



For what we can hope to afford – what poetry tells us about the perception of climate change

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“Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.”

When he wrote these lines in his 1821 treatise ‘A defence of Poetry’, the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was referring to the ability of poets to act as hierophants for the general population, interpreting unseen forces and making them visible through the power of their imagination and writing.

To many non-specialists, the science behind climate change can appear confusing and alienating, yet in order for global mitigation efforts to be successful it is not just scientists who need to take action, but rather society as a whole. Poets and poetry offer a method of communicating the science of climate change to the wider society using language that they not only better understand, but which also has the potential to stimulate accountability and inspire action.

By conducting a thematic analysis of 65 poems written about climate change by poets from across the world, this study demonstrates how these poets have interpreted the, at times, esoteric principles of climate change, how have they sought to convey their analyses, and how this might be used to more effectively communicate climate change and its effects to non-specialist audiences. Through analysing these poems, we can also determine how these poets have legislated our current response to the negative effects of anthropogenic climate change, highlighting the limitations of current mitigation efforts.