

Away from the Jeremiad: Recognizing and Reshaping Narrative Tropes About Climate Change

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In the projections of humanity's doom, as imagined by climate-aware philosophers and journalists, an underlying mythological structure stubbornly recurs. Though secular and (by their own description) 'realistic' about our inevitable demise, they replicate a puritan *topos*, that of the jeremiad. According to this narrative, we were given a pristine world full of wild beauty, yet we were bound to destroy it because of our sinful nature. Even when warned about our excesses by an enlightened prophet (or scientist), we struggle to change our behaviour. Powerful repetition of these mythological categories--the wild/wilderness, nature, divine gift, (sinful) excess, prophecy/enlightenment--pervades North American discourse about climate change, and it encourages certain communities to 'prepare for death' rather than striving for the great turn that is required to reshape our human interactions with our environment and with each other. As with most myths, it is easier to fall into its retelling than to question its basic assumptions. This paper proposes a method for recognizing the narrative trope and responding with alternative structures, in the context of education particularly, but also in public discourse more generally.

The jeremiad is often chosen as a rhetorical strategy in an attempt to promote behavioural change (Opie and Eliot). For example, in *Learning to Die*, Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst argues that we should spend our "last days" wisely and that we should "go down singing" while the earth recovers without us: "The wild will rescue life on earth, if anything does, because nothing else can. It won't be us who do the healing, even if some of us are still here..." (Bringhurst and Zwicky 20; 30). In an article on the futility of efforts to reduce carbon emissions, journalist Crawford Kilian of *The Tyee* decries measures such as carbon taxes and rooftop solar. These are woefully insufficient, he writes. Instead, he predicts that the global economy must fully collapse before people begin to recognize the need for system change (Kilian). Activist Bill McKibben describes his own initial foray into climate change activism as "at its heart a lament for the notion that wildness was vanishing--that every last place had been touched by a human hand" (McKibben 4). These examples reiterate aspects of the narrative trope of the jeremiad.

Political commentators have noted that the jeremiad underpins the rhetoric of North American conservatives and progressives alike. It has been described as the central narrative of the Great Migration; "the development of modern middle-class American culture" (Bercovitch 18); and the North American environmental movement (Opie and Eliot; Rosteck and Frentz). So pervasive is this schema, that only an effort of imagination and introspection can reframe it: 'Nature' should not be seen as some unspoiled and nostalgic category. We know from contemporary critique that 'wilderness' as such never existed (Cronon; Woods; Fletcher et al.). Further, when we tie human excess as a moral category to 'human nature', we occlude both true collective responsibility--i.e., climate justice for those disadvantaged by colonial capitalism (Táíwò)--and the potential for decisive and positive action by individuals. Finally, though perhaps once an effective call to action, the jeremiad facilitates fatalism, particularly among young people (Wray). This paper draws on rhetorical analysis to open a discussion into a more intentional and thoughtful creation of narrative structure.

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