

Interactive comment on “This bookmark gauges the depths of the human: how poetry can help to personalise climate change” by Sam Illingworth

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Thank you for taking the time to read this manuscript, and for providing comments on how it could be improved. Below I have responded to all your comments (which for ease of use I have **written in bold**), and indicated how I have changed the manuscript to account for these changes. Any line references refer to those provided in the *Geoscience Communication Discussions* preprint.

I can envisage there being value in an overview and analysis of poetry with relation to the environment that uses categorisation and similar procedures, perhaps along the lines of the ‘distant reading’ methodology of the Stanford Literary Lab; or, on another track entirely, an analysis of how poetry has been or can be used

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in public engagement contexts, or perhaps in self-conscious collaboration with scientists and/or communicative agendas. However, the sample of work here was too small to support the first endeavour, and the second did not seem to be at issue, though the model of communication which underpinned the essay suggested this as the most appropriate context. Broadly speaking, the article requires much more nuanced framing and discussion. Even given the journal’s remit of raising awareness of the importance and value of science communication from a scientist’s point of view, and understanding that poetry is being examined within that context, the discussion here cannot avoid involving concepts, ideas and methods that are well-established in non-science fields, which bear on the discussion of poetry in any disciplinary or cultural context, and which are currently absent or insufficiently considered.

I am sorry that you do not approve of the methodology that I adopted in this study. Naturally, as this is the first study of its kind I would expect there to be some criticisms of the approach that I have adopted. However, I believe that my methodology is carefully laid out and fully justified in the manuscript. I disagree that this article requires more nuanced framing and discussion, as what I have set out to do is to demonstrate how poetry might be analysed using qualitative content analysis, carefully outlining the limitations of my study, and suggesting how future endeavours might seek to build on and expand this work. Furthermore, as can be seen from the breadth of my references, this study has sought to fully engage with concepts, ideas and methods that are well-established in non-science fields.

I am afraid that I found the discussion of poetry to be reductive, ahistorical and simplistic. What evidence is there for poetry being ‘something that can transcend cultural barriers’ (cf. issues of translation, cultural capital, marketing and publishing economies, etc), and why should poetry, any more than any other medium, be able to ‘contextualize and personalise a global problem’? Particularly when one imagines the tiny readership for *Magma* and other poetry in com-

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parison to other mediums! How does the fact that much poetry since at least the high modernist period has been criticized for being – and in some cases deliberately has been – difficult, oblique and non-referential, relate to the presentation of it as establishing a ‘common language’? A claim which seems to unconsciously draw on Wordsworth’s 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (‘a selection of language really used by men’, etc), but struggles to account for much of the actual writing, publishing and reception of poetry since that time. A single issue of *Magma* is not sufficient to prove the overarching argument claimed – which would need to be revised to at least take into account the particular nature of that publication and of poetry magazine publication more broadly (readership, aesthetic, and so on). There exist many other collections of environmental poetry which would deepen the context for this argument, and also greatly complicate it (e.g. *The Ground Aslant*, ed. Harriet Tarlo; *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* ed. Alice Oswald). More incidentally, but perhaps still tellingly, Shelley’s treatise was written in 1821 and published in 1840 (unlike your edition) – and the original historical context in which the poem was written goes a long way towards explaining its thinking and intent, which has since undergone, it is an understatement to say, considerable discussion, revision and contestation

I apologise for any offence that I have caused in my discussion of the poetry in this research study, it was certainly not my intent to cause any ill harm.

With regards to the limitations of using a single issue of *Magma*, I believe that I have fully identified these limitations in the manuscript. However, as noted in my response to Referee 2, restricting this study to the poems that featured in ‘The Climate Change Issue’ does introduce a limitation to the study. I have now addressed this by inserting the following text after Line 787:

While the poetry that was used for this analysis was selected because of its broad range, there is a potential limitation introduced by the relative exclusivity of submitting to poetry journals such as *Magma*. While *Magma* does not charge poets for submitting

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to their magazine (as was the case for ‘The Climate Change Issue’), this is not the case for other journals. Furthermore, submitting work to poetry journals requires a certain level of cultural literacy that may risk excluding a range of diverse voices from contributing.

Thank you for your helpful comment regarding Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*. The edition that I was using was from 1890 (not 1840), although I have amended the text so that the reader is fully aware of the provenance of the text. The following text now appears in Line 72:

In his treatise *A Defence of Poetry* (written in 1821 and first published posthumously in 1840), the English Romantic poet P.B. Shelley (1890, pp. 46) wrote that:

While the coding of poems by categories might potentially yield some useful analysis, I do not think it is sophisticated or subtle enough here to answer ‘RQ1: how have poets interpreted the, at times, esoteric principles of climate change?’ (140). Perhaps it is simply a case that the RQ needs rephrasing, but there are basic questions here that are being conflated, perhaps the most pressing of which is: can the poets’ interpretations of climate change (and surely the more appropriate word would be something like ‘renderings’ or ‘representations of’) be assumed to be identical with those of readers? And as the answer is surely ‘no’, where does that leave the communication argument? Complex questions of poetic functioning, representation and of reading/interpretation are being overridden.

Thank you for your comments, but what you are proposing is a completely different research project to the one that I have designed and carried out. I appreciate the time that you have taken in reading and critiquing this manuscript, but it is clear that I have not conducted a study in the way that you would have done yourself if you were also conducting a similar investigation. As such I must respectfully disagree with your comments, as we clearly have a fundamental difference of opinion with regards to the

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research design that I have adopted, and which I have subsequently fully justified in the manuscript.

It is unclear to me whether sections of poems could be and were multiply categorized. For instance, ‘But these fields are, / again, under water, brought / to the brink of drowning’ was mentioned for being categorized as ‘the present’, but is it not also ‘reaction’ and ‘habitat’? More broadly, the categorizing needs to be much tighter and more targeted to be operable. For instance, ‘Reactions’, ‘those poems that explore the reactions that humans have towards climate change’ – it is hard to see how any poem dealing, however tangentially, with climate change wouldn’t fall into this category? The positioning of the extracts from the poems narrows down the possible complexity of the questions under discussion, and of the extracts themselves. A minor instance: the author states that poets ‘had clearly chosen to write sections of the poem in a language other than English as it enabled them to more fully express what it was that they meant to say about climate change’, but other possible reasons can surely be envisaged (e.g. questions of cultural capital, identity formation, deliberate estrangement of Anglophone reader etc.).

You have highlighted here what I agree is the main limitation of this study, i.e. that additional researchers conducting their own content analysis and creating their own codebooks would improve the triangulation of the analysis that I provide, and that multiple colleagues undertaking the content analysis would be of benefit for future research direction. As such I have inserted the following text into the manuscript directly after Line 787:

Future studies would also benefit from multiple colleagues undertaking the content analysis that has been described in this paper, as doing so would better recognise potential differences in any interpretations, thereby improving the triangulation of the coding and subsequent analysis.

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The conclusions reached were rather anticlimactic and commonplace. For instance, is it news to anyone that ‘using only a singular official language (i.e. English) or technical language (i.e. science) is not sufficient to interpret and communicate the causes and consequences of climate change, and that by doing so we are at risk of ostracising those communities that are not fluent in these chosen languages’ (564-8)? The question of communication is reduced to the overly narrow purview of issues such as language (which is in any case too casually categorized and understood – there are very many theories of poetic language which needed to be taken into account here, e.g. Jakobson’s Functions of Language, 1960, itself much contested since) and subject matter; and more consideration surely needs to be given to questions of ideology and its formation and perpetuation, within with communication takes place. The idea that climate change ‘is discussed less widely than is needed for meaningful action to take place’ (572-3) obscures the fact that climate change is surely discussed very widely and with great frequency (see any newspaper), and the implication that more meaningful action awaits better communication needs at least some reflection and justification, and probably qualification.

Again, I apologise that the conclusions that I reached in this manuscript, were in your opinion ‘commonplace’ and ‘anticlimactic’. I must once again respectfully disagree with your commentary, as I believe that throughout this manuscript I have clearly evidenced both the research design and the subsequent analysis. Furthermore, I believe that the findings of this study will be of genuine use to people who are communicating climate science to diverse audiences, and that furthermore (as discussed at length in the manuscript), that this study provides a sturdy framework for people wishing to adopt a similar approach to analysing poetry using such an approach in the future – the commentary from the other referees would suggest that there is value in this, although I fully understand that this is not an opinion that you share.

References

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Shelley, P. B.: *A defense of poetry*, Ginn, 1890.

Interactive comment on Geosci. Commun. Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/gc-2019-19>, 2019.