the Igloo”, “Bear’s Lament” e “Vermilion Flycatcher, San Pedro River, Arizona” — exploram as ameaças enfrentadas pelos corpos d’água em diferentes regiões do mundo.

**Palavras-chave:** água, crise ecológica, imagens, interconectividade.