



# Climate Narrative in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*

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**Abstract**— *The impacts of climate change are negative and appear in the form of extreme weather events, disrupted ecosystems, and socio-economic challenges, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Literature such as Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior provides an indispensable lens for viewing these profound environmental and societal impacts. This paper attempts to explicate the extreme polarisation of the environment and anthropogenic catastrophe positioned in climate change in 21st-century literature, as particularly illustrated in Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior. Dellarobia Turnbow — provides a nuanced glimpse into the complex effects of climate change on our ecosystems and rural communities. The unusual migration of monarch butterflies to Tennessee is a powerful symbol of the broader disruptions to the environment wrought by global warming. Kingsolver's writings capture the feeling of ecological disarray and the need for change. This analysis will examine how the environmental tragedy is leveraged to elaborate on the socio-economic and cultural challenges that communities grapple with in confronting these environmental transformations and in following through with climate change mitigation. The scholarship will examine the conflation of scientific language with a vocabulary of personal transformation and the language of community through a critical lens, isolating how the novel not only furthers the genre of environmental literature but also calls for increased ecological consciousness. In addition, the article will explore the function of storytelling as a tool for creating public awareness and interest in climatic issues, Arguing that novel literature is an indispensable medium for confronting the complexities of global climate change. Through a close reading of Kingsolver's published work, I will argue that literature is both a mirror of our contemporary environmental crises and an illusion of a sustainable future.*



**Keywords**— *Climate Change, Monarch Butterflies, Ecosystem Disruption, Ecological Consciousness, Environmental Sustainability*

The climate crisis — and the storms, changing ecosystems, and altered human lives that go with it — has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges of our time. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* is a sobering story of the ecological and social consequences of climate change, particularly for marginalized rural populations. Set in the Appalachian region of Tennessee, the narrative centres on Dellarobia Turnbow, a young woman whose life is transformed by the sudden appearance of millions of monarch butterflies on her family farm. The misguided

butterflies, part of a species that strays outside its typical migration route as climate conditions shift, are a symptom of the widespread environmental disarray caused by global warming.

Kingsolver's writing doesn't abstract climate change into an expansive scientific threat, but personalises it: a force with immediate and tangible consequences in the lives of everyday people, especially in rural parts of the country, where inhabitants are often least equipped to deal with it. With Dellarobia's journey and her community's

collective experience, the story explicates how global environmental changes touch down into economic and cultural realities. Dellarobia's affair with Ovid Byron, a scientist studying butterflies, reflects the indispensable role of science in understanding and addressing the complexities of climate change. But as the story shows, this knowledge is often at odds with socio-economic realities that prioritize short-term survival over long-term ecological viability.

In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver takes on humanity's abandonment of nature, while preaching a radical understanding of how ecosystems are connected and the consequences of manmade climate change. The erratic migration of monarch butterflies becomes a vivid metaphor for ecological imbalance, and Donat's descents into her miners' homes show the ways that environmental and socio-economic vulnerability converge. Through Dellarobia's character development and the story of the butterflies in the novel, Kingsolver demonstrates the need for environmental conservation (Batinovich 14). Through the application of ecocritical theory and the work of scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Timothy Clark, and Lawrence Buell, this analysis of the novel considers its representation of climate awareness, its representation of ongoing scientific discussion, and its exploration of the socio-economic barriers that stifle environmental activism.

In the novel, a major sign of climate change is the arrival of monarch butterflies in Dellarobia's Appalachian community. Normally these butterflies migrate to Mexico for the winter, but a global warming-induced ecological disruption prevents them from leaving Tennessee. This phenomenon is a microcosm of the climate disaster. Environmental changes throw the delicate balance of nature out of whack, forcing species like the monarch butterfly to adapt, often in ways that are surprising and dangerous. That's a sign of the sometimes haphazard impact of climate change on ecosystems around the world.

By using this unusual migration as a metaphor for ecological displacement, Barbara Kingsolver points to the actual impacts of climate change in a way that is relatable to the reader. Timothy Clark argues in his *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015) that one of the major problems of tackling climate change is its "hyperobject" quality—things that are too big and complicated for people to wholly understand. Kingsolver suggests this impossibility by localizing climate change in Feathertown, inviting readers to see how seismic upheaval means something to the landscapes that it wakes up in.

Kingsolver's painstaking depiction of butterflies also underscores the fragility of ecosystems. Monarch butterflies rely on specific migratory patterns to survive,

and their unusual appearance in Tennessee is a sign of the broader unpredictability brought about by climate change. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell asserts that environmental writing often seeks to make visible what usually remains maddeningly unclear or unseeable. Focusing on one species affected by climate change, Kingsolver provides a concrete example of the more abstract notion of global warming, making its impacts more relatable to readers.

Ovid Byron, the scientist who arrives to inspect the butterflies, becomes a key character through whom the novel articulates its condemnation of human involvement in and exacerbation of climate change. The novel drew on real-world scientific debate about climate change for the research, in particular on how human activities affect the planet's ecosystems. This foible reflects Byron's frustration with the local community's lack of understanding about the situation at hand, which mirrors the broader struggle climate scientists face in communicating the common need for public action on climate. Earlier in *Hyperobjects* (2013), Timothy Morton explains that climate change is not only that which is unfolding over longer periods than is typically understood but also that which has been expanding to very large dimensions, making it more difficult for most people to perceive exactly what is happening and what immediate effect it is having.

One of the most interesting parts of *Flight Behavior* is the analysis of the tension that exists between economic survival and environmental protection. Where the butterflies land, Dellarobia's family sees a possible gold mine. The family's awful financial state leads them to explore the idea of chopping down the forest to sell for cash, despite the irrevocable harm this would cause to the ecosystem. In impoverished communities, environmental degradation is considered a grim but necessary price of economic existence. Then there's this debate, which really highlights the problems that these communities face if they're to survive economically.

Kingsolver's rendering of this dilemma is consistent with this notion of environmental justice, a framework explored by Rob Nixon in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon claims that environmental degradation disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. Small towns like Ocracoke are often torn between short-term economic gain and long-term environmental sustainability. The struggles of the Turnbows in *Flight Behavior* are particularly representative of this dynamic. This presents a dilemma for those involved: they want to keep the funds flowing, but they also need to protect the habitat for the butterfly colony. Dellarobia's psychological

struggle to protect her family's choice to log the forest serves as a microcosm of the systemic challenge society faces in harmonizing economic development with environmental stewardship.

Cheryll Glotfelty's seminal text in the field of ecocriticism, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), highlights the importance of understanding how socio-economic factors inform ecological subjectivity in her assertion about the value of knowing how socio-economic factors inform socio-natural relationships. Kingsolver proves that an entire community's fortunes translate directly to specific perspectives on the preservation of the environment, and the author uses quite literally the direst of economic conditions of Feathertown to exemplify this effect. It scrutinizes the idea that environmental protection is an elitist luxury available to wealthy, educated people, while also emphasizing the awful long-term cost of the privilege of prioritizing short-term financial gain over ecological viability.

*Flight Behavior* is built around anthropocentrism, the attitude that human interests trump the interests of all other species. The novel subverts this way of thinking by showing the number of human-imposed wreckage in the world, with the monarch butterflies representing the wounds inflicted to humanity, the stemming of mobile freedom (and what is more a metaphor for life) by the act of anthropogenic climate change. Dellarobia's increasing sensitivity to interdependence in the web of human and natural systems disrupts her community's anthropocentrism as she discovers the fate of the butterflies is directly connected to the ecosystem's health.

Ursula Heise's idea of "eco-cosmopolitanism," elaborated in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), is especially relevant to the way that Kingsolver depicts the interdependence of ecosystems. As Heise argues, environmental literature tends to stress the global character of ecological catastrophes, demonstrating how specific environmental challenges are embedded in a larger, interdependent system. In *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver shows this interconnection through the disrupted migration of the butterflies, which she makes clear is not just a local anomaly but part of a global phenomenon of ecological disruption driven by climate change. Dellarobia's recognition that the butterflies' fates hinge on the state of the planet resonates with this eco-cosmopolitan view, as she realizes that her community's behaviour is part of a vast network of interconnected life.

Kingsolver's activism is part and parcel of her depiction of climate change as a crisis that requires understanding and personal participation. Through Dellarobia's journey from disillusionment to

environmental activism, Kingsolver emphasizes the power of individual agency in facing the challenges of climate change. Dellarobia's evolution parallels that of many people who don't start out knowing a lot about the scientific and ecological ramifications of climate change, and who, from education and personal experience, become more and more dedicated to environmentally conscientious action. This transformation is one of the most powerful elements of the novel — it shows how those who may seem apathetic or doubtful about climate change can become champions for the planet when presented with clear proof and the emotional impact of losing an ecosystem.

Kingsolver's novel participates in what Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism* (2012), calls the function of environmental literature: to increase ecological awareness and incite action. Kingsolver uses Ovid Byron to make the case that scientists should be immersed into public space around climate change. But as Dellarobia's experience shows, scientific understanding alone is insufficient to drive action; there must also be some emotional and ethical bonds to the environment. Kingsolver plays up storytelling as an essential means of bridging this gap by presenting Dellarobia's personal story as a way of bringing readers into the wider framework of the ecological crisis.

The novel's focus on storytelling as a means of environmental advocacy echoes Kate Rigby's argument (2004) in *Topographies of the Sacred*, which proposes that literature is critical in the forces that shape public attitudes towards nature and environmental preservation. By employing a rural, working-class female protagonist in Dellarobia, Kingsolver can speak to the socio-economic fractures that it's all too easy to assume fuels apathy over environmental destruction, but also show how people from these socio-economic backgrounds can do, and already are, being agents of change. By placing Dellarobia's personal transformation at the story's center, Kingsolver implies that effective environmentalism starts with personal awareness and responsibility, but also needs to involve collective action.

*Flight Behavior* ranks as one of the most important contributions to environmental literature in that it exemplifies the power of story in affecting the way the public perceives climate problems. As a novel, *Flight Behavior* offers a relatively accessible on-ramp into some of the more academic discussions surrounding climate change, while also exploring the emotional and social context for the crisis. Kingsolver's story illustrates the potential for stories to enact the urgency of safeguarding life on Earth, as ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell and Ursula Heise note, when they observe that literature is

better able to engage readers' emotional and intellectual faculties regarding our place in the world and our role in it.

By following Dellarobia's journey, Kingsolver brings the personal aspect of climate science to the forefront of her readers' minds, demonstrating the ways in which human narratives can offer immediacy to abstract concepts. The monarch butterflies are both a literal and figurative metaphor for the ecological havoc wreaked by climate change, but it is Dellarobia's emotional reaction to their plight that underlines the urgency of the crisis. Her growing alarm over the butterflies reflects a broader awareness she hopes to wake in her readers: that the environment's well-being is directly tied to human health.

In framing *Flight Behavior* as a story that straddles scientific discourse and personal narrative, Kingsolver participates in a phenomenon that Buell calls the "environmental imagination" (*The Environmental Imagination*, 1995), the degree to which a literary work comes to offer a means by which people experience and understand nature. Through the prism of Dellarobia's change, readers are also encouraged to think about their relationship to the environment and how they are affecting it, individually and collectively.

If *Flight Behavior* constitutes a building block for understanding the alchemy of ecological imbalance and the human story, other literary texts provide prisms that round out our viewing angles, implicating these diverse narratives in what questions about the environment ask of us. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* presents a future shaped by ecological disaster due to runaway technology and corporate greed. In contrast with Kingsolver's rural, community-minded narrative (and read the two together, as it turns out, there are Presidents in common too), Atwood's novel makes a more global picture, one where environmental destruction has already passed the point of no return. The genetic engineering of species in Atwood's novel echoes the interrupted migration patterns of the monarch butterflies in *Flight Behavior*, and both act as symbols of humanity's flagrant meddling with the natural world. Atwood's vision of a post-apocalyptic world, articulated by her protagonist, reveals the irreparable damage human beings cause when money takes precedence over sustainability: "We're not afraid of the consequences, we're afraid of missing the profits" (Atwood 234).

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* explores the connection between humans and the natural world through trees and the act of deforestation. Powers' focus is on interconnected narratives, similar to the way Kingsolver emphasizes community and collective action, showing how individual lives are inextricably tied to larger

ecological systems. Powers' characters, including Patricia Westerford, reinforce the importance of scientific and ecological knowledge, mirroring Ovid Byron's function in *Flight Behavior*. The novels register a common alignment in their representation of ecological consciousness as an agent of transformation. As Westerford puts it, "The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help — and who better to give it than those creatures who have benefited so much from them?" (Powers 198). Both fictions argue that ecological activism demands both personal passion and collective obligation.

Another vivid example is found in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, which weaves myths together with modern environmental crises to emphasize the global character of ecological disasters. Ghosh's narrative pits old beliefs against the sciences of climate change, in a way reminiscent of Kingsolver's dance between rural habits and new science. In *Gun Island*, the migration of communities displaced by rising sea levels echoes the migration of monarch butterflies in *Flight Behavior*, both offering painful metaphors for a world facing the consequences of climate change. Ghosh's exploration of environmental refugee crises builds on Kingsolver's portrait of localized ecological disruption and gives it a bigger geopolitical frame.

Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, meanwhile, offers a dystopian vision in which evolutionary processes increasingly reverse, owing to climate instability. Erdrich's depiction of a society on the edge of collapse balances Kingsolver's vision of rural communities dealing with the upheaval of environmental change. Neither author shies away from criticising the anthropocentric worldview that places human progress above ecologically healthy coexistence, forcing readers to reevaluate our relationship with nature.

The thematic echoes running between these works illuminate the common imperative of tackling ecological questions. Kingsolver takes a big step down to the ground, focusing on local and concrete effects of climate change, but other authors like Atwood, Powers, Ghosh and Erdrich can round out the picture of environmental literature much more broadly. These three stories, taken together, remind us that the climate crisis will be felt in complex and essential ways and that storytelling will be crucial to teaching us how to understand the changes to come.

The emotional and moral dimensions of climate change, as felt by Dellarobia and her community, are central to galvanizing action. This interplay between analytical reasoning and emotional engagement is evident, as well, in Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*, a sprawling narrative



of the history of deforestation and its devastating effects on indigenous peoples and ecosystems. Proulx's scrupulous historical detail balances out Kingsolver's contemporary lens, giving a sweep through time on our species' abuse of natural resources. Both authors call for a deeper awareness of ecological interconnectedness, arguing that scientific knowledge must be paired with a historical and cultural understanding for root change to occur.

On a different level, there's also the question of science in Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*, where personal grief has an ecological underpinning. In Macdonald's intensely personal narrative about falconry and environmental consciousness, you see how individual experience is connected to the vast world of ecological place. This emphasis on personal transformation resonates with the idea represented in Kingsolver's portrayal of Dellarobia's journey, which is a way for readers to see how an emotional connection with the natural world can trigger ecological awareness and action. Thus, both Kingsolver and Macdonald stress that scientific information must be conveyed in ways that resonate with different types of people. Ovid Byron's attempts to educate Dellarobia's community mirror Macdonald's ruminations on how to make ecological issues more relevant to the general public. As we continue to grapple with various scientific and environmental challenges, these parallels resonate — highlighting the importance of storytelling to convey complex, scientific issues to the everyday audience, and bridging the gap between an intellectual understanding and an emotional investment.

The socio-economic challenges that Dellarobia's community confronts in *Flight Behavior* highlight this intersection of environmental and social justice. Environmental justice ideas, especially Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, help us understand how environmental degradation does not affect us equally. In Dellarobia's Appalachian community, economic insecurity compounds agricultural neglect, setting in motion a spiral of exploitation and ruin. Nixon's claim that "the poor are the principal casualties of slow violence" reverberates with Kingsolver's depiction of how impoverished communities have to choose immediate survival at the expense of lasting environmental integrity.

The work of Octavia Butler meets in economic inequality and environmental justice too; in *Parable of the Sower*, climate change and socio-economic collapse have wrought a dystopian near-future defined by resource scarcity and social fragmentation. Butler's preoccupation with systemic inequality and environmental devastation fits well with Kingsolver's focus on the localized impacts

of global catastrophes. Questioning the assumptions underlying climate denialism and technocratic solutions, both authors argue that community-based resilience and ecological stewardship are necessary for an equitable future.

In those narratives, Kingsolver and her contemporaries identify the relationships between ecological systems and social systems. By focusing on the disproportionate loads borne by communities on the margins, these works rally for a coordinated approach to redressing the inequities of place and marketplace. The intersectional link also denotes the systemic form of change concerning sustainability and is the equity in society, analyzed by environmental literature, that reinforces the transformative power of storytelling in policy formation and public discourse.

One of *Flight Behavior*'s finest qualities is its use of storytelling as a middle ground between scientific abstraction and personal experience. The narrative strategy of Kingsolver's book underscores how stories can serve to humanize the complex issues surrounding our environment, and how data and science can be rendered into powerful narratives that compel action. That approach also is present in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, which employs a mixture of imaginary and documentary-style storytelling to wrestle with potential ways forward for the climate crisis. Like Kingsolver's, Robinson's novel recalls the power of narrative to inspire collective action and envision other possibilities. As Robinson writes, "What we choose to save is what defines us," revealing the moral force of environmental stewardship that resonates with the profound journey undergone by Dellarobia.

*Flight Behavior*, through its representation of displaced monarch butterflies, economic hardship, and the individual evolution of its journeying protagonist, reflects the real environmental challenges of our time while laying out a map for how we can imagine a sustainable future. Fuck their pyres, we burn now more than ever, & this is the point, the novel's genesis, right, we're one step above 2050, only — it's not a dystopia — we're still alive, & dreaming, & telling stories, we're just released — release action is a narrative device of ecological advocacy, this is a canonical embrace, trees as memories of the earth — so down: we're here. As we come to terms with the realities of climate change, climate science fiction will help guide the narratives we create — both in literature and beyond — and those narratives will help shape our collective response to this planetary crisis. Kingsolver is part of the work of Robinson, Kolbert, Powers, Klein and Proulx that demonstrates how meaningful storytelling can catalyze

action, and also a means by which to envision what other futures may look like.

The novel makes a permanent addition to contemporary environmental literature: A novel that uses climate change as a lens to excavate both the natural world and the world of humans. Interspersed with Dellarobia Turnbow's journey, in which Kingsolver decries anthropocentrism, argues the interdependence of ecosystems worldwide and prods for a keener ecological awareness." The novel uses the interruption of the monarch butterflies' migration as a poignant metaphor for the larger ecological catastrophes wrought by climate change; its depiction of life in an economically depressed rural area underlines the social and economic conditions that render environmental activism all the more challenging.

Although the scientific community has claimed that climate change is a 'long-term' process and, by and large, only a matter of rising global temperature averages, this paper, through engagement with ecocritical theory, particularly that of Cheryll Glotfelty, Timothy Clark and Lawrence Buell, has shown how *Flight Behavior* imbricates climate change within a dialectic of scientific, personal and communal frameworks. And Kingsolver's narrative does this, because in it she interrogates the place literature could have in the public's reckoning with environmental issues, and uses her characters' stories to demonstrate both the urgency of the climate crisis and holding space to account for what can be sought to save ourselves, together and separately.

It's not just concrete evidence of the predicament we've created for ourselves in the physical world, but also a visionary framework for envisioning more sustainable futures. Providing readers with both the scientific realities of climate change — but also the human, emotional footprint of a small slice of people who are subject to its whims — Kingsolver's novel is daring all of us to recommit to investing in the preservation of ecology and the recognition of our share of complicity in the global climate crisis.

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