

## ELEMENTAL VISION: THE SYMBOLISM OF FIRE, WATER, EARTH, AND AIR IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LITERATURE FROM MYTH TO MODERNITY

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The article explores the evolution of elemental symbology (fire, water, land, and air) in English-language literature, tracing their transformation from mythological origins to their nuanced roles in contemporary texts. The article's primary aim is to investigate how these four classical elements have served as potent symbols, evolving in tandem with humanity's shifting relationship to nature, identity, and the metaphysical realm. By examining works from ancient myths to modern novels, the article demonstrates how elemental imagery functions as a universal and adaptable metaphor, reflecting a culture's changing concerns regarding history, existence, and the human condition. Fire, once depicted as a symbol of divine knowledge and destruction in mythological traditions, transforms into revolutionary power in Romantic poetry and a fragile beacon of hope in dystopian fiction. Water, in turn, which is traditionally linked to life and purity in mythological contexts, becomes a symbol of emotional depth, chaos, and psychological exploration in contemporary literature. Similarly, air, once associated with spirituality in early mythologies, evolves in modern texts to represent both freedom and the impermanence of human life. The land, initially a symbol of stability and fertility, takes on ecological and political significance in contemporary works, serving as a repository of trauma, history, and identity. It has been proved that the most significant symbolic stability and replication in the European literature is provided by the Biblical range of symbols and their meanings. Classical philosophic aureole and mythological connotation appear in the age of Renaissance and Romanticism. The contemporary literature stresses both the environmental and invective aspects. This study underscores the enduring significance of the four elements (fire, water, land, and air) in literature, highlighting their dual role as reflections of humanity's changing perceptions of its place in the world and as responses to the evolving understanding of nature, existence, and the cosmos. Through these elemental symbols, literature engages with fundamental questions of life, meaning, and the natural world.

## ЕЛЕМЕНТАЛЬНЕ БАЧЕННЯ: СИМВОЛІЗМ ВОГНЮ, ВОДИ, ЗЕМЛІ ТА ПОВІТРЯ В АНГЛОМОВНІЙ ЛІТЕРАТУРІ ВІД МІФУ ДО СУЧАСНОСТІ

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### Ключові слова:

елементальний символізм, міфологія, культурна еволюція, історичний контекст, ідентичність.

Стаття досліджує еволюцію елементної символіки (вогню, води, землі та повітря) в англomовній літературі, відстежуючи їх трансформацію від міфологічних витоків до їх нюансованих ролей у сучасних текстах. Основна мета статті – дослідити, як ці чотири класичні елементи служили потужними символами, еволюціонуючи разом зі змінами людських ставлень до природи, ідентичності та метафізичної сфери. Аналізуючи твори від прадавніх міфів до сучасних романів, стаття демонструє, як елементна образність функціонує у якості універсального і адаптованого метафоричного інструменту, що відображає змінювані культурні занепокоєння з приводу історії, існування та людського стану. Вогонь, спочатку зображений як символ божественного знання та руйнування в міфологічних традиціях, перетворюється на революційну силу в романтичній поезії та крихкий маяк надії в дистопічній прозі. Вода, яка традиційно асоціюється з життям і чистотою в міфологічних контекстах, стає символом емоційної глибини, хаосу та психологічних досліджень у сучасній літературі. Повітря, яке колись ототожнювалось із духовністю в ранніх міфологіях, в сучасних текстах еволюціонує, уособлюючи як свободу, так і непостійність людського життя. Земля, спочатку символ стабільності та родючості, набуває екологічного та політичного значення в сучасних творах, слугуючи сховищем травм, історії та ідентичності. Доведено, що найбільшу символічну стабільність і реплікацію в європейській літературі забезпечує біблійний діапазон символів і їх спектр значень. Класичний філософський ореол та міфологічне значення з'являються в епоху Відродження та Романтизму. Сучасна література наголошує як на екологічних, так і на інвективних аспектах. Дослідження підкреслює невмирущу значущість чотирьох елементів (вогонь, вода, земля і повітря) в літературі, виокремлюючи їх подвійне значення як відображення змінюваних уявлень людства про своє місце у світі та як відповідь на еволюцію розуміння природи, існування та космосу. Через ці елементи символізм література торкається фундаментальних питань життя, сенсу і природного світу.

**Introduction.** In literature, the depiction of air, water, earth, and fire as four classical elements reflects their profound philosophical and cultural significance as fundamental forces shaping the physical world and human existence. Rooted in ancient traditions, these elements were seen as the building blocks of life, offering frameworks for comprehension of nature, balance, and transformation across diverse cultures, from Greek philosophy to Hindu cosmology and Chinese metaphysics. Philosophers like Empedocles, Plato, and Aristotle imbued the elements with symbolic meaning, linking them to cosmic harmony, human psychology, and metaphysical inquiry. Literature has long drawn upon these rich associations, using the elements to explore themes of creation, destruction, and the interplay between the natural and spiritual worlds.

The history of literary research focused on elemental symbolism embraces the instances of spot analysis of some central separate texts, marking a particular literary epoch. In *Beowulf*, the elements, especially the earth, are examined as imaginative constructs and tangible realities, illuminating the medieval understanding of the natural world, and were studied by Fred C. Robinson in *The Tomb of Beowulf: And Other Essays on Old English* (1993) and John M. Hill in *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (1995). The connection between literature and myth is partially studied in the article “*The Curious Symbolism of Fire in Literature and Myth*” (2021) by Dr. Oliver Tearle, in which the author analyses Shakespearean sonnets, poetry by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89), a short poem “*Fire and Ice*” by Robert Frost, the third section of

*The Waste Land* (1922) by T.S. Eliot and his *Four Quartets*, as well as mentions *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin. The symbolism of fire in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* appears in a number of essays. In her scholarly work "*The Natural Element Fire: Its Symbolism and Function in Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre'*" (2004) Corinna Roth provides the multifaceted symbolism of fire in "*Jane Eyre*," exploring its representation of passion, destruction, and renewal, and how it reflects the protagonist's inner state.

**The objective of the research.** The current study explores the evolving symbolic representation of the four classical elements (fire, water, earth, and air) from mythological origins to modern works in English-language literature. Tracing their historical continuities investigates how these elements have been interpreted across literary periods, transitioning from mythic and religious associations to philosophical and aesthetic roles. It analyzes their multifaceted symbolism in key texts, reflecting cultural, spiritual, and philosophical ideologies while examining their narrative and thematic functions in shaping character, setting, and plot. Finally, the study highlights the

transformation of elemental imagery in modern literature, demonstrating how contemporary writers reinterpret ancient symbols to address pressing concerns such as identity, ecology, and humanity's relationship with nature, ultimately underscoring the enduring relevance of these elemental archetypes in expressing humanity's engagement with the natural and meta-physical world.

**Material and Methods.** The research is based on the central English-language literary texts from mythology to the contemporary period, comprising elemental imagery and symbolism as the meaningful structures of the texts. The multi-methodological approach includes the following dominant methods of literary analysis: intertextual analysis (to connect various texts across time periods and genres and to demonstrate how different authors reinterpret elemental symbols in dialogue with past works), comparative (to retrace the symbolical evolution diachronically), structural (to study structural archetypes).

**Results and Discussion.** In mythology, fire, water, earth, and air serve as conduits between humans and nature and are interpreted as certain bricks in the world's architectonics. The original symbolic

Table 1

The Symbolic Interpretation of Elemental Images in the Old Texts

№	ELEMENT	RANGE OF MEANING	TYPE OF THE TEXT/EVENT DEPICTED	TEXT TITLE
1	2	3	4	5
1	FIRE	Embodies purification and life force.	Hindu mythology: Agni, the fire god.	<i>Rigveda</i> (is believed to have been composed between 1500 BCE and 1200 BCE, during the early Vedic period in ancient India).
		1) God's presence and power.	-Burning Bush ( <i>Exodus 3:2-4</i> ): God reveals Himself to Moses through a bush that burns but is not consumed, representing His eternal and self-sustaining nature; -Pillar of Fire ( <i>Exodus 13:21</i> ): God leads the Israelites through the desert as a pillar of fire by night, signifying guidance and protection; -Mount Sinai ( <i>Exodus 19:18</i> ): The mountain is enveloped in fire when God descends upon it, highlighting His majesty and power.	<i>The Bible (Old Testament)</i> (Hebrew Bible) is traditionally attributed to Moses, around 1400–1200 BCE; <i>New Testament</i> , Written between 50 CE and 100 CE)
		2) Judgment and wrath against sin and rebellion.	-Sodom and Gomorrah ( <i>Genesis 19:24</i> ): God destroys the cities with fire and brimstone as a punishment for their wickedness; -Lake of Fire ( <i>Revelation 20:14-15</i> ): In the New Testament, fire symbolizes eternal judgment, as the wicked are cast into the lake of fire;	

Continuation table 1

1	2	3	4	5
		3) Purification and holiness.	-Unquenchable Fire ( <i>Matthew 3:12</i> ): John the Baptist describes fire as a divine separation and judgment tool. -Refiner's Fire ( <i>Malachi 3:2-3</i> ): God's judgment purifies like a refiner's fire, removing impurities and restoring righteousness; -Isaiah's Vision ( <i>Isaiah 6:6-7</i> ): A burning coal touches Isaiah's lips, symbolizing the purification of his sins; -( <i>Peter 1:7</i> ): Faith is compared to gold refined by fire, emphasizing how trials strengthen spiritual integrity.	
		4) The Holy Spirit.  5) Zeal and passion.  6) Light and revelation.	-Fire represents the Holy Spirit's transformative power and presence: <i>Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4)</i> : The Holy Spirit descends upon the apostles as tongues of fire, empowering them to speak different languages and spread the Gospel. -Fire is a symbol of spiritual fervor and devotion to God: ( <i>Jeremiah 20:9</i> ): The prophet Jeremiah describes God's word as a "fire shut up in [his] bones," illustrating the irresistible force of divine calling; -( <i>Luke 12:49</i> ): Jesus says He came to "bring fire on the earth," symbolizing the transformative power of His ministry. -Symbolizes divine revelation and enlightenment ( <i>Psalms 119:105</i> ): God's word is described as "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path;" -( <i>Exodus 25:37</i> ): The lampstand in the tabernacle symbolizes God's illuminating presence among His people.	
		Symbolizes divine knowledge and human ingenuity.	Greek mythology: Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods	<i>Hesiod's Theogony</i> (around the 8th to 7th century BCE)
		Symbolizes both devastation and the purging of human greed; the funeral pyres in the poem also depict fire's role in the transition between earthly and spiritual realms, underlining its transformative essence.	Anglo-Saxon mythology: the dragon's fiery wrath.	<i>Beowulf</i> (8th–10th century).
2	WATER	Universally associated with life and renewal, also carries destructive connotations.	In the Biblical flood narrative, water represents both divine wrath and a chance for renewal.	( <i>Genesis</i> ).
		Water as a carrier of mystical properties, as sacred wells and rivers were believed to be conduits to the divine.	On the British Isles, Celtic mythology imbues water with mystical properties, as sacred wells and rivers were believed to be conduits to the divine	( <i>The Mabinogion</i> , c. 12th–13th century).

Continuation table 1

1	2	3	4	5
		Water's perilous nature represents chaos and the unknown.	Anglo-Saxon literature, descriptions of Grendel's mother's underwater lair.	<i>Beowulf</i> (was composed sometime between 700 and 1000 CE).
		Representing the allure and danger of the watery depths. Mythical water beings embody the duality of water – its beauty and power to enchant, attract, and ultimately destroy.	Folklore: Water sprites, mermaids, and Sirens.	<i>The Mermaid of Zennor</i> (a Cornish Legend); <i>The Mermaid's Rock</i> (Guernsey folklore); <i>British Sailor Lore</i> .
3	EARTH	<p>1) The promised land – God's blessing &amp; covenant.</p> <p>2) Land as a symbol of life &amp; human existence.</p> <p>3) Land as a sign of stability &amp; inheritance.</p> <p>4) Cursed land – consequence of sin.</p> <p>5) The new Earth – restoration &amp; redemption.</p>	<p>-<i>Genesis 12:1-3</i>: God promises Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as a sign of His covenant;</p> <p>-<i>Deuteronomy 8:7-9</i>: The Promised Land is described as a place of abundance, blessing, and God's faithfulness.</p> <p>-<i>Genesis 2:7</i> (Earth (dust) symbolizes human mortality and dependence on God): "<i>Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground...</i>";</p> <p>-<i>Ecclesiastes 3:20</i> (Earth reminds humans of their fragile, temporary nature): "<i>All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.</i>"</p> <p>-<i>Psalms 37:29</i> (Land symbolizes security, divine reward, and eternal inheritance): "<i>The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.</i>";</p> <p>-<i>Matthew 5:5</i> (Jesus reaffirms land as a metaphor for spiritual and eternal blessings): "<i>Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.</i>"</p> <p>-<i>Genesis 3:17-19</i> (Land can symbolize brokenness, struggle, and the consequences of disobedience; after Adam's sin, the ground is cursed): "<i>Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat from it...</i>";</p> <p>-<i>Jeremiah 23:10</i> (Earth can reflect humanity's moral and spiritual condition): "<i>The land mourns because of the curse...</i>"</p> <p>-<i>Isaiah 65:17</i> (Land symbolizes God's ultimate restoration plan and eternal dwelling with His people): "<i>Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth...</i>";</p> <p>-<i>Revelation 21:1</i>: "<i>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...</i>"</p>	<i>The Bible</i>
		Often symbolizes stability and fertility, embodying the life-sustaining foundation of existence.	In world mythology, especially Greek mythology, Gaia personifies the earth as a nurturing, generative force.	( <i>Hesiod's Theogony</i> , composed around the 8th to 7th century BCE).

Continuation table 1

1	2	3	4	5
		Connects all realms, symbolizing the interconnectedness of life.	In Norse mythology, Yggdrasil = the World Tree.	( <i>Poetic Edda</i> (also called the Elder Edda), (9 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup> centuries) and <i>Prose Edda</i> (also known as the <i>Younger Edda</i> (or Snorri's Edda), (13th century).
		Reflects the earth's duality as both a provider and a grave. Land becomes a repository of memory and wealth and a symbol of mortality.	Anglo-Saxon literature, the burial mounds of <i>Beowulf</i> .	<i>Beowulf</i> .
4	AIR	The element of movement, spirit, and thought, appears as a medium of divine communication. Articulates profound truths about existence, mortality, and humanity's connection to the cosmos.	Across cultures.	Mythology, folklore.
		Represents life force.	In Hinduism, Vayu is the wind god.	<i>Rigveda</i> .
		<p>1) Air as the breath of life.</p> <p>2) Wind as a symbol of the holy spirit.</p> <p>3) Air as a representation of God's power.</p> <p>4) Air as a metaphor for vanity or transience.</p> <p>5) Air and Satan's dominion.</p>	<p>- <i>Genesis 2:7</i> (Air (breath) symbolizes life given by God): "<i>Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.</i>"</p> <p>- <i>John 3:8</i> (Wind represents the mysterious and sovereign work of the Holy Spirit): "<i>The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.</i>"</p> <p>- <i>Job 37:9-10</i> (Wind and air symbolize God's control over nature): "<i>The storm comes out from its chamber, and the cold from the driving winds. The breath of God produces ice, and the broad waters become frozen.</i>"</p> <p>- <i>Ecclesiastes 1:14</i> (Wind represents fleeting, empty pursuits apart from God): "<i>I have seen all things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.</i>"</p> <p>- <i>Ephesians 2:2</i> (Air can symbolize the unseen spiritual realm where both good and evil operate): Satan is called "<i>the prince of the power of the air</i>," referring to his influence over worldly forces.</p>	<i>The Bible</i>

Continuation table 1

1	2	3	4	5
		Embodies the gentleness of spring winds; also as a powerful wind; divine interventions.	Greco-Roman traditions, Zephyrus.	Homer's <i>Iliad</i> , (~8th century BCE); Hesiod's <i>Theogony</i> (~700 BCE); Pindar's poetry (~5th century BCE); Ovid's <i>Metamorphoses</i> (~8 CE); Virgil's <i>Aeneid</i> (~29–19 BCE).
		Air and wind as metaphors for spiritual journeys and the transient nature of life.	On the British Isles, Anglo-Saxon poetry.	" <i>The Seafarer</i> " (c. 10th century).

spectrum of the elements can be represented in the table below and reflects the type of faith (pagan/Christian/other central word religion) or the mode of philosophical thinking.

As can be seen from the table above, the Biblical symbols find their implication and development in the Anglo-Saxon texts, such as *Beowulf*, which is a fusion of both paganism and Christianity, and can be partially echoed in the Old North mythology with a branched association. Such archetypes established a symbolic language that literature has continually revisited, reshaped, and expanded upon. Later, Biblical coding will be repeated in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1321) and reappear within the text *Piers Plowman* by William Langland (p. 1370–1386), where fire represents spiritual refinement and a metaphor for moral transformation.

Christian and classical traditions are reinforced during the Renaissance, with William Shakespeare shaping the canon and giving the elements recognizable and clear for contemporary person connotations. However, we will omit his deeply intertextual works since Dr. Oliver Tearle has already addressed them (Tearle, 2021). Much more interesting is the spectrum suggested by John Milton in his *Paradise Lost* (1667), where the four classical elements (fire, water, earth, and air) play pivotal symbolic and narrative roles, reflecting the poem's theological and cosmological framework. Milton sees the Heaven and the Earth as "*risen out of Chaos*" (Milton, 1900: 2). The "*Spirit*" [God] has "*mighty wings outspread, // Dove-like, sat'st brooding on the vast abyss*" (Milton, 1900: 2). Thus, the air equals the holy spirit. The *Heaven* and *abyss* (air) here become pregnant with the world (the birth of the Earth) and the battleground with "*The infernal Serpent*" and the "*rebel Angels*" (Milton, 1900: 2-3). Fire, on the other hand, is a dual symbol. It accompanies the fall of Satan: "*With floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire, // He soon discerns*" (Milton, 1900: 4). ; on the other, it illuminates those on the Creator's side: "*who, in the*

*happy realms of light, // Clothed with transcendent brightness, didst outshine // Myriads, though bright!*" (Milton, 1900: 5). John Milton compares Satan to the beast: "*If though beast he*" (Milton, 1900: 4), and this fiery beastly image will reappear within the tissue of William Blake's text in his *Songs of Experience* (1974): "*Tyger Tyger, burning bright // In the forests of the night; // What immortal hand or eye, // Could frame thy fearful symmetry? // <...> What the hammer? what the chain, // In what furnace was thy brain?*" (Blake, 2007: 24). Besides, Blake's fire is linked to divine creation, and its duality. The idea of a divine blacksmith crafting the tiger also parallels Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire and metalworking, who created powerful and intricate beings, such as Pandora or the automatons. While in Milton's text, fire equals Hell: "*His business be, // Here in the heart of hell to work in fire*" (Milton, 1900: 6); the Earth is interpreted in connection to Eden, "*pleasant soil*", "*the fertile ground*", "*blooming*", "*the Tree of Knowledge*" (Milton, 1900: 85). At this stage, it semantically coincides with Norse mythology, and Yggdrasil = the World Tree (The Younger Edda, 1880; The Older Edda, 1920). Milton's earth is "*self-balanced*" (Milton, 1900: 170). Calm is the water in the days of creation, yet untouched: "*on the watery calm // His brooding wings the Spirit of God outspread*" ((Milton, 1900: 170).

Meanwhile, air and the other elements gain similar characteristics, probably because all of them were burned out of Spirit, out of Abyss: "*They viewed the vast immeasurable Abyss, // Outrageous as a sea, dark, wasteful, wild, // Up from the bottom turned by furious winds // And surging waves, as mountains, to assault // Heaven's height*" (Milton, 1900: 169). Thus, Milton's air is as wild and powerful as nature itself.

At some point, like the other elements before, the water acquires animalistic features: "*The river-horse and sealy crocodile*" (Milton, 1900: 177). Milton often personifies natural elements to explore

deeper metaphysical and moral themes. By giving water predatory features, the author associates the natural world with the unpredictability and violence that animals represent. The crocodile symbolizes danger and predation, while the river horse invokes a more domesticated, yet still powerful, creature of the water. This animal imagery reflects how water, in its primal form, is not just a passive element but an active, sometimes hostile, force in *Paradise Lost*. Thus, Milton's use of the four elements underscores his cosmological vision and deepens *Paradise Lost*'s moral and theological themes. Each element reflects the tension between chaos and order, sin and redemption, making them integral to the poem's exploration of divine justice and human frailty.

The Victorian era lost the Romantic ties with mythology and the past, as well as the Classical adoration of Hellenistic philosophical symbolism. Fire, water, earth, and air became what they really are for society: the warmth and coziness of home, freshness and cleanliness, richness and possession (landlords), and finally, freedom.

Modern literature, in turn, often reinterprets ancient symbols through existential, psychological, and ecological lenses. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* evokes elemental decay and renewal to articulate the fragmentation of the modern world. At the same time, contemporary writers grapple with the ecological implications of humanity's relationship to earth, air, fire, and water. These texts reflect the ongoing dialogue between literature and the philosophical or spiritual questions these elemental forces pose. In war literature, the classical elements of fire, water, earth, and air are often used to underscore conflict's chaos, destruction, and existential weight. These elements become symbols of both the physical devastation of war and the emotional and spiritual toll on those involved. Fire frequently symbolizes the devastating force of modern warfare. Water in war literature often serves as a contrasting element, symbolizing both the hope for renewal and the inescapable suffering of soldiers. In Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the protagonist observes a river after the battle: "*The river, reflecting the clear sky, was of a radiant blue. It was a mirror of peace*" (Crane, 2019: 134). This brief moment of tranquility underscores the contrast between the natural world's serenity and the chaos of human conflict. As both a battlefield and a grave, the earth plays a crucial role in war literature. Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1917) depicts soldiers falling to the ground, seeking shelter from gas attacks: "*The blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues*" (Owen). The trenches, carved into the earth, become both protection and a grim reminder of mortality. Air in war literature often symbolizes modern warfare's

invisible yet omnipresent threats, such as gas attacks. In Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*, the imagery of poisoned air is particularly striking: "*Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling*" (Owen). The air becomes a deadly weapon, highlighting the new and horrifying dimensions of technological warfare. In war literature, fire, water, earth, and air are not mere natural elements but profound metaphors for conflict's physical and psychological dimensions.

In modern dystopian fiction, fire frequently symbolizes destruction caused by humanity's hubris or industrial overreach. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) vividly portrays fire as a destructive force through the burning of books, symbolizing the eradication of knowledge: "*It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed*" (Bradbury, 1953: 1). However, fire also holds potential for renewal, as the phoenix metaphor at the novel's conclusion suggests the possibility of rebirth through destruction.

Water in environmental fiction often reflects scarcity and the vital connection between humanity and the planet. In Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), water embodies both life and vulnerability in a world ravaged by bioengineering and climate change. The protagonist, Snowman, observes the altered environment: "*The sea is calm, smooth as a slab of grey slate. Once it was teeming with fish, glittering with shoals of silver, but now it looks dead*" (Atwood, 2005: 41). This desolation of water highlights ecological degradation and the consequences of human interference in natural cycles.

Earth serves as both the stage for human exploitation and the source of resistance. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) envisions a future where genetically modified crops dominate and natural ecosystems are nearly extinct. The struggle for control over fertile land and its diminishing resources underscores the importance of the earth as a contested and precious element: "*The Earth did not complain as it was stripped bare, as rivers were poisoned and forests fell to machetes*" (Bacigalupi, 2009: 78). In *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, the symbolism of land is deeply intertwined with themes of history, memory, trauma, and identity. The land is not just a physical space but a repository of collective and individual experiences shaped by enslavement, survival, and resilience. The plantation Sweet Home symbolizes land as a site of exploitation and violence. Despite its pastoral name, Sweet Home is steeped in cruelty, its beauty masking the dehumanizing realities of slavery. Sethe reflects on the painful duality of this land, recalling how it was a place where "[n]obody ran off with anything," but also where her humanity was constantly diminished (Morrison, 2020: 24). The land's complicity is evident in its role as the setting for brutality and trauma, a silent witness to the atrocities



that left indelible scars on those enslaved there. Conversely, the land surrounding *124 Bluestone Road* embodies a paradoxical duality. For Sethe, it initially offers the promise of freedom and a space to rebuild her life, but the legacy of slavery also haunts it. The house, described as “*spiteful*” (Morrison, 2020: 3), is a site of unresolved trauma, with the ghost of Beloved embodying the inescapable weight of the past. The land itself becomes a battleground for memory and forgetting as Sethe struggles to confront and reconcile the horrors that have shaped her identity. Morrison also explores the land as a space of healing and spiritual connection through Baby Suggs’s sermons in the Clearing. This natural space in the woods serves as a sanctuary for the Black community, where they gather to reclaim their humanity. Baby Suggs exhorts her audience to “*love your heart*,” urging them to find strength and self-worth in a world that seeks to devalue them (Morrison, 2020: 103). Here, the earth symbolizes renewal and communal resilience, offering a rare reprieve from their trauma. Ultimately, in *Beloved*, land is a complex and multifaceted symbol, representing both the scars of history and the possibility of healing. From Sweet Home to *124 Bluestone Road* and *the Clearing*, Morrison underscores the idea that physical spaces carry the legacies of those who inhabit them, bearing witness to both suffering and survival. As Sethe confronts the ghosts of her past, the land becomes a canvas on which the interwoven themes of trauma, memory, and identity are inscribed, encapsulating the enduring impact of slavery and the potential for redemption.

Air often represents the most immediate and visceral consequence of environmental collapse, tied to pollution and suffocation in dystopian worlds. In Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), the ash-choked air reflects a post-apocalyptic reality where survival depends on escaping suffocation: “*The air was heavy with ash, gray snow falling through the silence*” (McCarthy, 2009: 5). The polluted air becomes a physical manifestation of the world’s decay, symbolizing both ecological collapse and the erasure of hope. In contemporary environmental fiction, authors often reframe the elements as a call to action, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (2018) uses metaphorical elements to explore ecological activism. Trees, rooted in the earth yet reaching toward the air, serve as a central motif: “*Air moves, leaves whisper, roots reach deep into the soil, and the world listens*” (Powers, 2019: 172).

Therefore, in modern and contemporary dystopian and environmental fiction, fire, water, earth, and air reflect humanity’s evolving relationship with the natural world. Authors like Bradbury, Atwood, McCarthy, and Powers use these elements to critique environmental degradation and propose paths for

renewal. These works underscore the urgency of reconciling human progress with ecological preservation, inviting readers to rethink their place within the elemental fabric of life.

**Conclusions.** Thus, the symbology of the four classical elements (fire, water, air, and land) has evolved from their mythological origins as metaphysical archetypes to their nuanced representations in contemporary English literature, serving as flexible metaphors for humanity’s relationship with nature, divinity, and the self. Fire symbolizes destruction and renewal, from the divine knowledge of Prometheus to the existential hope in McCarthy’s *The Road*. Water embodies life, purity, and transformation, oscillating between lifeblood and chaos in Woolf’s *The Waves* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Air represents the spiritual and transcendent, evoking freedom and impermanence. Land, rooted in stability and fertility, now reflects history, trauma, and ecological awareness in works like Morrison’s *Beloved* and Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Together, these elements transcend their classical roots, addressing modern anxieties about identity, survival, and environmental fragility, illustrating their enduring and adaptable symbolic power in human culture.

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