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## REPRESENTATION OF NATURAL DISASTERS IN LITERATURE: FROM MYTHOLOGICAL TALES TO MODERN NARRATIVES

**Abstract.** This study explores the evolution of literary representations of natural disasters, tracing their transformation from mythological to scientific interpretations across various cultures and historical periods. Natural disasters have significantly influenced human cultures, belief systems, and literary traditions, serving as both cautionary tales and reflections of societal values. By examining key literary works – from ancient texts like the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh to contemporary climate fiction – this research highlights pivotal shifts in how societies understand and depict catastrophic events. The analysis identifies themes such as the transition from supernatural explanations to naturalistic interpretations, the increasing emphasis on human agency in environmental crises, and the nuanced portrayals of resilience in the face of disaster. Notable literary figures, including Dante, Shakespeare, and modern authors like John Steinbeck, Kim Stanley Robinson, Julian Barnes and others illustrate these trends, showing how narratives have adapted to reflect contemporary scientific knowledge and environmental awareness. This article also deals with the vital role literature plays in shaping societal perceptions of nature and disaster, revealing deeper cultural and intellectual shifts. By bridging historical literary analysis and current ecological concerns, the study demonstrates how narratives can foster a deeper understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural world and inform responses to ongoing environmental challenges. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of literary discourse in addressing the urgent issues posed by climate change and natural disasters in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Natural disasters; mythology; contemporary literature; human perception; environmental narratives; cultural evolution.

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## РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИЯ ПРИРОДНЫХ КАТАКЛИЗМОВ В ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ: ОТ МИФОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ СКАЗАНИЙ ДО СОВРЕМЕННОСТИ

**Аннотация.** Данное исследование рассматривает эволюцию литературных произведений о природных катастрофах, прослеживая их трансформацию от

мифологических до научных интерпретаций в различных культурах и исторических периодах. Природные катастрофы значительно повлияли на человека и его ценности, системы верований и литературные традиции, служа как предостерегающими рассказами, так и отражением общественных ценностей. Изучая ключевые литературные произведения – от древних текстов, таких как «Эпос о Гильгамеше», до современной климатической фантастики – это исследование подчеркивает ключевые изменения в том, как общества понимают и изображают природные катаклизмы. Анализ выявляет темы, такие как переход от сверхъестественных объяснений к натуралистическим интерпретациям, возрастающее внимание к человеческому фактору в экологических. Знаковые литературные фигуры, включая Данте, Шекспира и современных авторов, таких как Джон Стейнбек, Ким Стэнли Робинсон, Джулиан Барнс и другие иллюстрируют эти тенденции, показывая, как нарративы адаптировались к современным научным знаниям и экологической осведомленности. Это исследование, раскрывая более глубокие культурные и интеллектуальные трансформации, подчеркивает жизненно важную роль литературы в формировании общественного восприятия природы и катастроф. Совокупность исторического и литературного анализа современных экологических проблем, демонстрирует, как нарративы могут способствовать более глубокому пониманию отношения человека к природе и сигнализировать о реакциях на текущие экологические вызовы. В конечном итоге, это исследование подчеркивает важность литературной дискуссии в решении актуальных проблем, связанных с изменением климата и природными катастрофами в 21 веке.

**Ключевые слова:** природные катастрофы; мифология; современная литература; восприятие человека; экологические нарративы; культурная эволюция.

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The way of representation of natural disasters has undergone a profound transformation across time and space in world literature. Throughout the development of human civilization,

catastrophic natural events have played a crucial role in shaping cultures, belief systems, and literary traditions. From the great flood myths found in various ancient civilizations to modern cli-fi novels, the human experience of nature's destructive power has been a constant source of inspiration and reflection. As noted by literary scholar Ursula K. Heise, “The stories we tell about nature and our place in it matter deeply, as they guide our individual and collective behavior toward the environment” (Heise 2018: 5). This study aims to trace the evolution of these narratives, examining how human interaction with and understanding of natural disasters have transformed over time as well as to identify and analyze key literary works that exemplify the shift from mythological to scientific explanations of natural catastrophes.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to illuminate the complex relationship between human societies and the natural world, as well as the role of literature in reflecting and shaping this relationship. As noted by ecocriticism scholar Lawrence Buell (2005), “Environmental crisis is as much a crisis of the imagination as of the environment” (Buell 2005: p. 2). By analyzing the changing representations of natural disasters in literature, we can gain insights into the broader cultural and intellectual shifts that have occurred throughout human history.

This research employs a qualitative approach, combining close literary analysis with historical contextualization. We have selected a range of literary works from different periods and cultures, from ancient mythological narratives to contemporary novels and poetry, chosen for their significant engagement with natural disaster themes and their representation of prevailing worldviews. The analysis focuses on: 1) the portrayal of natural disasters and their causes; 2) the role of divine or supernatural elements in the narrative; 3) The cultural and religious context of the narratives; 4. the literary techniques used to convey the impact of natural disasters; 5) the evolution of scientific understanding as reflected in the texts.

Ancient mythologies from various cultures provide the starting point for our analysis. These early narratives often attributed natural disasters to divine intervention or supernatural forces. For instance, the Mesopotamian “The Epic of Gilgamesh” (circa 2100 BCE), one of the earliest known literary works, features a great flood sent by the gods to punish humanity. Similarly, Greek mythology presents numerous examples of natural disasters as manifestations of divine wrath, such as Zeus' thunderbolts or Poseidon's earthquakes. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) – Roman epic poem includes numerous accounts of natural disasters attributed to divine intervention. For instance, the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha presents a flood myth similar to that of Noah, where Jupiter (Zeus) punishes humanity for its wickedness. These narratives reflect a worldview where natural disasters are inextricably linked to divine will and human morality.

As noted by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, “Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths” (Campbell 1968: 48). These early disaster narratives served not only as explanations for natural phenomena but also as vehicles for conveying moral and social values. The recurrence of flood myths across diverse cultures, from the biblical account of Noah's Ark to the Hindu puranic text of Manu's flood, suggests a universal human need to make sense of overwhelming natural forces.

During the Middle Ages, religious interpretations of natural disasters remained prevalent in European literature. However, this period also saw the emergence of more nuanced perspectives. Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy" (circa 1320), while still rooted in Christian theology, presents a complex view of natural phenomena as part of a divinely ordered universe. The poem's intricate cosmology reflects medieval attempts to reconcile religious beliefs with emerging scientific understanding. As noted by literary scholar John Freccero, "Dante's poem represents the summa of medieval thought, but also points forward to the Renaissance" (Freccero 1986: 12). The Renaissance brought further shifts in perception, with authors like Shakespeare incorporating natural disasters into their works as both literal events and metaphorical devices. Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605) uses the imagery of storms and tempests as both literal events and metaphors for human turmoil. While still invoking supernatural elements, Shakespeare's treatment of natural phenomena begins to reflect the changing worldviews of the Renaissance period, where nature becomes a mirror for human psychology and social dynamics.

The Enlightenment period marked a significant turning point in the literary treatment of natural disasters. Voltaire's "Candide" (1759), written in response to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, challenges the notion of divine providence and presents a more skeptical view of natural catastrophes. This shift towards rationalism and empiricism laid the groundwork for more scientific approaches to understanding natural phenomena.

During the period of Romanticism, the commonly accepted features in literature included the themes of loneliness and isolation, idealization and harmony of nature and human; however, it also explored the tragic consequences of human on nature. For example, Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" (1818) uses natural disasters in its story to discuss human ambition and the problems that arise when science is pursued without ethical guidelines. Another novel of the author – "The Last Man" (1826) – looks in to the future of Europe in the late 21<sup>st</sup> century where the humanity is in the brink of extinction due to the pandemic situation. Shelly concerns the destructive consequences of human activity on nature, environment and entire humanity.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, there have been many disaster stories of different genres that reflect the interrelation of human and the environment. John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) and Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" (2006) focus on how environmental disasters affect people, mixing scientific facts with strong narratives. "The Grapes of Wrath" tells the story of the Dust Bowl, which is a disaster caused by humans, and uses insights from current science. Steinbeck's portrayal reveals increasing concern about how human actions impact nature and how social and natural forces can combine to create disasters. "The Road", set in a world after an unspecified disaster, shows current fears about global environmental issues. McCarthy's simple writing and realistic situation make it a secular disaster story without any supernatural elements.

In "A History of the World in 10½ Chapters", Julian Barnes blends personal and shared memories with important historical events, such as natural disasters. This way of telling the story helps him look at how these events affect people and larger human experiences. One of the most prominent examples in the book is the retelling of the biblical flood. Barnes takes this story, not as a

religious or mythological event but a metaphor for human frailty and history that always falls back into doom. The flood is the link between personal and collective memory, a powerful reflection on how such an event reverberates through culture, ensuing in generations of stories across time and space. The author presents a fictional account of a stowaway on the Titanic in the chapter titled "The Stowaway". This part of the novel explores themes of class, fate, and the unpredictability of life. The Titanic disaster represents human ambition and technological progress, serving as a backdrop for examining personal decisions and the fragility of existence. The stowaway's experience blends with collective memory, illustrating how individual stories can be overshadowed by larger historical tragedies.

Contemporary climate fiction being developed in the context of dystopian literature reflects destructive influence of human activity on nature and environment. Novels like Barbara Kingsolver's "Flight Behavior" (2012) and Kim Stanley Robinson's "New York 2140" (2017) engage directly with the realities of climate change, presenting scientifically informed scenarios alongside deeply human stories. "Flight Behavior" directly engages with climate change, presenting a scientifically informed scenario of ecological disruption. Kingsolver's work exemplifies the emerging genre of climate fiction, which seeks to translate abstract scientific concepts into tangible human narratives. Robinson's novel presents a future New York adapted to massive sea-level rise, blending hard science with speculative fiction. This work represents the cutting edge of disaster narratives, fully embracing scientific projections while exploring their social and psychological implications.

So, the analysis of several literary works shows some principle features in the development of disaster narratives: 1) a gradual shift from supernatural to natural explanations for catastrophic events; 2) an enhancing focus on human action and impact on to natural disasters; 3) the development of detailed and scientific representation of natural phenomena; 4) a persistent theme of human resilience and adaptability in the face of natural disasters; 5) the use of disaster narratives as vehicles for social and environmental critique; 6) a shift from fatalistic acceptance to exploration of human agency and responsibility. These trends reflect broader cultural and intellectual shifts, including the rise of scientific thinking, growing environmental awareness, and changing conceptions of the relationship between humans and nature.

The evolution of disaster narratives in literature mirrors the development of human understanding of the natural world. Environmental historian Donald Worster believes that "The idea of nature has a history in our consciousness, just as the idea of God or the idea of the self does" (Worster 1994: 3). This historical consciousness is clearly reflected in the changing literary representations of natural disasters. The persistence of certain themes across different historical periods suggests some universal aspects of the human experience of natural disasters. The search for meaning in the face of catastrophe, the struggle between fatalism and human agency, and the tension between fear and awe of nature's power are recurring motifs that transcend cultural and temporal boundaries.

At the same time, the increasing scientific accuracy and environmental awareness in contemporary disaster narratives reflect the growing urgency of addressing global environmental challenges. As climate change continues to exacerbate the frequency and severity of natural disasters, literature serves as both a mirror of societal concerns and a tool for imagining possible futures.

Hence, this study has traced the evolution of human interaction with catastrophic events in nature as reflected in literature, from ancient mythologies to contemporary works. The transformation of these narratives reveals a complex interplay between cultural beliefs, scientific understanding, and literary imagination. As we face unprecedented environmental challenges in the 21st century, the role of literature in shaping our understanding of and response to natural disasters becomes increasingly crucial. By examining the historical trajectory of disaster narratives, we gain valuable insights into the ways humans have dealt with nature's power throughout history, and how we might continue to do so in the future. Future research could explore the impact of these literary representations on public perception and policy-making regarding environmental issues. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural traditions could further illuminate the universal and culturally specific aspects of human responses to natural disasters.

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