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The Rebirth of People and Earth: COVID-19 as a “Healer” in Kitty O’Meara’s Picturebook *and the People Stayed Home*

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Abstract

Kitty O’Meara’s picturebook And the People Stayed Home (2020) presents COVID-19 as a potential “healer” that fosters the rebirth of people and earth. O’Meara’s poem, “In the Time of Pandemic,” conveys a message of hope, resilience, and reflection in the face of the pandemic. When accompanied by the illustrations of Stefano Di Cristofaro and Paul Pereda, the poem takes on a new dimension as a picturebook. The article examines O’Meara’s picturebook, exploring how the visual elements enhance the emotional impact and deepen the interpretation of the text. O’Meara’s picturebook is examined through the lens of both ecocriticism and picturebook theory. Leaning on both theories, the article reveals deeper meanings and implications regarding the relationship between the pandemic, the environment, and human society. By analyzing the visual and textual elements of the picturebook, the article uncovers the ways in which these illustrations highlight the interconnections between humanity and the natural world.

Keywords: COVID-19; Kitty O’Meara; picturebook genre; healing; ecocriticism

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on our lives, inspiring a wealth of artistic expressions, including poetry. Many poets have considered it dreadful and catastrophic. The very same pandemic has been depicted by some poets, however, as a healer, a turning point in the spiritual life of humanity. Kitty O’Meara, a former teacher at middle school, has been called the poet laureate of the pandemic by O, The Oprah Magazine (Nicolaou, 2020). In March 2020, the same month when the global quarantine has been announced, O’Meara published her poem entitled “In the time of Pandemic” on her Facebook page as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rapidly, the poem became well-known in different countries around the world and has been widely circulated on social media. It has been translated into more than 20 languages (Krug, 2020, para. 8). It has sparked a remarkable wave of creativity, inspiring musicians, filmmakers, and artists to harness their craft in translating its words into songs, videos, and visual art.³ Through the creative expressions that have emerged, the poem’s impact has been amplified, reaching new audiences and fostering a sense of unity during times

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³ “There has been a ballet with people narrating in eight languages. A children’s choir in Italy sang it. Two people filmed themselves singing it on a rooftop in Spain. A famous opera star sang an original work based on it!” O’Meara announces at the end of her picturebook. The artistic responses to O’Meara’s poem serve as a testament to the enduring power of art to inspire, heal, and connect people across the globe.



of isolation. In the same year, O'Meara's poem has been transformed into a visual storytelling experience entitled *And the People Stayed Home* (2020).⁴ The collaboration between O'Meara and the two illustrators, Stefano Di Cristofaro and Paul Pereda, in creating the picturebook *And the People Stayed Home* emphasizes the power of artistic synergy.⁵ Through their collaborative efforts, they transform the poem into a visually engaging and emotionally significant experience. Producing a picturebook for children and adults brings O'Meara's message to a wider audience and presents it in a different and more permanent format: "[i]n these pages, thoughtful words are richly illustrated, and words and images together communicate an optimism for our shared human experience and our future that will resonate with readers of all ages" (O'Meara, 2020, back cover).

O'Meara's picturebook is examined through the lens of both ecocriticism and picturebook theory. Leaning on both theories, this article sheds light on the deeper meanings and implications regarding the relationship between the pandemic, the environment, and human society. The analysis involves a close reading of the text and a detailed examination of the visual components, considering their emotional impact, use of color, size, panel layouts, and other elements that contribute to the overall reading experience. The article seeks to answer the following questions: How can an ecocritical analysis of O'Meara's picturebook provide insights into the connections between humanity and the natural world? To what extent does O'Meara's picturebook visually represent the themes of hope, resilience, and reflection in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? In what way do the illustrations by Stefano Di Cristofaro and Paul Pereda enhance the emotional impact and deepen the interpretation of O'Meara's poem?

The Healing Power of COVID-19: A Glimmer of Hope Amidst the Pandemic

COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly brought immense suffering, loss, and disruption to the world. It has caused widespread illness, economic turmoil, and social isolation. However, amidst the darkness, there has been a glimmer of hope. COVID-19 has unexpectedly emerged as a catalyst for change, forcing humanity to confront its weaknesses and reevaluate its relationship with the earth. Kumar et al. (2020) argue that "[n]ature seems to have hit the reset button, reclaiming the spaces to heal itself as the anthropogenic activities have slowed down" (p. 1). Sharma (2021) states, "as humans, globally and collectively, suffered the zoo-like caging for the first time in the history of humankind, Nature, in the absence of her biggest polluter, started healing" (p. 95). Amidst all the gloom and doom that COVID-19 pandemic has given, "there seems to be a proverbial silver lining and some positive consequences as well" (Kumar et al., 2020, p. 4). The pandemic has prompted a collective reconnection with nature. As individuals sought relief from the anxiety and isolation of the pandemic, many found solace in the healing power of nature. This revived relationship with the natural world has reminded us of our interdependence with the earth and the importance of preserving and nurturing it. COVID-19 has thus acted as a "healer," fostering a collective rebirth of both people and the

⁴ Examples of picturebooks that were written as a response to COVID-19 and provide different perspectives and approaches to addressing the impact of COVID-19 are Tomos Roberts' *The Great Realization* (2020), Tia Martina's *When the World Went quiet* (2020), and Michael Morpurgo's *A Song of Gladness* (2022). These picturebooks, as well as others, aim to inspire readers of various age groups, offering a way to engage with and understand the challenges and emotions associated with the pandemic through the power of poetry and visual storytelling.

⁵ Stefano Di Cristofaro is an illustrator and designer whose works have been widely exhibited. Paul Pereda is an illustrator who has primarily worked in video game development and trading card games with clients such as Disney, Nickelodeon, Atari, and MTV.

planet, reawakening a sense of ecological consciousness and motivating individuals to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.

Hence, in the midst of the devastation caused by COVID-19, there have been glimpses of environmental healing. The temporary reduction in human activities has resulted in decreased pollution levels and cleaner air in many parts of the world. Wildlife has reclaimed spaces that were once dominated by human presence.⁶ While humans were restricted to their homes under global lockdown, the wild animals all over the planet seem to have come to reclaim their territory. The media outlets have been tweeting and uploading several images and videos showing animals on the streets. The emergence of wild animals in urban areas is mostly because there is peace and calm, which attracts these animals to the residential areas (Kumar et al., 2020, p. 4). “It is the tranquil ambience and clean environment that has changed the behaviour of wild animals” (Sinha, 2023, para. 2). Rivers have become clearer, and the natural environment has shown signs of regeneration. These ecological transformations serve as a reminder of the resiliency and capacity for healing that the earth possesses.

The pandemic has provided an opportunity for personal reflection and growth, leading to individual healing and the potential for collective rebirth. The periods of isolation and social distancing have compelled individuals to confront their own fears, anxieties, and priorities. By delving into their inner selves, people have discovered new strengths, passions, and perspectives. This process of self-discovery and personal healing has the potential to foster a collective rebirth, leading to a society that is more attuned to the needs of individuals and more compassionate towards one another. COVID-19 has reminded us of our shared humanity and the interconnectedness between people and the earth, urging us to embrace our role as healers and stewards of a brighter future.

Poetry as a Panacea in the Face of a Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world to a standstill, causing immense suffering and disruption. However, amidst the darkness, poetry has emerged as a powerful medium to express the collective experiences, emotions, and reflections of individuals during this challenging time. As Bravo (2020) states, “poetry has long been associated most readily with times of crisis, transition or heightened emotion” (para.13). The poet Claire Shaw (2021) argues that during the pandemic “we discovered we needed poetry more than ever before – its ability to console and connect, to express sorrow, to find beauty, to create meaning” (p. 172). “We need the voice of poetry in times of change and world-grief,” said former Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, on launching *Write Where We Are Now*, a growing collection of work by poets from around the world in response to the pandemic; “a poem only seeks to add to the world and now seems the time to give” (2020). Writers have turned to poetry for self-recollection and introspection as it provides them with an escape from their panic and anxiety. Acim (2021) argues: “approaching poetry was a panacea against the fatality of the disease; it had an enormous impact on their hearts and souls” (p. 67). In writing poetry, writers find glimpses of hope and resilience, portraying COVID-19 as a potential “healer” that brings about the rebirth of people and the earth. The pandemic has significantly influenced the way

⁶ For more information, see Sinha, Samir Kumar. (2023) “Lockdown Lessons in Human-Animal Coexistence.” <https://roundglassustain.com/wildvaults/lockdown-and-wildlife>.

Ishak, Natasha. 33 Pictures of Animals Taking Over Human Spaces During COVID-19. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/covid-19-animals-reclaiming-earth>.

poetry is written and appreciated. It has brought forth new themes, forms, and modes of expression, reflecting the unique experiences and emotions of individuals during this challenging time. Themes such as isolation, loss, fear, resilience, and hope have become prominent in pandemic poetry. The pandemic has pushed poets to confront and express the complexities of human suffering and the existential questions that arise during times of crisis. It has also given rise to a renewed focus on the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment, leading to an increased emphasis on ecological consciousness and sustainability in poetic works.

COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the platforms and avenues through which poetry is shared and appreciated. Poetry offers an immediate outlet for personal response, particularly through “the affordances of social media” (Giovannelli, 2023, p. 212). Bravo (2020) outlines, “from daily readings on the Today programme to minimalist lines on Instagram, poetry has become one of the emerging cultural trends of the pandemic. It is being retweeted at pace, shared by distant friends on Facebook and slipped into our pockets via WhatsApp groups” (para.4). Additionally, the therapeutic and cathartic role of poetry has been highlighted, providing solace and connection in times of crisis. The pandemic has shown that poetry can serve as a source of support and healing, offering a space for collective reflection and empathy. The constraints and uncertainties of the pandemic have sparked experimentation and innovation in poetic expression. COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the forms and styles of poetry. Poets have explored new forms, such as micro-poetry and social media-based poetry, which offer concise and impactful ways to capture the essence of the pandemic experience. The brevity and immediacy of these forms resonate with the fast-paced and fragmented nature of the pandemic era. Two such viral poems are “Lockdown” by Richard Hendrick and “The First Lines of Emails I’ve Received While Quarantining” by Jessica Salfia. Additionally, poets have incorporated elements of storytelling, personal narrative, and spoken word into their works, bridging the gap between poetry and lived experiences. This blending of genres allows for a more accessible and relatable poetry that connects with diverse audiences.

An Ecological Reading of the Pandemic

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment, emphasizing environmental perspectives and concerns. According to Glotfelty (2015), “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” it “has one foot in literature and the other on land” (p. 122). Ecocriticism “explores the way in which the relationship between humans and nature is envisioned” (Di Leo, 2023, p. 303). For Serpil Oppermann (1999), it “takes an earth-centered approach to literature, and an ecological approach to literary criticism. Ecocriticism mainly concentrates on how literature interacts with and participates in the entire ecosphere” (p. 2). In its broad sense, ecocriticism is “how nature gets textualized in literary texts to create an eco-literary discourse” (Oppermann, 1999, p. 3). Ecocriticism launches “a call to literature to connect to the issues of today’s environmental crisis” (Oppermann, 1999, p. 29); paradoxically, COVID-19 has created an environmental nourishment rather than a crisis. “[E]cocritics recognize the need for *reconstructing* nature, not as the Other excluded from the realm of discourse, but as a subject which requires a non-dualistic perception and interpretation from a human position” (Oppermann, 1999, p. 32; emphasis added). Surprisingly, nature is reconstructed by the exclusion of humans; therefore, the individual here is the “Other” and not the other way round. “A new eco-literary discourse” is suggested, one

that “can address nature’s voice without infusing it with human preeminence. Then a dialogic interaction with nature’s language would challenge the status of humans as the privileged speaking subjects” (Oppermann, 1999, p. 33).

Timothy Morton, a prominent ecological philosopher and literary theorist, has made significant contributions to the field of ecocriticism. His work emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and challenges traditional notions of human exceptionalism. Morton’s concept of the “ecological thought” encourages us to transcend anthropocentrism and consider the agency of nonhuman entities in shaping our world. Morton’s ideas, particularly his notion of “hyperobjects,” provide valuable tools for analyzing COVID-19 poetry from an ecocritical perspective. Hyperobjects, such as climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic, are phenomena that are vast in scale and extend beyond our immediate perception. In *Ecological Thought* (2010), Morton uses the term to explain objects so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization, such as climate change and Styrofoam (p. 130). In “Sublime Objects” (2020), Morton explains that hyperobjects not only become visible during an age of ecological crisis, but alert humans to the ecological dilemmas defining the age in which they live (p. 207).

The human versus the nonhuman concepts is negotiable in the ecological field. Ecocriticism “differed sharply from other forms of ‘postmodern’ thought in that it sought to redefine the human subject not so much in relation to the human others that subjecthood had traditionally excluded as in relation to the nonhuman world” (Heise, 2006, p. 507). Ecocriticism, for Glotfelty (2015), “negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (p. 123), whereas for Oppermann (1999), it “attempts to find a common ground between the human and the nonhuman to show how they can coexist in various ways, because the environmental issues have become an integral part of our existence” (p. 29). “Where the term ‘nonhuman’ indicates a positive presence of other-than-human agents, there is an implication of independence, but no implication of human absence” (Plumwood, 2006, p. 136), this, again, highlights the focus on both the human and the nonhuman. The concept of “positive presence” challenges the “human-centeredness” concept which overestimates human agency and underestimates nonhuman ones:

The implications of over-estimating human control and agency include not only the failure we have noted to observe and value nature’s creativity and services, but also exaggerating the potential for control of natural systems and processes, denying the need for negotiation with nature, and reinforcing settler traditions of forcing the land to adapt to us rather than vice versa. (Plumwood, 2006, p. 138)

This quotation by Plumwood emphasizes the negative consequences of overestimating human control in our relationship with nature. It highlights the need for humility, respect, and collaboration in our interactions with nature. To relate this to the pandemic, COVID-19 has raised awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. O’Meara’s picturebook promotes responsibility, empathy, and sustainable living for the benefit of both humanity and the planet.

The Picturebook: An Aesthetic Experience

The picturebook genre is mainly characterized by the close relationship between text and pictures and engages readers through various levels of interaction. It is a “combination of

verbal texts and visual images” (Nodelman, 1996, p. 111). The illustrations are “almost always congruent with the text, engaged at best in a responsive interplay which illuminates, amplifies, exemplifies, and extends it” (Doonan, 1996, p. 228). In *Through the Eyes of a Child* (2010), Donna Norton describes the picturebook as “[a] balance between the illustrations and the text, so that neither is completely effective without the other” (p. 166). In poetry picturebook, “a single literary text has been fragmented, sequenced, and interwoven with the pictures in order to create a new artistic work” (Neira-Piñero, 2013, p. 17). It is defined as follows:

A book that combines printed pictures with literary lyric text in verse in such a way that both expressive elements (verbal and visual) form an aesthetic unit and come together to bring meaning, which results in a piece of work made by words and images where the importance lies in description, the playful component, the expression of feelings and emotions and a subjective world view. (Neira-Piñero, 2013, p. 16)

O’Meara’s poem has been perfectly integrated in the picturebook, thereby achieving an interaction between words and pictures in which both elements contribute to the creation of meaning. This results in a new book that makes the original poem accessible and attractive to young readers. O’Meara’s poem is not altered in the picturebook, but the formal aspect of the poem changes to fit this format. The poem is divided and distributed throughout the pages, combined with illustrations and alternating with visual parts. Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) distinguish a particular type of enhancing relationship, which they term “complementary,” and which takes place “when enhancing interaction becomes very significant”—as occurs in O’Meara’s picture book (pp. 225-26). According to Nikolajeva and Scott, there is an enhancing interaction, in which “pictures amplify more fully the meaning of the words, or the words expand the picture so that different information in the two modes of communication provides a more complex dynamic” (p. 225). The pictures in O’Meara’s book enhance the poem, add a new visual story and guide the reader through the story. In the picturebook, “we read images and text together as the mutually complementary story of consciousness” (Moebius, 2012, p. 141); therefore, a detailed exploration of the illustrations in connection to the poem is offered. Leaning on ecocriticism and picturebook theory, the article explores how the illustrations in O’Meara’s picturebook depict various landscapes and ecosystems and examines the dynamic relationship between humans and the diverse species that inhabit these environments.

Visualizing the Pandemic, the Environment, and Human Society

O’Meara’s picturebook provides a unique perspective on the interplay between the pandemic, the environment, and human society by visually depicting the interconnectedness of these elements. Through vivid illustrations and thoughtful composition, O’Meara’s work offers a powerful representation of hope, resilience, and reflection amidst the challenges of COVID-19. The collaboration between Stefano Di Cristofaro and Paul Pereda in creating the illustrations further amplifies the emotional impact of O’Meara’s poem. The illustrations enhance the poem’s themes, evoke emotions, and create a cohesive narrative that captivates readers. Most of the pages in O’Meara’s picturebook feature a single panel. The use of a single panel on a page is a powerful storytelling tool. It conveys a powerful and focused visual message and allows the illustrators to capture the reader’s attention immediately.

O'Meara's picturebook emphasizes the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. It suggests that when people change their behaviors and lifestyles in response to the pandemic, it has a positive effect on the earth. The actions and choices of individuals impact the collective well-being of both humans and the environment. The poem addresses the human-nature relationship by highlighting the transformative power of stillness and reflection. O'Meara suggests that when people pause and engage in activities such as reading, listening, resting, and making art, they develop a deeper connection with themselves and the natural world. This connection leads to healing, both individually and collectively. O'Meara's poem portrays nature as resilient and capable of healing. When humans stop harmful and mindless activities, the earth responds and begins its healing process. This perspective reflects an understanding of the regenerative capacity of the natural world and the potential for restoration when humans align their actions with ecological well-being.

The illustrations by Di Cristofaro and Pereda play a crucial role in enhancing the symbolic and imaginative elements of O'Meara's poem. The first line of the poem "And the people stayed home" is accompanied by a poignant full spread (fig.1). A full spread in a picturebook refers to a layout where the illustration extends across both pages, spanning the entire width of the open book. It is a powerful visual element that has a significant impact on the reading experience. The visual representation of closed establishments and balconies with the shadows of lonely people symbolizes the collective pause and stillness experienced during lockdowns. This illustration reinforces the idea of people retreating to their homes, seeking solace, and reflecting on their lives amidst the crisis. With more space available, the full spread enables the illustrators to include intricate details, textures, and nuances in the illustration, enhancing the readers' engagement and allowing them to explore and discover hidden elements within the illustration. O'Meara writes:

And the people stayed home.

And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised,

and made art, and played games,

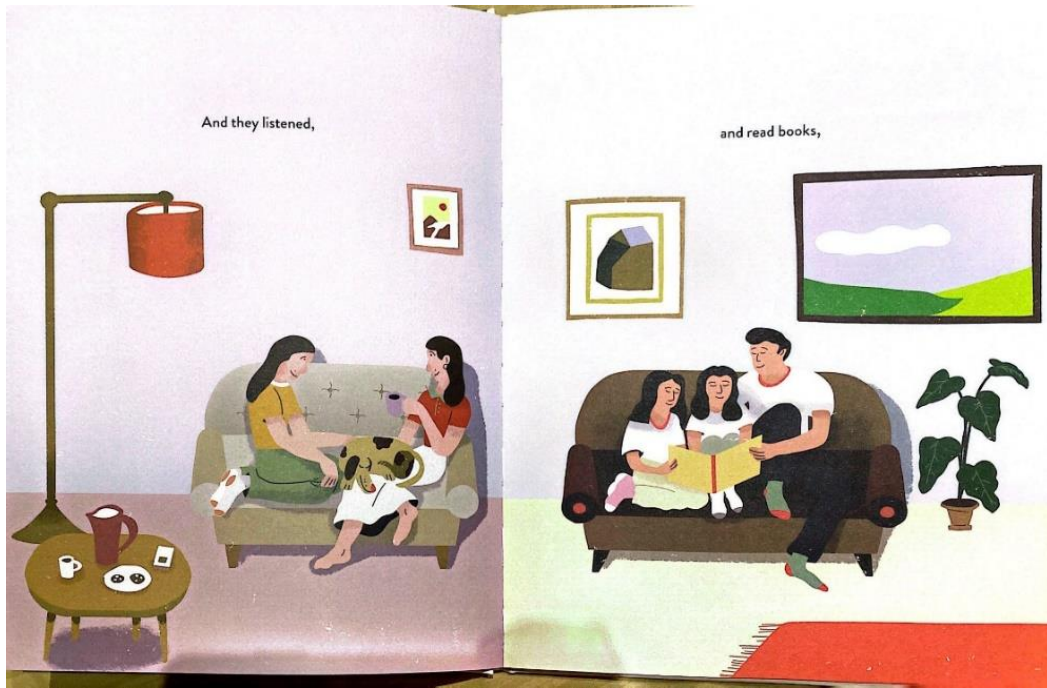
and learned new ways of being and were still.

And listened more deeply.

Some meditated, some prayed, some danced.

Some met their shadows. (1-7)

These lines are skillfully illustrated by Di Cristofaro and Pereda. The illustrators turn from representing shadows of lonely people into depicting family gatherings.

Figure 1. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O'Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing

O'Meara depicts positive aspects of the quarantine; she lists some of the activities practiced while staying at home, activities which have been ignored before. She starts by mentioning "listening." "And they listened" this line would probably refer to listening to music, as the pandemic influences the artistic perception of individuals since they have the opportunity now to listen to music. However, the illustration adds to the meaning of the text, it shows two young ladies talking to each other. As families spend more time together within the confines of their homes, the process of listening among family members has undergone a significant transformation. Prior to the pandemic, family members were often occupied with their individual routines and work. However, the quarantine has created an environment where family members are constantly in close relationship. This increased physical closeness has provided opportunities for more frequent and intentional listening, allowing family members to engage in deeper conversations and develop stronger connections. They started to listen "more deeply," as O'Meara writes. Noticeably, a dog, sleeping on the lap of one of the two young ladies who are practicing the listening/speaking training, appears as part of the scene in the illustration, and consequently of the process of listening. O'Meara proceeds: "and read books," this implies that reading has been ignored before the pandemic, and reflects the significant role played by reading. The line is accompanied by an emotive illustration for a father reading a book to his daughters; reading, being the outcome of the quarantine, enhances the father-daughter relationship. By dedicating a whole page to a single panel, Di Cristofaro and Pereda highlight a crucial scene in the story in a concise and powerful manner. They carefully compose the image, using visual cues and details to communicate the intended message effectively. The illustration includes a plant that decorates the house, as well as a picture of natural green scenery on the wall. These visuals symbolize resilience, growth, and renewal.

Moreover, people “rested” and “exercised,” the antithesis here highlights the need to both practices, physically and psychologically. The line “and rested” is illustrated with a teenager listening to music. The presence of the Elephant-ear plant (*Colocasia*), which represents wisdom, beside “and rested” implies advice to the materialistic, practical society that resting for some time is a wise decision. The line “and exercised,” on the other hand, is accompanied by a picture of a young lady exercising next to a ponytail palm, a plant which is known for its drought tolerance, it, hence, symbolizes endurance and tolerance during the plague.

Figure 2. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O’Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing



The Healing Power of Creativity

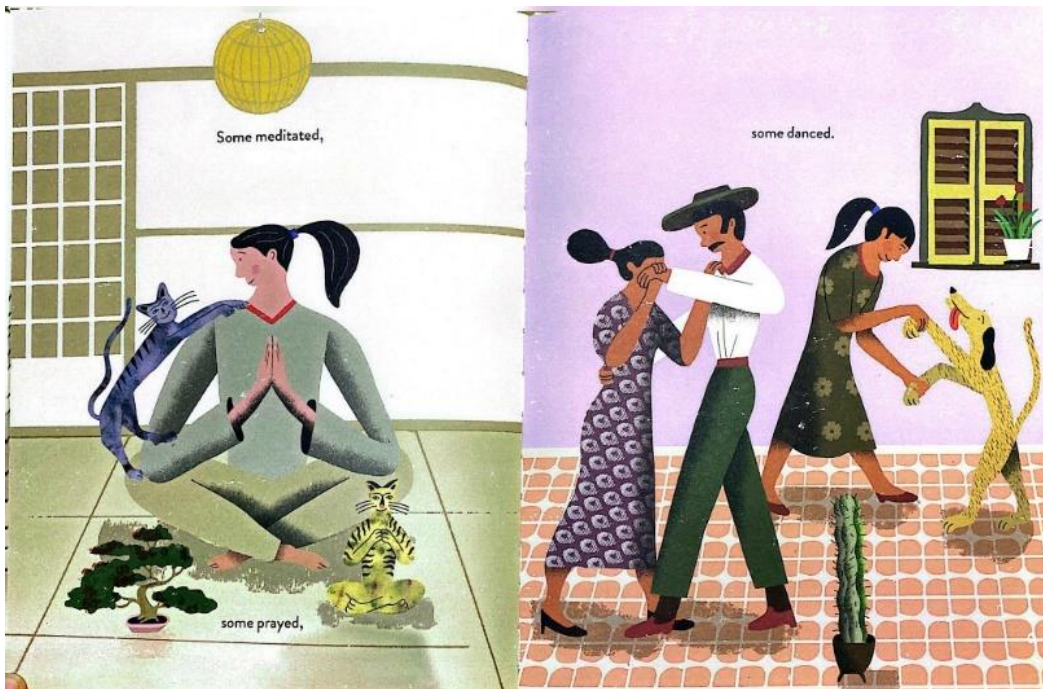
O’Meara’s picturebook acknowledges the power of creativity as a means of healing and envisioning a better future. During the pandemic, numerous people have turned to arts as a vital means of coping with its challenges. Barbara Weigand asserts that creative arts “provide a powerful, healing experience, an opportunity to reconnect with that inner part of oneself that may have been ignored or forgotten.” Creative expression, for Weigand, “provides a distraction, a feeling of control, a sense of accomplishment, pleasure, relaxation and relief from stress, anxiety or even physical pain.” Sharing that activity with others provides “camaraderie, connection and a shared sense of purpose. Creating art is simply good medicine.” Creative artmaking is one way “to address the adversities of the pandemic as it allows creative individuals to experience positive affect, engage in self-reflection, and heal psychological wounds” (Chan et al., 2022, p. 93).

O’Meara mentions activities such as making art and playing games as ways in which people can tap into their creative potential. This creative expression not only fosters personal growth but also contributes to the collective process of imagining new ways of living that promote

sustainability and the well-being of the earth. An artistic tendency increases, during the pandemic, not only by listening to music, but also by creating art. The phrase “made art” is accompanied by an illustration representing two young people painting a green natural scene, and another green painting is at the back hung on the wall, with a dog enjoying watching them. Soon, the boy, the girl, and the dog are shown in the picture having a good time smearing each other and hurling paints at each other (fig. 2). The bright colours, which appear in the picture, are usually associated with “exhilaration and discovery” (Moebius, 2012, p. 151). The illustration highlights the positive impact of the pandemic on enhancing family relationships, in addition to highlighting the involvement of pets in everyday activities.

Another attempt to devote attention to creative pursuits can be noticed in O’Meara’s words, “some danced.” This phrase is depicted (fig.3) by a leisurely inside dance between a man and a woman, as well as a small girl and a dog, with red flowers at the window and a cactus plant on the floor. The inclusion of the dog in this picture is intended to assert intimacy with pets; one could recall Garrard’s statement (2004) that a pet is a mirror “reflecting back our gaze” in this context (p. 139). The red flowers represent the scene’s romantic tendency and beauty, while the cactus, which has connotations with endurance, denotes perseverance in the face of the crisis, so COVID-19 is compared here to a harsh or barren environment; the cactus is a perfect symbol of resilience that leads to recovery and healing. The large illustrations command attention and create a visual impact, and the small details invite closer examination, encouraging readers to engage with the illustration more intimately.

Figure 3. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O’Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing



Religious rituals play a significant role during the enforced lockdown: “Some mediated, / some prayed;” these lines reflect psychological as well as religious performances practiced during the crisis. Animals and plants play a role in the illustration of these lines. The picture

is of a girl meditating through a yoga exercise surrounded by a couple of cats sharing her performance, one is stretching on her arm, and the other is imitating her position; plants appear in front of them (fig.3). The cats and plants amidst the spiritual context imply a special tie to humans, a type of mystical bond that asserts and enhances human's connection to the environment. The pandemic has provided humans with the time needed to reconsider their relationship to God as well as to the "other." The poem highlights the importance of mindfulness and self-reflection during times of crisis. It suggests that in the face of the pandemic, people have an opportunity to pause and engage in activities that foster deeper connections with themselves and the world around them. By meditating, praying, dancing, and meeting their shadows, individuals gain a heightened awareness of their own thoughts, emotions, and actions, leading to personal healing and transformation.

The message of the poem is perfectly delivered when O'Meara writes: "and learned new ways of being." O'Meara here shifts from crystalizing performed practices to emphasizing the role of the quarantine in being a turning point in the life of people who have been taught new ways of living. The "new ways" refers to a shift in the ways of life. In "Some met their shadows. / And the people began to think differently," O'Meara stresses the role of the pandemic in raising self-consciousness. From a psychological perspective, "an encounter with the shadow might become an initiation, a call to remember the multifaceted complexity of human nature and the fertile depths of the human soul" (Zweig and Wolf, 1997, p. 7). O'Meara seeks for a rediscovery of such fertility inside souls, an encounter with the "hidden shadow" is "a source of emotional richness and vitality;" therefore, "acknowledging it can be a pathway to healing and an authentic life" (back cover). The concept of authenticity here refers to going back to nature away from materialism and capitalism. This is also asserted in the picture, the person is sitting in front of his shadow on a rectangular table; rectangular shapes, as Moebius notices, refer to an "encounter" with the disadvantages of "civilized life" (p. 150), and therefore an eagerness to the natural authentic one.

A Journey of Self-discovery and Transformation

The isolation and self-reflection brought about by lockdowns and social distancing have compelled individuals to confront their fears and anxieties, and to reconsider their priorities. O'Meara has beautifully captured this internal journey of self-reflection and growth. This line "And the people began to think differently" encapsulates one of the themes in pandemic poetry, the notion of personal transformation and self-discovery. It is accompanied by an illustration of a young boy carrying a worm and smiling to it, the picture is vibrant and filled with plants. The representation of the worm symbolizes the start of a new life. The line "and dreamed new images" is accompanied by another picture of the same young boy contemplating a colorful butterfly standing on the plants. Specifically, this picture is connected to the picture of the worm, as if the boy in fig. (4) has been waiting for the transformation of the worm into a colorful butterfly, a process which is accomplished in fig. (5). "Think differently," therefore, has to be read within an ecological framework; it implies the birth of a new healthier relation with animals and plants. The illustration is strengthened by centering and enlarging the butterfly, to use Moebius' concept (p. 149).



Figure 4. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O'Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing

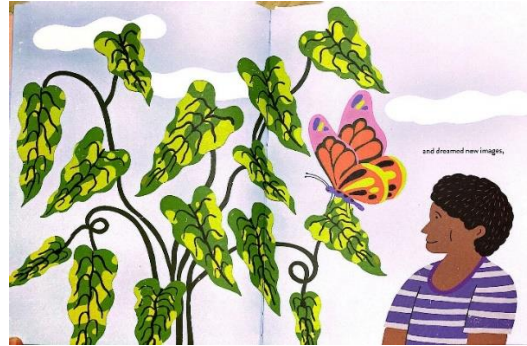


Figure 5. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O'Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing

The sequence of illustrations in the picturebook adds a narrative flow to the poem, enhancing its storytelling aspect. Di Cristofaro and Pereda create a visual journey that unfolds alongside the poem, capturing the emotional essence of each line. Through their illustrations, they establish a cohesive narrative arc, guiding readers through the progression of themes and emotions. The collaboration between O'Meara and the two illustrators ensures a smooth integration of the text and the visuals, enhancing the reader's experience. The two illustrations of the worm and butterfly serve as a powerful metaphor that enhances the message about COVID-19 and its positive impact. The worm and butterfly represent the transformative journey and growth that individuals and communities undergo during challenging times, such as the pandemic. The images of the worm and butterfly symbolize the process of metamorphosis and transformation. Just as a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, individuals and societies have the potential to undergo profound changes and emerge from demanding situations stronger and more resilient. The worm represents the initial state of vulnerability and limitation, while the butterfly represents the eventual transformation and growth that can occur. The worm and butterfly imagery highlights the adaptability and resilience of individuals and communities in the face of adversity. Like a worm that adapts to its environment and transforms into a butterfly, people have learned to adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19; they have found new ways of working, connecting, and supporting each other. The image emphasizes the capacity for resilience and the ability to navigate through difficult circumstances.

The presence of the butterfly in the image evokes a sense of hope and renewal since butterflies are often associated with beauty, grace, and the arrival of something new. In the context of the poem, the butterfly represents the potential for positive change and growth that can arise from the experience of the pandemic. It symbolizes the possibility of emerging from the crisis with a renewed appreciation for life, a transformed perspective, and a commitment to creating a better future. By incorporating the illustrations of the worm and butterfly, O'Meara's poem deepens its message about the pandemic. It highlights the potential for personal and collective transformation, the resilience of individuals and communities, the hope for renewal, and the importance of patience and time. The image serves as a powerful reminder that even in the face of adversity, there is the opportunity for growth, change, and a brighter future.

The Rebirth of People and the Earth

O'Meara reflects on the environmental healing that has taken place amidst the crisis. The temporary reduction in human activities has resulted in cleaner air and water, and a resurgence of wildlife in many parts of the world. O'Meara has beautifully captured these moments of environmental rejuvenation and presented COVID-19 as a “healer” of the earth. She writes:

And the people healed.
 And, in the absence of people living in ignorant,
 dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways,
 the earth began to heal.
 And when the danger passed,
 and the people joined together again,
 they grieved their losses (9-15)

The poem suggests that the pandemic has triggered a shift in human consciousness. The devastation caused by COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of human societies and the unsustainable practices that have contributed to the degradation of the environment. The poem implies that the period of seclusion and reflection has allowed people to “think differently” and develop a heightened sense of awareness. Through solitude and reflection, individuals tap into their inner strength, resilience, and creativity. COVID-19 pandemic becomes a “healer” that forces them to reevaluate their lives, shedding old patterns and embracing new possibilities. The above lines convey the idea that the pandemic serves as a “healer” by reawakening people’s ecological consciousness. It encourages them to adopt more sustainable practices, appreciate the beauty of nature, and strive for a harmonious coexistence with the earth.



Figure 6. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O'Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing

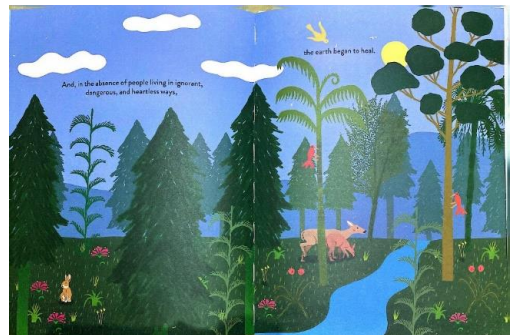


Figure 7. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O'Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing

The above lines are illustrated adeptly by the illustrators. The line “And the people healed” is accompanied by a striking illustration (fig.6) that presents a vibrant garden bursting with colorful flowers and lush greenery. The garden represents the regenerative power of nature. It symbolizes growth, hope, and the potential for renewal. By depicting the garden in full

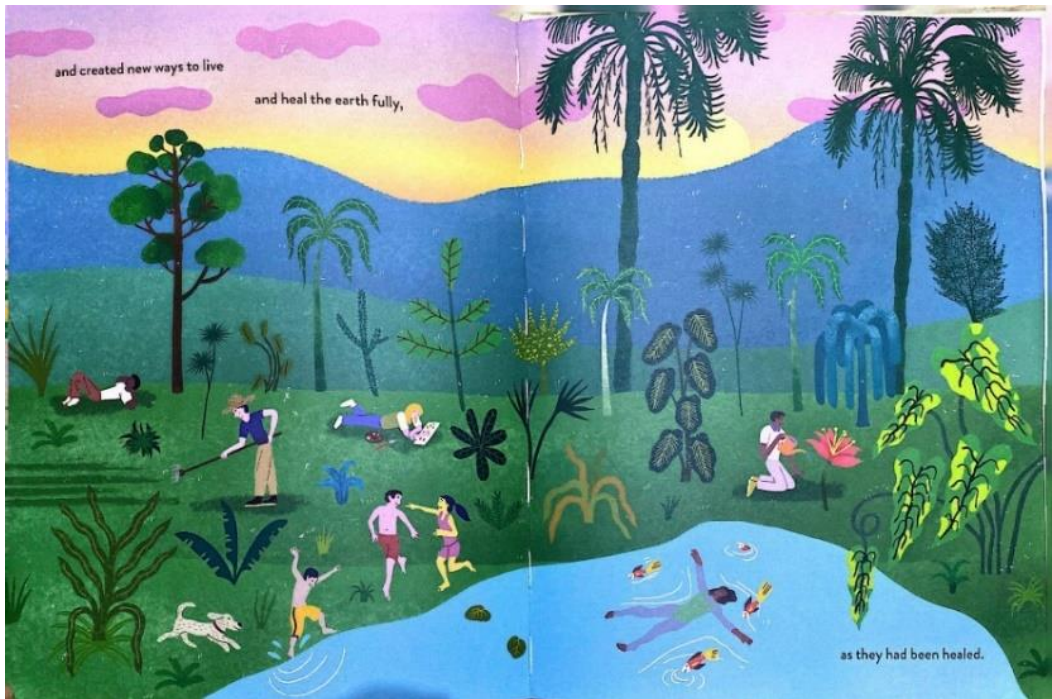
bloom against a serene background, the illustration reinforces the poem's message of finding beauty and solace in the natural world. The illustration (fig.7) brings to life the poem's imagery of nature reclaiming its space. It depicts flora and fauna thriving in the absence of human activity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. The visual representation of blooming flowers, vibrant landscapes, and animals roaming freely serves as a reminder of the resilience and beauty of the natural world. The yellow sun shining beside the line "the earth began to heal" symbolizes a new promising beginning; in general, the picture is joyful with a clear blue sky, a pure blue river and a green wide land. Throughout the picturebook, soft blues, greens, and earthy tones dominate the illustrations. These color choices create a serene and calming atmosphere, evoking a sense of peace and healing. The soothing colors contribute to the overall therapeutic experience of the picturebook, providing comfort and solace to readers.

The rebirth of people, as portrayed in O'Meara's poem, is intricately tied to the rebirth of the earth. This awakening urges people to make new choices and envision a more sustainable future, both for themselves and the planet. The poem underscores the importance of environmental responsibility. It implies that as people come together again after the pandemic, they carry a sense of grief for their losses and a renewed commitment to making better choices. O'Meara writes:

and made new choices,
and dreamed new images,
and created new ways to live
and heal the earth fully,
as they had been healed. (16-20)

This commitment includes dreaming new images and creating new ways of living that prioritize the healing of the earth. The poem emphasizes the role of collective responsibility in healing the earth. The above lines suggest that when individuals come together and make conscious choices to live in more mindful and sustainable ways, they contribute to the healing process of the planet. This notion encourages a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of the earth and emphasizes the idea that individual actions can have a significant impact on the environment. The poem draws a parallel between the healing of individuals and the healing of the earth. It implies that as people undergo personal healing and transformation, the earth also begins to heal. This connection suggests that the well-being of humanity and the well-being of the planet are intertwined. It encourages individuals to recognize their role in the broader ecological web and to prioritize actions that contribute to the overall health of the earth. Rebirth proves itself at the end of the poem: "and created new ways to live / and heal the earth fully, / as they had been healed." These lines celebrate the resilience and regenerative power of nature. The pandemic becomes a moment of reckoning, urging people to reevaluate their relationship with the earth and prioritize its preservation.

Figure 8. From *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O'Meara, 2020 © Tra Publishing



The illustration of these lines is a harmonious picture of people enjoying themselves in a huge, beautiful garden, people appear relaxing, painting, playing on the lake (fig.8). A more direct ecological intersection reveals itself in the person watering the flowers, the one who is gardening, the boy who is splashing water with his dog, and the girl swimming surrounded by playful fish. This picture is the impact of the new lifestyle practiced throughout the poem while being locked down, and which constitutes steps towards healing. Humans now are harvesting the fruit of making “new choices;” this is even clear when comparing the illustrations of both stages: working versus enjoying. Lynch’s words that “the pandemic has offered opportunities as well as challenges” (2020, p. 5) perfectly fit into the end of the poem; challenging the pandemic has opened an opportunity for a better, healthier life.

Finally, the bond between human and earth is explicitly accentuated, their tied destiny and their common fate are asserted: “[t]he desire to *heal* our relationship with the earth we inhabit must accompany the *healing* of our relationship with ourselves” (Gifford, 1999, p. 165; emphasis added). O’Meara writes, “And heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.” These lines encapsulate the spirit of resilience that pervades pandemic poetry. COVID-19 may have brought suffering, but it has also ignited a collective strength and determination to overcome challenges. The pandemic becomes a “healer” that unites individuals and communities, inspiring acts of kindness, compassion, and solidarity. Throughout the poem, the poet is celebrating “resilience” against COVID-19, a kind of celebration of “people’s ability to make healing tunes out of hardship” to borrow Gifford’s description (2006, p. 139). The poem as well as the illustrations reveal intimate relations both in-between the persons, and between the persons and the environment: plants, animals, birds, insects, and water; this could be read within Zweig and Wolf’s reference (1997) to “the healing power of love” (p. 159). Zweig and

Wolf also clarify that “[h]ealing at the level of soul is a natural, regenerative process, like new skin that grows to close a wound. It is not a cure, but a deep sense of acceptance and a reorientation toward life and toward the gods” (p. 10).

Ecocritics pay special attention to animals, Huggan and Tiffin (2015) use the term “zoocriticism” to highlight the interest in animal representations and elevate towards animal rights (p. 189). The idea of “granting or extending of rights to others of all kinds, may itself be regarded as in essence anthropocentric, since it is only the dominant (human) group that is in the position to do so” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 190). The illustrations of animals throughout the picture book transcend the idea of the intimate human-animal relationship and enhance awareness of animal rights, particularly in the scenes of the rabbit and the deer wandering safely (fig.7), the dancing dog (fig.3), the fish that are thrown in the river to be free, and generally in the essence of happiness prevailing in the pictures of animals throughout the book. In general, the presence of animals urges us to “deconstruct and discuss our assumptions about our relationships with them,” as suggested by Gifford (1999, p. 165).

Conclusion

This article explores the impact of COVID-19 from a positive lens; it is an unconventional celebration of the pandemic from an ecocritical perspective. O’Meara’s picturebook presents an alternative, healthier version of the world through an ecocritical viewpoint that challenges anthropocentrism and enhances human and nonhuman connections. Its eco-poetic themes and philosophical reflections provide a perspective that encourages introspection, personal growth, and a reevaluation of our relationship with the environment. By highlighting the interconnectedness between human healing and the healing of the earth, the poem invites us to consider our role as custodians of the planet and to foster a deeper sense of environmental responsibility. The poet advocates for a renewed relationship with the earth, presenting COVID-19 as a wake-up call to reevaluate our impact on the planet. The message of the poem is complemented and amplified by means of unique illustrations. Through an ecocritical lens, the article highlights how the poem and its accompanying illustrations draw attention to humanity’s interconnectedness with the natural world. The illustrations by Stefano Di Cristofaro and Paul Pereda provide visual clues that complement and expand upon the themes presented in O’Meara’s poem. They depict scenes of nature reclaiming spaces left empty by human activity, emphasizing the resilience and rejuvenation of the environment during the pandemic.

By analyzing the visual and textual aspects of O’Meara’s picturebook, the article uncovers the nuanced ways in which the illustrations deepen the reader’s interpretation and emotional engagement with the text. It sheds light on the broader implications of the pandemic on human society and the environment, encouraging readers to reflect on their relationship with the natural world and consider the potential for positive change even in times of crisis. Through this poem of introspection, resilience, and interconnectedness, O’Meara has captured the transformative power of the pandemic. Her picturebook serves as a catalyst for personal growth, prompting people to confront their fears and embrace new possibilities. The pandemic also sparks a renewed relationship with the environment, urging us to adopt sustainable practices and cherish the earth’s fragile beauty. Additionally, O’Meara’s picturebook celebrates the resilience of individuals and communities, inspiring acts of kindness and unity. It calls for societal transformation, advocating for a more just and

equitable world. It reshapes our relationships to animals, building an intimate bond and proving that we are not superior, dominant creatures. In conclusion, O'Meara's picturebook presents COVID-19 as a potential "healer" that fosters the rebirth of people and the earth.

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