



Reading *The Iron Woman* in Times of Crisis as a Tale of Hope

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Accepted: 26 June 2021 / Published online: 16 July 2021
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Abstract

What role does literature for children and young adults have in the present environmental crisis and in the context of climate change? To answer this question, I propose to analyse Ted Hughes's narrative *The Iron Woman* (1993) which, despite being written almost thirty years ago as a sequel to *The Iron Man* (1968), reads as both a story of hope and a wake-up call in our current crisis where children act as agents of change. Drawing on Lucy, the female protagonist, and the Iron Woman as symbols of hope, I will look at the impact that Rachel Carson's seminal work *Silent Spring* (1962) had for Hughes and place his environmentalism in the context of more recent ecocritical theory, using ecofeminism as a critical framework to analyse the novel. By raising awareness and engaging directly with our environmental crisis, *The Iron Woman* puts forward Hughes's own social and political concerns and could be read as a potential healer of broken bonds between humanity and nature, not only as a discourse of hope, but perhaps also as a way to contribute towards much-needed change.

Keywords *The Iron Woman* · Ted Hughes · Rachel Carson · Ecofeminism · Climate change

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Both Poles are glowing. Once they go
 Your whole realm flies off its axle,
 Your palace is rubbish in space.
 And look at Atlas. He is in trouble.
 His shoulders are fabulous, but who can carry
 The incineration of a Universe?
 (Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, p. 41)

Introduction

While concern over the human impact on the environment has existed for decades, there is now a call for a new sense of urgency which demands a shift to transform the understanding of our place in and our impact on the physical world, as well as of the relationships we share with other life forms that cohabit the earth. Such concerns may seem less pressing at times like the present when the most devastating virus to date in modern history is transforming the society in which we live. Living in the middle of a pandemic has left us with a disturbing sense of unreality. Books that used to read like science fiction have lately become uncomfortably real. While fiction allows us a way to escape reality, it can also provide us with a window through which to confront our fears and even contribute towards change. However, the present crisis is part of a much broader problem, one deeply connected to our dysfunctional relation with nature.

Western culture is predominantly an uncaring anthropocentric society, one which considers humankind as being superior to nature and one that is guided by the assumption that it is only in relation to humans that anything else has value. As Val Plumwood claims, this “ecological mess” that we have made is:

fruit of a human and reason-centred culture that is at least a couple of millennia old, whose contrived blindness to ecological relationships is the fundamental condition underlying our destructive and insensitive technology and behaviour. To counter these factors, we need a deep and comprehensive restructuring of culture that rethinks and reworks human locations and relations to nature all the way down (Plumwood, 2002, p. 8).

Plumwood held that humans needed a new ethics to restore harmony in the natural world. Read in the current crisis, her words seem to ring truer than ever. Given this bleak scenario, what value does it have to read a children's text which is approaching its thirtieth anniversary, when we are currently immersed in a global environmental crisis which has worsened dramatically over the past three decades?

Ted Hughes firmly believed that the most important way to communicate is through storytelling. People understand and become more engaged when they learn through stories. Visual arts and literature are important vectors of change in the ethical plane and, as such, can be seen as valuable tools of ecological awareness and moral transformation. Literature promotes attitudes and values—especially in the young reader—and can stimulate reflection on the moral consideration of the

non-human world and even induce action. In response to drastic climate change, it is necessary today, more than ever, to offer a discourse of hope. One that inspires and allows us to imagine resilience. But how can younger generations persuade older generations and take agency to take steps to repair and protect our environment? Can literature lead to action and become a rationale for change?

In my analysis I argue that children's literature can be a valuable medium which can empower young readers to productively engage with the challenges of climate change by addressing critical issues of ecological problems, raising environmental awareness in young readers and even, perhaps, offering solutions by calling attention to understanding the relationship between nature and culture as a holistic unit. Following this, I will enquire as to whether texts like Hughes's children's novel *The Iron Woman* (1993), read in the context of the present environmental crisis, can really serve any purpose to help us reconnect with nature and open our eyes to the perils of the human-induced phenomenon of climate change. Can Hughes's novel be read as a discourse of hope or inspire change for a more sustainable future through promoting values such as an ethics of care, reciprocal respect, and empathy? From an ecofeminist perspective, can Lucy, the young female heroine, be read as a literary counterpart of sorts, to Greta Thunberg and other young adults who have instilled change through action, providing hope for the future?

Children and Young Adults' Literature and the Environment

Children's literature has long been concerned with nature. The way we portray the natural world and the environment we live in matters. The image we present to children and young adults about the world they live in can offer creative settings that can excite their imagination and perhaps prompt them to consider their own relationship with our damaged planet.

Whilst in America Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) is considered by many as the book that began "the environmental movement in children's literature" (Dobrin and Kidd, 2004, p. 11) and as a canonical text of literary environmentalism for the classroom, Ted Hughes's *The Iron Man* (1968) has long been part of the curriculum throughout schools in Britain and continues to remain on the reading lists as a standard text for primary schools in the UK. Both read as examples of early environmental texts that convey didactic messages about the need for humans to become better caretakers of the earth. One of the primary functions of such texts is that they can help young children understand contemporary ecological issues and reveal how humans have disrupted the harmony of our planet, positioning young people to reflect on responsible ecocitizenship.

In *Confronting Climate Crises Through Education* (2018) Rebecca L. Young makes a compelling case for how literature and empathetic reading strategies can lead to action and become a rationale for change. Introducing environmental concerns in the classroom literature can be a platform for engaging both children and young adults, thanks to the emotional response created.

There has recently been a rise in environmental texts that "thematize contemporary ecological issues [and] reflect shifting global agendas and predict future

possibilities” (Massey and Bradford, 2011, p. 109) and, especially since the 2000s, a growing trend in dystopian fiction for young adults. Titles such as Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* (2004), Scott Westerfield's *Uglies* series (2005–2007), Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2009), Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series (2008–2010), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011) or more recently *The Grace Year* (2019) by Kim Liggett, envision a world damaged by global warming together with post-apocalyptic scenarios of catastrophic events linked to climate change and ecological destruction. However, given their bleak scenarios, what allure do such grim narratives have for young (and not so young) adults?

At times of political and social unrest, contemporary texts like these can offer insight into environmental issues and engage students in debate. As Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad and Carrie Hintz claim, “[YA dystopias] revolve around two contrasting poles: education and escape. The novels simultaneously seek to teach serious lessons about the issues faced by humanity, and to offer readers a pleasurable retreat from their quotidian experience” (2013, p. 5).

Many dystopian science fiction narratives feature young female protagonists who are often activists, so that women and environmental concerns are often depicted as being interrelated and can be read from an ecofeminist perspective. According to Alice Curry, “Ecofeminism is rooted in the critical insight that environmental crisis is a feminist issue” (2013, p. 1). Whilst dystopian novels such as those mentioned focus consciously on ideological critiques that link environmental awareness to maturing young female protagonists, Hughes's female counterpart to *The Iron Man* (1968) is perhaps a less obvious choice to analyse. However, by tracing Rachel Carson's influence on Hughes's environmentalism and looking at the way his narrative deconstructs certain stereotypes related to ecofeminism, such as that of women being “close to earth” and men as being superior, I believe it reads as an interesting early precursor of ecofeminism in young adult literature. My analysis therefore takes a cross-disciplinary approach through ecofeminism together with a posthumanist perspective, as a holistic scope for rereading *The Iron Woman*.

The Iron Man and The Iron Woman

Hughes himself said of *The Iron Man* that he had written it as a “blueprint imaginative story”, one “intended to cure the mentally sick, & to put people in contact with their real nature” (Hughes, 2007, p. 284). Lissa Paul read *The Iron Man* as “a redemptive story” (Paul, 2000, p. 225) by linking Hughes's need at the time of writing the story as a healing myth for his own children following the death of their mother, Sylvia Plath, who had committed suicide in 1963. In the tale Hughes attempts, in an allegorical sense, to guide his children through the healing process of the loss of their mother by creating the Iron Man as a heroic figure.

Written half-way between a modern fairy-tale and a science-fiction myth, Hughes's narrative describes how a giant “metal man” appears from the sea and falls from a cliff, only to reassemble himself, and begin devouring anything metal. He soon becomes a problem for the local farmers who decide to dig a pit to capture him and bury him. However, after being buried he rises again and when a monstrous

alien descends from outer space and threatens the extinction of all life on Earth, the Iron Man defends the people and restores peace.

In a similar way, *The Iron Woman*, written as a sequel to *The Iron Man*, has a somewhat simplistic plot, following the mysterious arrival of a giant Iron Woman who rises from a polluted marsh determined to destroy the factories that are dumping waste in the river and poisoning the fish. She becomes friends with Lucy, the young female protagonist, whose father works at the local factory, and tells her that she has come to teach mankind a lesson. Lucy then seeks the help of the Iron Man and Hogarth, the little boy who befriends him, to try and reason with the Iron Woman, who decides to turn the men who work at the factory into fish, so they will experience the same pain as the creatures who live in the poisoned river. This strange transformation is followed by a chain of supernatural events which turn the tale into a somewhat surreal cybernetic fantasy. The narrative is resolved by transforming the men back into their human form and magically turning the industrial waste into fuel.

Despite its problematic and idealistic ending, *The Iron Woman* puts forward many of Hughes's own social and political concerns and can be read as a potential healer of broken bonds between humanity and nature and, especially in the present environmental crisis, as a wake-up call, where children act as agents of change.

More recently, Eman El Nouhy (2017) has compared Hughes's narrative to that of the Medusa, claiming that by fusing the myth he is able "to facilitate an archetypal awakening that might reach his readers' unconscious and hence force them to recognize the atrocities they have committed against Nature, who is also "the female in all its manifestations'" (El Nouhy, 2017, p. 349). Despite noting the female aspect, El Nouhy fails to mention the importance of Lucy in the novel, and instead repeatedly insists that Hughes uses the Medusa myth as a metaphor for a "defiled, victimized woman—for Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide shortly after she discovered that Ted Hughes had committed adultery" (2017, p. 350) overlooking the overtly environmental dimension of the novel and the fact that Hughes had already written *The Iron Man* as a healing myth for his children and as a way to express his own grief.

Written as an intervention on behalf of water quality and public health, *The Iron Woman* has a much stronger and more active environmental agenda than *The Iron Man* and can be read as a redemptive story for a society that has cut itself off from 'being human' and from being part of the larger web of life. By raising awareness and engaging directly with our ecological crisis both novels can be read as eco-fables or healing myths which can challenge us to alter our perceptions from anthropocentric to biocentric.

Throughout his career Ted Hughes was well aware of environmental crises that we are facing, and their effects as largely of our own making. The concern for nature that emerges so distinctly in Hughes's writing is closely linked to the interconnectedness between human nature and external nature. In 'Myth and Education' (1970), Hughes argued that myths are a kind of story that contain cathartic properties, ones that can reunite our inner world with the outside and keep them in balance. Hughes wrote for a world that had lost its balance. However, he also believed that writing had the power to transform our perceptions and that literature could act as a healing

device and that this healing power could be transmitted through the imaginative experience of reading, to the psyche of the reader.

Ecological Awareness and River Pollution: Hughes and Carson

Hughes's poetry has won acclaim by readers and critics and been placed in a long tradition of the great English poets, but Hughes was much more than a poet and writer. Throughout his career he was deeply engaged with environmental issues such as water pollution, climate change and species extinction, and his sense of environmental responsibility can be seen through his own local call to action. It was after witnessing the decline in trout and salmon in the Devon rivers of the Taw and the Torridge during the mid-1980s that the poet supported and led several campaigns concerned with the water quality in rivers. His action on behalf of the welfare of local flora and fauna can also be seen through the numerous letters he wrote to national newspapers on the decline of otters, river pollution and the exploitation of fishing areas to raise environmental awareness.

Hughes was well informed about river pollution, as can be seen when in 1981 he formed the Torridge Action Group and acted in the cause of public health with local authorities over the Bideford Sewage system, which emptied its effluent directly into the river, causing severe pollution. When the group called for a public enquiry to clean up the river, he spoke on their behalf and wrote a reasoned campaign statement which, in turn, expanded into a national research and monitoring organisation concerned with water quality in the nation's rivers (Gifford, 2008). Hughes was also an active campaigner for a hygienic water supply in Southwest England, and after sitting on the committee for the National Rivers Authority, he set up the Westcountry Rivers Trust in 1993.

However, it was shortly after reading Rachel Carson, while in America with Sylvia Plath in the late fifties, that the poet first became concerned about the effects of industrial pollution and the environmental hazards it caused. In 1959, while fishing on Cape Cod and reading an article in *The Nation* about the dumping of atomic waste in barrels into the sea, Hughes discovered that the mackerel there was radioactive. Both Plath and Hughes were already familiar with Carson's earlier works *Under the Sea Wind* (1941) and *The Sea Around Us* (1951) before *Silent Spring*, was published in 1962, which in Hughes's own words "revealed the whole of America as a poisoned land" (in Gifford, 1995, p. 131). Written as a study on the toxic effects of chemical residues in animal and human bodies, Carson's, *Silent Spring* (1962), is often considered as the book that launched the modern environmental movement. Her first chapter, 'A Fable for Tomorrow', opens with the following words:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields' (Carson, 1962, p. 1).

However, Carson's peaceful fairy tale soon becomes one of the most haunting images in environmental literature when:

a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death [...]. only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh' (Carson, 1962, p. 2).

That same eerie silence can be found in the opening of *The Iron Woman*, as related by Lucy, the young heroine: "The marsh was always a lonely place. Now she felt the loneliness" (Hughes, 1993, p. 3). If Carson's fable of doom is a "spring without voices" (Carson, 1962, p. 2), then the silence depicted in Hughes's fable, with birds and fish dying from the chemical poisoning of the waste dumped by the factory where Lucy's father works, seems directly indebted to her.

Another direct allusion to Carson's seminal work can be seen at the beginning of Hughes's narrative in the figure of the birdwatcher who discovers that the bittern, an endangered species, and her eggs, whose hatch he had spent all day waiting for, are stone dead, uncannily recalling the premise behind Carson's *Silent Spring*. Carson had been prompted by a letter from her friend Olga Owens, a newspaper reporter, who had written in 1958 telling her how pesticides were wiping out the birds. Not only did Carson's book demonstrate the effects of DDT on the whole food chain but she revealed how "the earth's vegetation is part of a web of life in which there are intimate and essential relations between plants and the earth" (Carson, 1962, p. 64) laying the foundations for a more holistic view of Nature. Long before the term 'ecocriticism' existed,¹ Carson embodied the movement through her writing, endorsing the notion that, as humans, not only can we alter nature, but that the key to change, and mending the damage we have caused, lies also in our hands.

Like Carson, Hughes also believed that humans and nature were part of the same web of life and that you could not harm a part of nature without harming the whole. Raising environmental awareness and instilling in the reader a sense of connection with the natural world was part of the poet's project. From the very beginning of his career, he strived to make his environmental thinking public, and throughout his life he was actively involved in a number of educational projects and charities, many of which were directed at children and young adults.²

¹ Although the term 'ecocriticism' was first introduced in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", Cheryll Glotfelty was the first to employ the word as a critical approach to studying nature writing in 1989 at a meeting of the Western Literature Association. In the field of children's literature, the term was first used in the winter 1994 issue of the *Children's Literature Quarterly*, guest-edited by Betty Greenaway titled "Ecology and the Child". Similarly, the following year, *The Lion and the Unicorn* offered a special issue devoted to "Green Worlds: Nature and Ecology", edited by Suzanne Rahn. The first full-length book study on children's literature and ecocriticism is Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd's (eds.) *Wild Thing: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, published in 2004.

² Examples of these projects can be found in 'Farms for City Children', set up by Clare and Michael Morpurgo in 1976, and of which Hughes became president whilst actively being involved helping with fundraising and reading to the children. Other examples can be found in environmental projects such as the Atlantic Salmon Trust, or his wish to set up a tree planting scheme with schools in Devon, or the

Both *The Iron Man* (1968) and *The Iron Woman* (1993), read as Hughes's clearest depictions of ecological healing and draw strongly on Rachel Carson's idea that harm to nature is caused by humankind. However, both novels also read as examples of how children's fiction can successfully engage with the entangled relationship between society, technology and the web of nature, and illustrate our own prioritising of the first two at the expense of the last.

When Children's Literature Meets the Cyborg

Children's literature and posthumanism have long shared much in common. As a genre, children's fiction abounds in non-human creatures and hybrid human-animal beings, toys, robots and other machines and it can offer readers multiple and alternative ways of envisioning human interconnections with the artificial. As Maria Nikolajeva puts it "Negotiations within the hybrid human-animal or human-machine body are omnipresent in real life, but in fiction they can be amplified, and in children's fiction they can be used for didactic purposes" (Nikolajeva, 2016, p. 135).

In the case of Hughes, and parallel to his own environmental campaigning during the 80s, *The Iron Woman* was a way of voicing his own frustration with governmental and political institutions who had failed to respond to his concern for river pollution. In the novel, when Lucy takes the Iron Woman to the canal to wash herself, she finds it "almost empty of water", as it has become a rubbish dump full of "rusty bicycle wheels, supermarket trolleys, bedsteads, prams, old refrigerators, washing machines, car batteries, even two or three old cars, along with hundreds of rusty, twisted odds and ends, tangles of wire, cans and bottles and plastic bags" (Hughes, 1993, p. 17). In the words of Yvonne Reddick, the novel reads as "one of his most public literary statements against water pollution" (Reddick, 2017, p. 260). The fact that it was largely informed by Hughes's own social and political interventions related to river pollution and the dumping of toxic waste can be clearly seen in its sub-text about the link between water quality and public health.³

What is perhaps more relevant, in line with Carson, is that Hughes uses *The Iron Woman* to explore how environmental issues are social issues. This political discourse which would now be recognised by ecocritics as environmental justice—the concern for both environment and human's dependency upon it—can also be read

Footnote 2 (continued)

Sacred Earth Drama Trust, which aimed to make children spokespeople for the environment. For a more detailed analysis of these projects see Kerslake's study "Ted Hughes: The Importance of Fostering Creative Writing as Environmental Education" (2020).

³ Today recent reports by the Environmental Agency reveal that Britain's waterways continue to be polluted with chemical sewage discharge and industrial chemicals and that all English rivers have failed to meet quality tests for pollution. See "Shocking state of English rivers revealed as all of them fail pollution tests" <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/17/rivers-in-england-fail-pollution-tests-due-to-sewage-and-chemicals>

in the novel. As Zoe Jacques points out, “Both children’s fiction and posthumanism, then, might be said to have the unique potential to offer a forward-focused agenda that unites the possibilities of fantasy with demonstrable real-world change” (Jacques, 2015, p. 206).

By placing children as protagonists alongside cyborg-robots, Hughes is endowing them with the power for humanity to change. Moreover, in both novels he chooses children as the first to identify and empathize with the problem in order to bring about a resolution. In *The Iron Woman*, Lucy is the first to realize that something is wrong when she sees a sick eel writhing and gasping on the surface of the river: “What was wrong with it? Seeing its peculiar head bobbing up like that, and its little mouth opening, she had felt a painful twist somewhere in her middle. She had wanted to scoop the eel up and help it. It needed help. Something was wrong with it” (Hughes, 1993, p. 2).

The strange silence that pervades the swamp at the beginning of the novel is broken by “a long wailing cry, like a fire-engine siren” (Hughes, 1993, p. 4), that comes from the giant muddy figure that first appears rising from a black polluted swamp. Lucy first mistakes the “man-shaped statue of black mud” (Hughes, 1993, p. 5) for “a hippopotamus-headed, gigantic dinosaur, dragging itself on all fours up out of a prehistoric tar pit” (Hughes, 1993, p. 4). She then mistakes the Iron Woman for a “seal covered with black, shiny oil. A seal that had swum through an oil slick” (Hughes, 1993, p. 11). This strongly resonates with Hughes’s own concern about oil spills together with his awareness of the effects of chemicals in wildlife and the decline of local species. These ideas are clearly voiced in the introduction Hughes wrote for a book called *Your World* (1992), the profits of which went to the United Nations Environment Programme. The text, which stands as one of the poet’s most outstanding environmental essays, was later published as an article in *The Observer*. In the article he makes the connection between the decline in otters and the large quantity of seals that were also dying in the Baltic at the same time, claiming that he “felt that the account of reintroducing otters to East Anglia ought to be read in a context of greater awareness, and so wrote to the newspaper, quoting this autopsy of the dead East Anglian otters” (Hughes, 1992, p. 34) to explicitly make his point:

These creatures were obviously not aliens quarantined on another planet. Cell by watery cell they were extensions of ourselves, our early warning system, physically our own extremities. The Letters Editor asked me to cut out all the gruesome, close-up stuff about the disintegrating tumour-crammed body bags of the otters. I insisted, this was the whole point of my letter. He then refused to publish it [...] And when I asked him why, he told me: ‘We simply can’t put that sort of thing in front of our readers at breakfast’ (Hughes, 1992, p. 34).

While Hughes was trying to urge the reader to identify and relate with the otter’s pain, the media’s concern (in this case the news editor’s) was to censor feelings that would make readers uncomfortable. The importance of enabling readers to understand their interconnectedness with nature has been referred to as environmental empathy. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell comments on how “the understanding of personhood is defined for better or worse by environmental entanglement. Whether individual or social, being doesn’t stop at the

border of the skin” (Buell, 2005, p. 23). Buell, like Hughes, reaffirms the ecocritical commitment to environmental awareness as a prelude to ecological solutions and makes the point that empathy is key for ‘environmental imagination’, referring to the reader’s ability to experience a sense of connection with the environment and a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural world. This idea of kinship is precisely what the Iron Woman is attempting to do when she turns the men into fish so they may experience the same pain as the creatures in the poisoned river and become, in this way, aware of the damage they have caused by polluting the waters.

Seeking to Reconcile the Human Detachment from Nature

Hughes’s concern with our loss of connection with the natural world is very similar to that of Carson. Both look at the source of our loss of connection with nature and the consequences this entails in their writing. But more importantly, both look at how this rupture might be healed. Whereas the birdwatcher in *The Iron Woman* remains disconnected from wildlife and symbolises the detachment of humanity from nature, the Iron Woman herself laments this alienation and voices it through the metaphor of her scream. Indeed, the most memorable thing about her is her cry, one that represents the creatures of the marsh:

It is the cry of the insects, the leeches, the worms, the shrimps, the water skeeters, the beetles, the bream, the perch, the carp, the pike, the eels. “They’re crying”, whispered Lucy. “The cry of the ditches and the ponds”, the voice went on. “Of the frogs, the toads, the newts. The cry of the rivers and the lakes. Of all the creatures under the water, on top of the water, and all that go between” (Hughes, 1993, p. 20).

The Iron Woman’s cry can also be read as symbolising the poet’s own “voice of pain” (Hughes, 2005, p. 458). Blake Morrison even goes as far as suggesting the possibility of linking “the central image of the scream to the noise Hughes has endured in his own life for more than 20 years” (Morrison, 1999, p. 169). Hughes himself refers to that same impression of the scream as being what made him stop writing the story in the 80s:

I began writing the story in the mid-80s, and at one point I was scared by it and had to back off. The image of that scream in particular alarmed me. I wasn’t sure what I was pushing myself into, so I left it alone for a bit and turned to Shakespeare instead while I got used to it’ (Morrison, 1999, p. 160).⁴

If the Iron Man emerges from the sea, the Iron Woman first appears from the river as half-goddess half-cyborg, aligning herself with Gaia as the personification of Mother Earth and taking on the form of an aquatic goddess. Water is an ancient

⁴ Hughes is referring here to his magnum opus *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992) which he had begun in the 80s.

symbol of both birth and rebirth, and the Iron Woman symbolizes a source of energy and life representing the creatures of the river. As Jacques points out, “the posthuman challenge embodied in the robot-cyborg is entangled with environmentalism and gender as competing discourses” (Jacques, 2015, p. 20). The fact that she transcends the boundaries between the artificial and the natural makes *The Iron Woman*, in the words of Jacques, “a cybernetic complication” (Jacques, 2015, p. 197) in the sense that she both unifies and rejects the provocative declaration of ecofeminist Donna Haraway: “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway, 1985, p. 101). For Haraway, the cyborg is neither human nor animal -nor machine- but mediates between. Either way, half-cyborg half-goddess, the Iron Woman symbolizes for Hughes the Goddess of Complete Being in her clearest form, crossing the borders between human and nature, and mediating between both. Moreover, if we draw on Haraway’s term ‘natureculture’ as a single word for the dissolved duality, the Iron Woman as half-cyborg half-goddess can also be seen as unifying. While Haraway suggests that “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines” (Haraway, 1985, p. 72), it is precisely the element of fear that Hughes uses to promote that union.

In *The Posthuman* (2013) Rosi Braidotti also proposes the idea of moving towards a new subjectivity, one that takes into account the various interconnections between all species. Serpill Oppermann prefers the term ‘posthuman ecocriticism’ and defines its objective as follows:

Conserving the new materialist understanding of the nonhuman (biotic and abiotic) as already part of the human in the world’s becoming, posthuman ecocriticism seeks to maintain a sustainable ecological critique of the material interaction of bodies and natures in a highly technologized world and their conceptualizations in literary and cultural texts (Oppermann, 2016, p. 30).

Following this, *The Iron Woman* can be read as a redemptive story, written for a society that has cut itself off from being part of the larger web of life. By exposing the effects of toxic chemicals from a waste factory, the Iron Woman vows to destroy those who have poisoned the river and marshlands, and all the creature that live there.

Despite the fact that, as Reddick argues, Hughes “cannot be called an ecofeminist” (Reddick, 2017, p. 262), an ecofeminist reading of the novel can offer insight into the close relation between the metaphor of the Iron Woman as nature and how the image of the female as nature plays an important symbolic role in constructing the poet’s view of human identity. Morrison even goes as far as claiming that had the book been written by a woman, it would most certainly have been called feminist.

In any case, the novel perpetuates interesting binaries. By directing her revenge on a male community (the waste disposal factory workers, including Lucy’s father who has just received a pay rise) who are responsible for polluting the river, the Iron Woman uses her ‘unearthly’ powers of the space-bat-angel-dragon, granted by the

Iron Man, to turn all the men in the country into fish in order for them to experience the same pain as the creatures who live in the polluted water. By losing their identity as ‘human’ and becoming water creatures, the men need to be carried by the women, who are clearly aligned with nature, to water in order to survive.

When things turn into a national disaster and get out of hand, the children, Lucy and Hogarth, who reappears from *The Iron Man*, beg the Iron Woman to stop. Eventually the men emerge from the water, with their hair turned white. Hughes’s urgency for that same “deep change” (Hughes, 1993, p. 85) voiced by the Iron Woman, to save Western society, comes in the form of a healing miracle to save nature and humankind. Overnight strange yellow webs grow, dissolving the waste from the factory and turning it into a magic non-toxic fuel. Curiously enough, the same day that Hughes sent *The Iron Woman* to his publisher at Faber, he read in *New Scientist* that two Japanese scientists claimed to have found a way to convert plastics into fuel (Morrison, 1999, p. 166).

Despite resolving the story in an over-idealistic way, Hughes’s concern over waste disposal was real enough and echoes his own frustration towards environmental policies. It was while writing *The Iron Woman* in the 80s and directly after becoming Poet Laureate in 1984, that Hughes was able to tackle environmental concerns more actively by using the Laureateship as a platform. As Gifford correctly points out, “Hughes used the Laureateship to challenge the establishment on behalf of nature” (Gifford, 1995, p.152).

Throughout his career Hughes was well aware that the global environmental crisis, together with the effects that the widespread use of pesticides and pollution had on the environment, was largely of our own making. The problem, of course, was how to get this message across to the rest of society. In a letter to his editor, who was at the time Christopher Reid at Faber, Hughes made the following proposal concerning *The Iron Woman*: “We could send John Major a gold-backed copy. Present all the chieftains with one maybe... And all the cabinet” (in Gifford, 2009, p. 25).

Eco-warriors: From Lucy to Greta Thunberg

Young female protagonists, such as Lucy, are often read as being counterparts to real-life heroines. In the words of Ingrid E. Castro, “Constructions of YA fantasy protagonists, who are usually strong, motivated, young, and female, increasingly overlap with real-life media images of powerful girls” (2021, p. 202). Literature provides a safe space for exploring female identities and imagining the future. Today there is a long list of female ecowarriors in YA fiction who might inspire young women: from Walt Disney’s Pocahontas, or Princess Leia, to Tenar in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* to the likes of Lucy, or more recent heroines such as Katniss Everdeen, the young female protagonist of Suzanne Collins’s trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008–2010), or Samantha Steadman in Joanne MacGregor’s Eco-warriors series (2011–2016).

However, it is not only hope that these young women provide but potential solutions to the ongoing issues of climate change, standing up, like Lucy, to the threats from patriarchal systems or neoliberal capitalism and the effects of the

Anthropocene. Their call to action can inspire change and empower other women, challenging traditional gender roles. As Castro claims: “In this cultural moment of political “girl power”, girls are reshaping concepts of gender in line with their cultural, historical, material and social circumstances” (Castro, 2021, p. 202).

If Carson's *Silent Spring* was instrumental in the development of modern environmentalism, perhaps the biggest female icon of climate change today is Greta Thunberg, who, after being catapulted into the media in 2018 when she sat in front of the Swedish parliament, inspired Fridays for Future, a worldwide student movement for climate in over 100 other countries. TIME magazine named her Person of the Year in 2019 (Alter et al. 2019, np), the same year as she was awarded the Rachel Carson Prize, an international environmental award. She has also been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize two consecutive years. Perhaps today there are dozens of other (extra)ordinary teenage girls out there like Greta Thunberg, who will demand better protection for their future and who feel the need to take necessary action to compensate for what previous generations have failed to do. Their call to action strongly resonates with Carson's powerful speech when she made her first televised appearance on April 3, 1963, and spoke before millions of viewers:

We still talk in terms of conquest. We still haven't become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. [...] We in this generation, must come to terms with nature, and [...] prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves. (Carson, 1964).

Today, Carson's words sadly ring truer than ever. They reflect the essence of her life's work, calling for a change in the way humans viewed nature and launching the environmental movement that took place over the next half-century.

Conclusion

By promoting environmental values such as an ethics of care, reciprocal respect and empathy and by unifying humans, nature and technology, *The Iron Woman* successfully puts forward Hughes's own social and political concerns and reads as a potential healer of broken bonds between humanity and nature offering a redemptive sense of hope.

By reconciling these bonds and rethinking our relationship with the environment, children's literature holds an important place in raising younger generation's awareness about their responsibility towards nature in both our present and future. In times of crises, narratives such as *The Iron Woman* can empower children to understand the urgency to act. Whilst we continue to learn to deal with the effects of climate change and pandemics perhaps we can learn from the past. Maybe we can also heal. Perhaps, even, we shall emerge wiser and better equipped to transform our civilization into an ecologically sustainable one, to ensure a healthy future for all life on this planet. I have to wonder if we ever shall.

Funding Open Access funding provided thanks to the CRUE-CSIC agreement with Springer Nature.

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